



**Professor Eric Strauss, Director of the Environmental Studies Program and Science Director for the Urban Ecology Institute**

## **Closer look at urban ecology**

By Susan L. Wagner

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The term "urban ecology" is a relatively recent one, dating back perhaps 20 years. According to Professor Eric Strauss, director of the Environmental Studies Program and science director of the Urban Ecology Institute (both at Boston College), the field is an interdisciplinary pursuit that "brings together the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities in the service of people living in high density."

Strauss will present an overview of the subject at the next Weston Observatory colloquium on Wednesday, Dec. 6 from 7 to 9 p.m. (and repeated at the same time on Wednesday, Dec. 13). The event is free and open to the public, and the topic will likely be new to many in the audience.

As yet, Strauss said, there are only a few journals extant in the field.

"But it has developed from a variety of trends and social phenomena, such as the women's movement, the civil rights movement, environmentalism, architecture, and transportation studies, into a combined effort to make more livable and sustainable cities with a focus on healthy neighborhoods."

The core philosophy behind urban ecology, he added, is the belief that cities are the key to human survival as a species.

"This is because, by having humans living in high densities, you achieve an economy of scale in the delivery of goods and services. This, in turn, allows you to leave larger tracts of open space, which lets the earth system work in sustainable ways."

The background for urban ecology is the demographic trend that emerged in the U.S. after World War II along with the GI Bill, HUD loans, and the baby boom. This was the

emergence of the wider population into the middle class.

"The idea was that, if you were an immigrant, you first lived in the city. Then, if you got a good enough education and worked hard enough, you could make enough money to move out of the city into the suburbs. This, of course, created the growth of huge suburban landscapes."

Urban areas, Strauss said, are relatively sustainable because, although resources have to be brought in, most of the inhabitants walk or use public transportation. Likewise, even though people use automobiles in rural areas, resources are more local, so these locales are relatively sustainable too.

"The suburbs are the worst of all worlds. You have to use a car to get around, you are not deriving your resources locally, and you are putting down a lot of concrete – impervious surface."

Strauss hastened to add, however, that he is not pointing fingers.

"The suburbs represent a celebration of Americans reaching the middle class. In urban ecology, we're not advocating the destruction of the suburbs – even if that were possible. We're talking about the next 3 billion people that will happen over the next 50 to 100 years. What we need to be thinking about is re-homesteading some of the decaying areas in our cities and making them into neighborhoods that people want to live in."

Neighborhood, is in fact, a key concept. People who live in large cities like New York or even Boston, Strauss said, don't think of the whole city as their neighborhood. Rather, they have their own neighborhood within the city.

"And sustainable neighborhoods are the scale at which people need to work so that they can have a voice and a role in the stewardship of their surroundings."

Urban ecologists, he went on, think in terms of amenities and dis-amenities in these areas. An example of the former would be a local park. An example of the latter would be a nearby waste transfer station.

"We've discovered, for example, that in neighborhoods where there is a park nearby and people know their neighbors, and thus there is a higher degree of social cohesion, there are lower crime rates and better educational outcomes compared to urban communities that do not have those amenities."

In addition to introducing the field of urban ecology at the upcoming colloquium, Strauss plans to talk about the projects Boston College is undertaking with middle and high school students in Boston.

"We're now working with about 3,000 young people and 50 teachers each year. Our goal is to get kids doing urban ecology outside of the classroom. So we have them doing storm water analysis, bird biodiversity, urban tree cover analysis, and social surveys."

Strauss' presentation is the fourth in the observatory's 2006-07 series. Ample parking is available, and light refreshments will be provided. Reservations, which are required due to limited seating, may be made by calling 617-552-8300. The observatory is located at 381 Concord Road in Weston.