

Plain and Integral: An Interview with Karen Kho

By Jonathan Reams

Abstract: Karen Kho describes her work in the Alameda County Green Building Program. She covers the application of an integral framework to working with a variety of stakeholders in the residential building industry. This work includes a stakeholder analysis, rating program, educational materials and guidelines. How the program expanded beyond Alameda County is also covered.

Keywords: Green building, integral, residential home building.

Four or five years ago I heard about some work that David Johnston was involved in as a consultant, applying an integral framework to developing the green building industry in Alameda County in the east San Francisco Bay area. Green building is a term used to cover a variety of practices focused on creating environmentally responsible, energy efficient and healthy places to live and work. In the fall of 2004, I was doing some consulting work in that area, and heard that he was going to be speaking on the topic at the Integral study group that takes place at the California Institute for Integral Studies. I attended the talk he gave, which was followed by a wonderful presentation from Karen Kho, who works for the Green Building program in Alameda County. Her presentation was a balance of theory and application that grounded the integral perspective in a real world application.

A year later, in thinking about interesting topics for Integral Review, Karen's presentation and brief paper came to mind. I asked her if she would be interested in telling more of the story of the Green Building program, and how it has spread beyond Alameda County. The following is the result of two interviews and some further back and forth between us.

As I interviewed Karen, what revealed itself clearly was how an integral awareness was engaged in a very pragmatic endeavor, and that there was a current underneath all of the activity weaving it together. The glimpse of this awareness that came between the lines sat with me long after the interviews.

Jonathan Reams

Q I'd like to begin by asking about your background. What brought you into the area of green building practices?

A I started off as an environmentalist, a conservation major in college until I realized that environmental problems were really tied up with developmental problems. So I studied international development. In retrospect, I'm not sure I learned much about development, except that well-intentioned people could easily make things worse rather than better. Instead of going overseas, I decided to stay closer to home and become an urban planner. Planners attempt to integrate different disciplines like economics and sociology, and to work with people from many different sectors. Before coming to the Green Building

program, I worked in transportation, community development and urban sustainability. My work has centered on social change, of one kind or another, and I have always been interested in knowing what makes some approaches more successful than others.

Q This was a question floating in the back of your mind.

A Yes. When I'm engaged in the actual work I do not have a lot of time to think, I'm putting out fires and implementing a program from day to day. It takes an effort to step back and ask—how effective is this program? Is it accomplishing what we're hoping to, or are we pushing ahead because the course got charted a long time ago? I have always been a student of development in the broadest sense—interested in what makes things work for individual people, families, cities, as well as society as a whole. Observing the dynamics of development has been fascinating.

Q In reflecting on why some things work better than others, what did you discover along the way?

A Speaking from the context of community development, two things come to mind. First, the more people that are engaged, and the more diverse their perspectives, the more potential there is for positive change. Second, the more that a community is able to tap into local creative thinking, the more it can generate solutions tailored to its unique circumstances. There's a stark difference between a community that has confidence in its own ability to innovate, vs. those that look outside for experts or money or off-the-shelf solutions. I believe the true art of community development comes in facilitating unity-through-diversity and fostering creativity.

Q I agree. So how does integral theory fit into this for you?

A Even though I completed my formal education a decade ago, I continued on a path of self-directed study. I find most people are either in the world of practice or in the world of theory, but I need a foot in both. As Paolo Lugari, the Colombian visionary, says, "There is nothing as practical as a good theory." What fuels my learning is the question: What are the universal principles that can explain how the world works? I had been seeing correlations between healthy self-development, a good relationship, a productive office and a sustainable community. Well, when I came across integral theory it provided a lens to focus on the dynamics of development. You can't remedy complex social problems by only looking at the external factors. You have to understand the values or motivations of people.

Q What were your early efforts at utilizing integral theory for creating solutions to the problems that you were facing?

A My early efforts at using integral theory were basically "testing it out" to see if it correlated with strategies that I knew from experience were successful. I believe there's a lot of good work being done by people who have never heard of integral theory, but if

they are successful, most likely they are doing things in an integral way. They have an intuitive understanding of how to do things in an integral way.

Q They may not have the lingo but they're doing the work.

A Exactly.

Q You currently work for the Green Building program in Alameda County. How did that program get started?

A The Green Building program in Alameda County got off the ground in the late 1990's. In Alameda County a portion of landfill fees are set aside for outreach programs to reduce waste, such as promoting recycling and composting. Green building became a priority area because 20-30% of the waste comes from the construction and demolition of buildings.

When the Green Building program was started, the initial activities included giving grants to build demonstration projects and organizing public lectures. The demonstration projects were not having a broader impact, because the builders doing most of the construction weren't even paying attention to them. So my colleagues hired David Johnston as a consultant to help reach a broader audience.

Q So, there was an awareness that the conventional methods for getting people to change their practices were not working. How did the integral approach and the consulting that David did influence the program?

A I don't think there's a common understanding about what constitutes an "integral" approach. What I mean by integral is that one considers both technological, quantitative factors and social or qualitative factors. And you are working with the key stakeholders in an appropriate way. For the Green Building program, this meant reaching out to the mainstream builders, who are doing most of the construction. You can't point fingers at the building industry; you have to engage builders and understand how they work.

Q That was the fundamental premise that enabled all of this work to flow?

A Yes. I think the thing that David really brought to the program was an ability to tap into values, motivation and culture—Wilber's lower left quadrant. He was instrumental in bringing together key groups and tapping into the reasons that they might be motivated to do green building. Initially that included production builders and city officials.

Q To create a value proposition for those groups that would make them say okay, I'll come to the table.

A That brought them to the table initially. Over time, we need to deliver on what we promise. You are circling around the quadrants in a sense. First, you generate interest and focus on understanding values and motivation. Then you need to provide services and meet the needs that have been identified. As people get engaged in the program's

activities it may shift their sense of who they are and what they're doing. You might even find that someone who was rabidly opposed to green building becomes its most enthusiastic proponent.

Q That idea of moving around the quadrants makes sense. If you started with their motivations and the value system and then asked them questions like what do you need, what would help you, and then on the external side delivered individual information, put together structures and facilitated things like meetings with the regulators. It's like you say, it helps them understand their relationship better, and opens up a different developmental level of conditions where they can come back and say now we need this as well.

A Yes that's how it can work. As things are unfolding, I pay attention to where are we in the cycle. Do we need to stimulate a group's motivation again and remind people why they should care about green building? Or are people really engaged and hungry for more information? One of the things we're working on now is a rating program. It was not a priority when the program started. But now it's something people want. They are ready for it.

Q It sounds like it is kind of an evolutionary or developmental process where you were able to meet some basic foundational needs and wants, and as those settle in and take root a new set of needs occurs.

A Right. The need may have shifted to another quadrant or to another group. In the fall, I was spending a lot of time developing material for the production builder group. Now we're working with remodeling contractors. It's a constant process of balancing activities and keeping the overall picture in mind.

Q How do you use the integral framework now?

A Aside from David I don't work with anyone who speaks in Spiral Dynamics colors or integral lingo. The language can be a real stumbling block. But as I started mapping out integral theory against the daily reality of promoting green building, I realized that there was a very simple way to capture the essence of it. I found a way to communicate "integral" without using any jargon.

*What I did was take Ken Wilber's Four Quadrants and distill them into four questions that anyone can understand. Who? What? Why? and How? *Who* addresses the intentional and subjective—it speaks to self or group identity, *Why* examines values, motives, cultural norms and worldviews. *What* leads you to behaviors, products that are created. And *How* elicits the rules, roles, social systems and organizations that make those behaviors or products possible.*

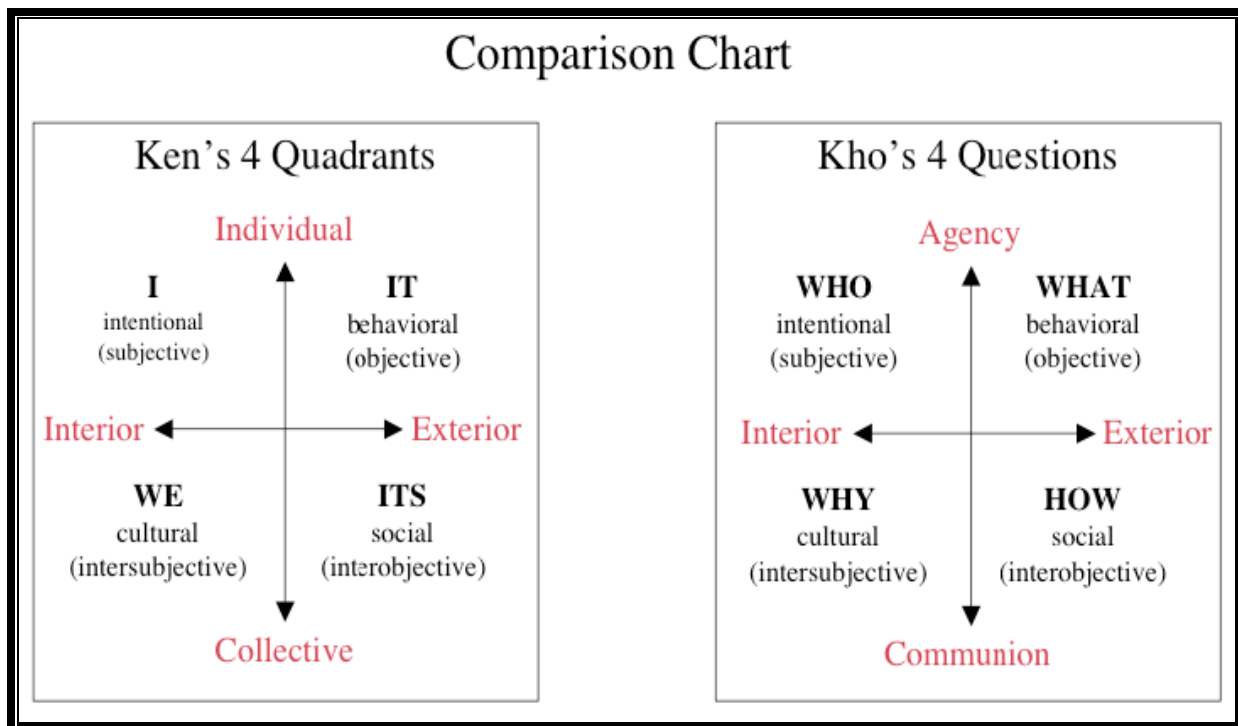


Figure 1: Comparison of Wilber's 4 Quadrants with Kho's 4 Questions.

Q Okay, those are very basic questions that anyone can relate to. How do you apply them?

Overview of the 4 Questions	
<p>Who?</p> <p>Self or group identity</p>	<p>What?</p> <p>Behavior Products</p>
<p>Why?</p> <p>Values, Motives Worldviews Cultural Norms</p>	<p>How?</p> <p>Rules, Roles Organizations Social Systems</p>

Figure 2: Overview of the 4 Questions.

A As I described earlier, I use this framework to evaluate what needs the most attention in our green building program. I am often asked to speak to groups that want to start a green building program. So I incorporate the four questions into the process.

It's quite a common practice in business development or community development to conduct a stakeholder analysis. I've taken that framework and embedded it with an integral structure—the four questions. When you've completed the stakeholder analysis, you have a good idea about the points of leverage. From there, you can create a program of action.

Analysis of Housing Market

WHAT	→	WHO	→	WHY	→	HOW
<i>What is being built?</i>		<i>Who is building?</i>		<i>What do they value?</i>		<i>What influences them?</i>
Mass-Produced Homes & Apartments		Production Builders, Developers, Contractors		Profit, Predictability		Consistent Standards Expedited Processing
Custom Homes & Home Remodels		Custom Builders, Remodelers, Architects		Status, Performance, Individuality		Awards, Ratings, Information
Affordable Housing		Non-Profit Developers, Architects		Social Equity, Environment		Regulations, Financing, Information
Custom Green Homes Eco-housing		Owner-Builders, Green Builders		Environment, Affiliation		Information

Figure 3: Results of Stakeholder Analysis.

In the case of green building, we are concerned about what kind of housing is being built. First, you identify the types of housing being built in a community and list them by the quantity of production. Second, you identify the stakeholder groups that are building each type of housing. Third, you examine the values or motives of each group, and last, you consider what will influence each stakeholder group to “green” their activities. So you start with What, then shift to Who, then to Why and then to How. The chart above shows what this analysis looks like in our county, and for California overall.

Q On your stakeholder analysis chart you show that the custom builders and remodeling contractors tend to be more interested in status, performance and individual creativity as where the mass production homebuilders want profit and predictability. There would be very different motivations for these groups.

A Right, and it's not that homebuilders would turn down the opportunity to gain recognition, but it's not the prime motivator for them. We promote tours that showcase homes constructed with green building practices. These tours are much more popular with the architects and the remodelers than with the production builders. The remodelers appreciate the opportunity to showcase what they've done and get more business. In recent years, the production homebuilders have had waiting lists for homes that have not even been constructed yet, due to the housing shortage in California. We included a couple of their homes in the tours but it has not been a key leverage point for them.

Q How do you develop a program based on the stakeholder analysis?

A In Alameda County the program evolved dynamically, in response to the needs that arose. First, we needed to define green building and debunk misconceptions – so we developed green building guidelines. After the guidelines were published, people wanted to know where to buy products and who to hire to do the job. Then building professionals needed training and we had to address the supply of green building products. So, the program elements came together incrementally. If you are building a new program from scratch, you need to start with a stakeholder analysis so that you identify the right target groups. But the way you build your program will depend on the resources and opportunities unique to the situation.

When I speak to cities that are starting a new program, I give them an outline of the elements they should consider based on what we've found to be effective. What they choose to focus on will depend on what kind of building is taking place in their community. The good thing is that they don't have to develop the tools and practices from scratch, as we did. But what can't be substituted is the local groundwork of convening key stakeholders and developing shared values and motivations. (The lower left quadrant work). Every community needs to do that for themselves.

Q Could you highlight the main elements of the work that the Green Building program does?

A As you can see on the chart below, the main elements are policies, guidelines, ratings/incentives, technical assistance/education and consumer outreach.

We work with all the cities in Alameda County by providing recommendations on what policies they should adopt for their own buildings as well as private sector buildings. Often we find ourselves bridging between the cities and the builders. Builders feel that cities are over regulating everything that they're doing and that getting a project approved costs far too much money and time. Many cities, especially the more mature ones, feel that the builders ought to be required to do more. They both have valid concerns, but they usually don't communicate in a non-adversarial way. We often serve in an intermediary role.

I'm speaking primarily about the residential sector because it's more complex—and accounts for more construction. We developed three sets of residential green building guidelines, because each one addressed a different stakeholder group. They differ in their construction methods, their motivations, and their business models. Production building is predominant in the east part of the county. So, we work with large-scale builders to identify practices appropriate for them. The west part of the county is mostly built out, so you see a lot of smaller projects and remodeling. And in the multifamily sector, there are many non-profit developers, with very different needs and constraints than the production builders or remodeling contractors.

Once we had released the guidelines, people wanted to know how much you had to do in order to call a project "green." So, we created the Green Points rating system to help builders track what was in their project, and cities to know what was being proposed. We offer grants and incentives based on how well a project scores, either based on their residential Green Points score or commercial LEED rating.

Residential Green Building Program

HOW	→ WHY	→ WHO	→ WHAT
<i>Elements</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Target Audiences</i>	<i>Desired Outcome</i>
City Policies & Permit Process	Set standards Encourage collaboration	City Officials, Production Builders	Healthy, Safer Durable, Energy efficient, Cost-effective, Sustainable, Comfortable, Housing for All
Guidelines & Education	Consistency How-to information	Building Professionals, Homeowners	
Rating System & Incentives	Promote competition Reward excellence	Architects, Developers, Custom Builders	
Design Assistance & Grants	Facilitate learning Financial support	Non-Profit Developers	
Consumer Marketing	Increase demand Public awareness	Homeowners, Civic Groups	

Figure 4: Program Development.

We offer a full range of educational programs—tailored to each of the stakeholder groups. Sometimes these are developed in conjunction with a partner organization like Build It Green or the local chapter of the US Green Building Council. We also provide free technical assistance to certain projects, to help reduce the learning curve. This has been helpful for city or county public works staff to learn to manage civic green building projects and incorporate green building into standard practice. We've also found it helpful for nonprofit developers.

Q How are you able to have an impact in the multi-family housing market? What has been your best leverage point with that stakeholder group?

A We have had a really good relationship with non-profit developers because they don't need to be convinced of the importance of green building. The barriers for them are technical knowledge and financing. They wanted a lot of information—everything you need to know to decide if a green building practice will be appropriate for your project or not.

Q All in two pages.

A Exactly. And so unlike our other two guidelines, the one for the multifamily buildings is a 200 page reference document. The project manager can bring the two-page summary to the team meeting with their architect and subcontractors. We gathered up the technical information that would otherwise take them a long time to find. We do not have a product like that for the production homebuilders. Even if we did produce one they wouldn't take the time to read it.

Q So, how do you reach that market? What kinds of support or information are you able to provide for them?

A The production builders who are doing green building want to be seen as quality builders. They want to maintain a good reputation. They see that more and more cities are asking about green building and they don't want to get left behind.

Q It is part of staying up with the most current trends and having a reputation for quality that is seen as a long-term advantage for those builders.

A Right. The main motivation for production builders to work with us is that we provide a bridge to the cities. There are lots of cities around the state that are looking at what we're doing and copying. So they want to help shape what we're doing because it might have a larger impact.

Q How much has the public had an impact on this? Have they started asking for this more and more?

A What we hear from the production builders is that the public is not asking for green building yet. It's probably due to the lack of information, but also the housing shortage in California. Consumers have not been picky about what they buy, at least not recently. In the past, we have sponsored public lectures and workshops, and organized home tours. But in the coming year we will be focusing on consumer marketing. Now that we have provided education to the builders and created awareness on the supply side, we can put more attention on generating demand.

Q How has the success of the green building program in Alameda County started to attract interest from other counties in the Bay Area or elsewhere in California, and what has that led to?

A We have made all our educational materials available to cities and counties in California and beyond. Most of them do not have the resources to work with the stakeholder groups and technical experts. We made a commitment to our builder committee that we would promote consistency among local jurisdictions. They don't want to go to other communities and have to deal with different green building standards. So, we are active throughout the state.

I helped start a network of public agencies with existing and nascent green building programs. It began with eight or nine active programs in the San Francisco Bay Area, but it has drawn people from as far away as Fresno and Truckee. The group meets quarterly, and now a sister chapter has formed in Southern California. There are almost 70 jurisdictions involved, and more contacting us every week.

We, Green Building in Alameda County, see ourselves as a seed organization that jumpstarts activity in green building and develops the resources that are needed. Since our program is geographically restricted to Alameda County, we look for other organizations that might be a more appropriate long-term home for the resources that we develop. For that reason we helped found Build It Green, a California non-profit

organization that is promoting green building. Build It Green has taken over several of our programs, such as a certification program for building professionals, home tours, and a database of green building products.

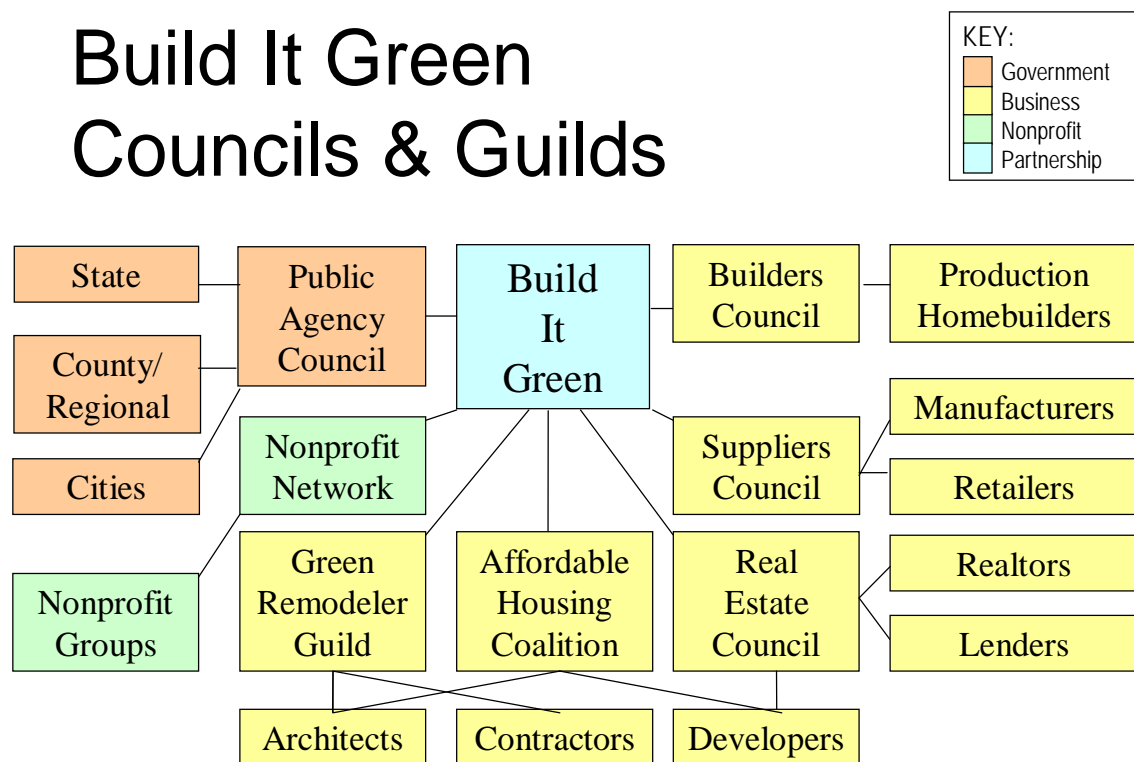


Figure 5: Build It Green councils and guilds.

We (Green Building in Alameda County) have also been interested in fostering interactions among different stakeholders in the green building market. So, we have worked closely with Build It Green in convening and facilitating the formation of other stakeholder councils. I mentioned the network of public sector green building programs earlier – this group comprises the Public Agency Council of Build It Green, with chapters in Northern and Southern California. We supported the formation of a Green Remodelers Guild in Alameda County, which included graduates from our Certified Green Building Professional programs. The Remodelers Guild is now a council of Build It Green.

In addition to the Public Agency Council and Green Remodelers Guild, there are a Suppliers Council, Builders Council, a Nonprofit Network, the Real Estate Council, and an Green Affordable Housing Coalition. Those groups are self-directed. For instance, the remodelers meet ten times a year, and they want to learn from each other and bring in experts on various topics. The suppliers group is looking at ways to get some of the green building products to market and removing barriers. Each group has its own interests. Build It Green provides a forum for all of them; it is becoming the social glue.

Q It is very clear from your description to see how it has organically blossomed. From something that was seen to work, people have been attracted to it, and it's been able to meet multiple stakeholder needs in a way that continues to grow in a very positive and successful way.

A Yes. And I hope that in the next couple of years Build It Green will be able to encourage more interaction among these different councils. Each of the stakeholder groups needed time to coalesce around core values, to develop their own mission statements or sense of purpose and priorities.

Q Their own culture and identity. The left hand quadrant things.

A Right. And now there is interest in bringing some of these groups together. Build It Green is hosting a summit for all the guilds and councils under at its umbrella in the fall of 2006.

Q That sounds like a fairly large undertaking.

A It will be.

Q But you only have marginal involvement with Build It Green yourself?

A Actually I'm involved with most of the councils because many of them evolved from our development and outreach committees in Alameda County. I like to keep track of the issues and objectives for each group so that we can keep our program current and up to date.

Q It is sort of like research for your own Green Building program, just to have the pulse of what is current in those communities and stakeholder groups.

A I also keep an eye out for potential conflicts, because they often arise in groups, especially when groups are in the early formative stage.

Q It sounds like there is some awareness of the developmental process of each stakeholder group or guild, that they have to go through this on their own. And having gone through that in the Alameda County program you can provide a level of mentoring for those to happen.

A Yes. Something like that. But in addition, I think it comes back to the integral perspective, whether we call it integral or not. There are more and more people who are becoming involved in this green building movement, so the leadership of the whole initiative is very dispersed. It is not focused on Green Building in Alameda County or any one organization. It is now spread out among the many people who have become interested and stepped up to the plate. I think it's important to make sure things move forward in an integral way. There are always individuals who are less tolerant or open to other value systems. They can create or exacerbate differences among groups rather than seek integration. So, that is one of things that I look for.

Q Can you describe the figure 6 for me?

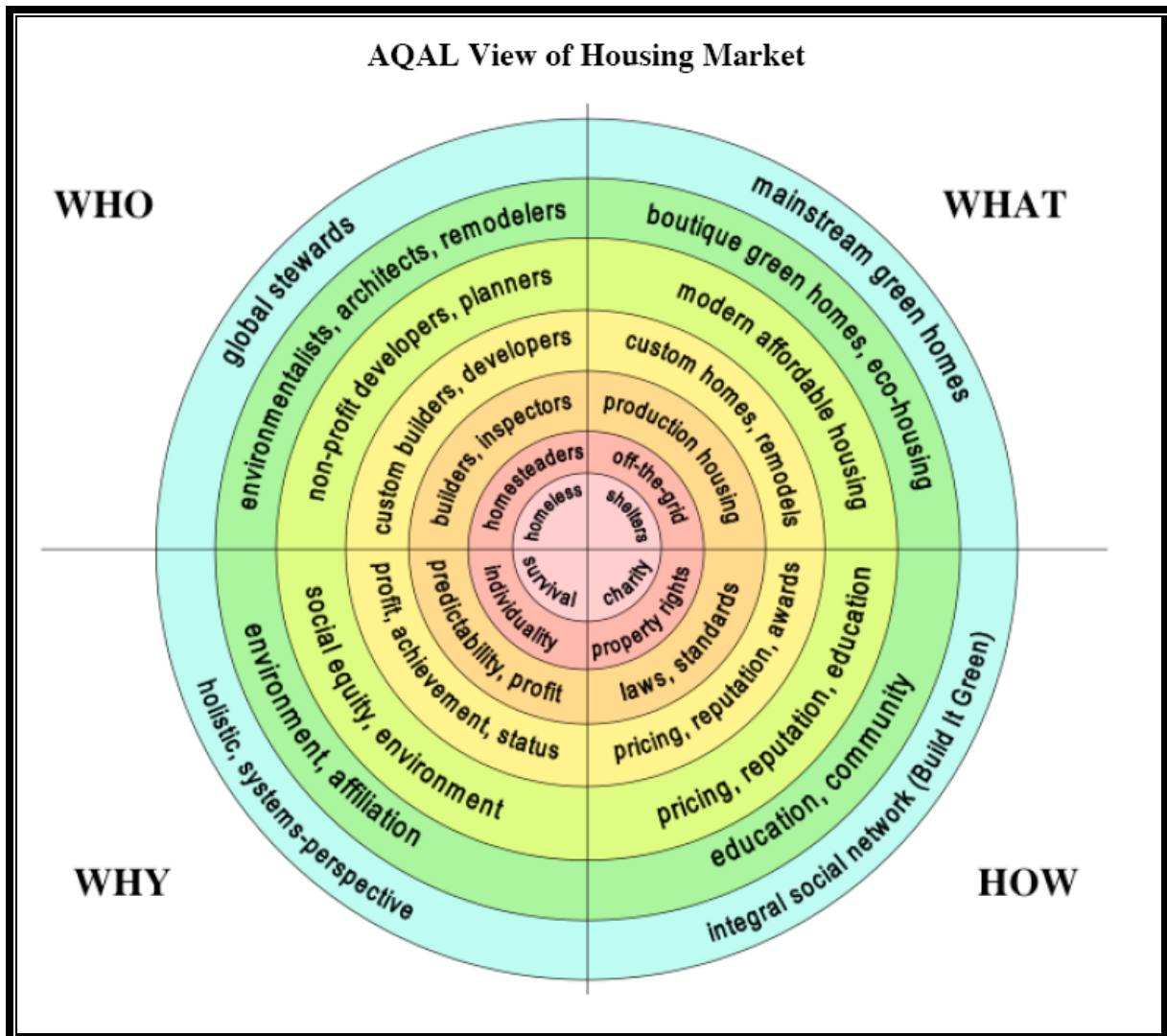


Figure 6: AQAL View of Housing Market.

A The way the graph is constructed, if you look at the middle four rings, from production housing out to the eco housing, that's where our green building program has focused. That covers the market transformation program. How are we going to "green" housing in Alameda County? If you look back at our stakeholder analysis and how that led to the green building program then you will see all those different stakeholder groups and the elements of our green building program in those four rings. Then I added in the center to rings of housing types that are "below the market" so to speak. There is no open market for those sorts of things. But they fill in the full picture of what is being built.

Q *So, in looking at all of this, how do you measure success?*

A There are different ways that we measure success. We look at how many of our cities are actively promoting and encouraging green building. We also look at how many people we're attracting to our trainings, and whether we have been able to engage

all the key stakeholders. Maintaining a channel of communication with the production builders is a sign of success. We don't have much quantitative information, such as the number of houses built, at this point. That will come later as the rating program matures. We are seeing success in the left-hand quadrants first, and expect that to show up in the right hand quadrants later (the number of green buildings). Sometimes people get narrowly focused on looking only at the number of buildings.

I think that another gauge would be local capacity building. When we got started there were only a few environmental groups promoting green building—before it was even called green building. Now we're working with realtors, mortgage brokers—people who are involved in a lot of transactions around housing. I think that's a sign of success.

Q What would be the most challenging thing you're experiencing now in terms of what's going on with the program?

A The most challenging thing is keeping all of the stakeholders in the fold and fending off the tendency to go to one end of the spectrum or the other. For hard-core environmentalists, we are never green enough. And for some building industry stalwarts we are interfering with the "free" market. The forces of polarization are very strong. In California, we have the whole gamut. We have the most liberal groups that you can find, as well as a very conservative building industry association. I think in other parts of the country, the stakeholder spectrum is not as wide, or it may be weighted towards one end or the other.

Each group has a tendency to do whatever is most comfortable and familiar for them. And there is a time when those strategies are appropriate. For builders it is to focus on the economics, and to fight change. For government it is to regulate. For environmentalists it is to protest and fight industry. It is difficult to hold the space where there is common ground.

Q Are you hopeful that the work of Green Building in Alameda County and Build It Green will be able to continue holding this common space open and support the sustainable evolution of the building industry?

A Absolutely! We have our ups and downs, but overall we are seeing more acceptance of green building and increased collaboration.

Q Thanks for taking the time to share all of this with our readers.

A Thanks for your interest! It has been a pleasure.