




Professor plans to create a sustainable, happy neighborhood in a Tempe barrio



By Gabriel Sandler | 09/08/15 7:10pm

In His Classroom

He could've driven his Nissan Leaf or Toyota Prius, but Professor Scott Cloutier biked to campus. When he got to Wrigley Hall at Arizona State University Tempe, his 22 students, ranging in age from 19 to 60, were already chatting in their classroom. They arranged the tables in a long U-shape with an empty seat awaiting Cloutier.

The professor strode to the chair. Cloutier, 36, weighs 210 pounds and stands at 6 feet 5 inches tall. His dark slacks, white button-up shirt and navy tie enunciated his fitness. His socks, a striped multicolor combination of green, brown, blue and pink, added a dose of energy to his conservative outfit. Seated, he laid one arm on the table and rested his head on the other hand, scratching at his close cut, dark reddish beard.

"Friends," he began, as he looked around the classroom.

Everyone there was part of an unconventional workshop course, Sustainable Neighborhoods for Happiness. The object: students learn to immerse themselves in a neighborhood, research its various aspects and try to learn how sustainable adjustments, like culturally sensitive design or access to affordable healthy foods, might increase happiness. For the next five years, Cloutier and different

batches of students will partner with a barrio in Tempe, helping apply sustainable practices to increase neighborhood happiness. (Cloutier asked that the neighborhood not be named, to protect research confidentiality.)

Measuring a community's happiness does have obstacles and controversy, but Cloutier has long believed in the reliability of his methods.

In the classroom, when a student asked a pointed strategy question or suggested how to approach the community, Cloutier let previously appointed student leaders answer, and generally run the class.

Briefly, Cloutier interjected, expressing hope for the students to maximize their independence. "Eventually, I'll be in the background, and you all will be like, 'Scott, what the hell are you doing?'"

What he's done is designed the class the same way he wants to design communities. Cloutier developed the Sustainable Neighborhoods for Happiness Index for his dissertation, departing from traditional sustainable engineering. From his perspective, the engineering field did not emphasize people's importance. Now he works to focus sustainable thinking around their wellbeing.

The approach employs traditional research methods: gathering infrastructural data, holding community meetings and surveying the neighborhood residents. The focus, however, isn't simply to adapt to climate change. The practices tacitly help the environment. Cloutier believes sustainable design can lead people and their communities to happiness and opportunity. "[Sustainability] is really about humans...we need to be talking about things like values and what we value, things that contribute to our quality of life," he explained.

People often see sustainability as an environmental issue. Cloutier wants them to see it as a human issue too.

If all goes according to plan, his barrio project will culminate in a sustainably designed happy community.

In His Past

"I'm a kid from New Hampshire," Cloutier said, guessing where his love of sustainability started, "I grew up in the most beautiful nature there is."

Cloutier and his friends constantly spent time outside: exploring the woods, biking, throwing things into the rock quarry and catching frogs. Rural living, however, meant a few houses along his street to form a community.

He wasn't the best high school student either. His current unconventionality first manifested as, "fighting the system," as he saw it. He spoke fondly of his parents, but acknowledged that between their divorce and looking out for three younger sisters, his home life posed challenges. At 17, he spent a summer living with close friends who he credited with providing him a loving environment.

Needing a new atmosphere but with limited options, Cloutier's father suggested joining the Navy. Cloutier would see the world and start shaping his sustainability perspectives. Though stationed in Norfolk, Va., Cloutier's time in the military took him to Egypt, Russia, Italy, Spain and Turkey. He saw tremendous military efficiency combined with desperate need for resources.

"I saw poverty. I saw people living in trash piles. I saw open sewers with kids playing in them...I saw that stuff and I thought 'How do people live like this? How can they let people live like this?'" Cloutier asked. "[Given] that experience and coming back to design, I realized engineering is not enough."

Cloutier wanted to address people directly. Trying to understand their needs mattered more than just designing systems.

"Production doesn't really measure anything that matters, like how you feel or the quality of our relationships. How our children are brought up and the strength of our community connections, that's how I really started to think about things differently," he explained.

At the University of New Hampshire, he got a bachelor's degree in environmental engineering and a master's degree in civil engineering. At Cornell University, pursuing his doctorate, he began focusing happiness over design.

"I was in the engineering department, and I proposed to my advisor that I study community development and happiness, and he laughed," Cloutier said. "I don't think he laughed because he thought I was funny. He laughed because he knew it was a risky subject, being in engineering and talking about happiness. That's not really something engineers talk about."

Cloutier finished his doctorate in Biological and Environmental Engineering in 2014. Now, at ASU, he works on neighborhood happiness constantly, pursuing that controversial subject at full speed.

In SNHI

The United Nations defines "sustainability" as "calls for a decent standard of living for everyone today without compromising the needs of future generations."

It's a popular goal for engineers, planners, biologists, environmentalists and others. Many in these professions pursue sustainable goals, but few consider how happiness overlaps with sustainable practices and behaviors.

Cloutier assesses community happiness collaboratively, asking individuals in the neighborhoods how they feel. In an interview, he acknowledged how unclear measuring happiness may seem to outsiders, but trusts his methods. His surveys gauge happiness of residents while his student teams gather data on nine specific systems. These range from transportation to waste management. Ideally, Cloutier can correlate the community's needs and how the community functions, revealing how sustainable practices might help.

Once his team understands the desires of people in the unnamed barrio, they can suggest solutions, which vary from installing a neighborhood garden or stop signs to full community cleanups and evaluations of local governance. Cloutier explained that while climate issues might seem too big to tackle, in a community no sustainable action is too small.

Happiness research has skeptics. Will Wilkinson, a writer and former researcher at the libertarian Cato Institute, concluded in 2007 that measuring happiness might be inconclusive. (Wilkinson did not immediately respond to requests for comment on this story.)

"In its present state happiness research cannot be relied on as an authoritative source for empirical information about happiness, which, in any case, is not a simple empirical phenomenon but a cultural and historical moving target," Wilkinson reasoned.

He described happiness surveys as a "blunt" method of examining an already fuzzy concept. "Doesn't everyone have his own notion of happiness?" Wilkinson wrote.

Cloutier recognized his research's challenges. Getting the barrio on board with sustainability necessitates he and his researchers understand their values. Because of the research's fragility, he requested neighborhood residents not be interviewed, citing the delicacy of trust building.

The barrio's concerns revolve around crime, safety and, ironically, encroachment by ASU. They're not concerned with sustainability.

"Four or five years ago, I thought sustainability was universal. I've come to realize it's not universal," Cloutier said. "You do it in a way that resonates with the people you're working with."

"Work at a local scale," he continued, "and really begin to engage solutions on the ground."

Mara DeFilippis, a project manager at Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives at ASU, explained what separates Cloutier's work from more traditional sustainability research.

"Engineering people are very technically minded. They don't laugh at jokes. They're extremely technical and they're not really interested typically in how people interact with the products that they design. That component is really missing these days," DeFilippis explained.

Cloutier sees a direct connection between design, built environment and wellbeing. He believes regardless of how someone perceives happiness, sustainability helps. He might be living proof of it.

In His Home

On a recent Saturday morning, Cloutier answered the door in basketball shorts and a grey t-shirt that read "Live Free or Die." In his comfortable single-story house, a plaque to the left read, "Happiness is not a destination, it is a way of life." On the right hung a giant blue and green painting of the earth done by Cloutier.

"He painted it, but I wouldn't call him a painter," his wife Kari commented. "He's a thinker." In the kitchen their 1-year-old twin boys Isak and Ethan stared, now making noise after a lunch of pork, oranges and avocados.

Cloutier and Kari went to the same high school in New Hampshire, Cloutier two years ahead, but didn't meet until he returned from the Navy. "I liked him right away," Kari remembered. After a long relationship, they married five years ago.

On their kitchen counter sat a pair of kiddie cups for the twins and laptops for the parents, who keep busy. While Cloutier works on happiness research and multiple papers, Kari teaches yoga and works electronically for a Maryland winery.

Cloutier's energy and intensity extends beyond his sustainability work. Both he and Kari see physical health as part of sustainable living. Even if it's just taking the twins for walks, they exercise daily.

"I'm very competitive [with sports.] Basketball, baseball, softball, those are my major ones," Cloutier said. "Don't like to lose."

In the kitchen, Kari follows new recipes and said Cloutier gets likes getting creative. Fighting his weakness for Salt and Vinegar Chips, Cloutier began preparing his own sweet potato chips. They buy

whole foods and get eggs from their chickens in the backyard. A fence keeps Bodhie, their adopted shepherd dog mutt, from beating them to the eggs.

They live deliberately close to ASU's campus and not far from Kari's yoga studio. Neither wants to spend their lives driving a long suburban commute. They value "educating by example," for their kids, Kari said, and "giving yourself to the world the best you can."

In the Neighborhood

One of Cloutier's neighborhood projects was simply cleaning up a dirt lot, a small, important sustainable act.

"I love the dawn," he said one April morning, stretching his arms and surveying the uneven 18,000 square foot dirt lot in the barrio. In the middle waited 20 tons of 1 inch Apache Brown rock. Poured out, it spanned the lot's length, forming a tight center row. Cloutier would make the fenced, littered dirt ground into an aesthetic and functional space for this close knit neighborhood just off the freeway.

He brought a wheelbarrow, a pair of rakes, shovels and snow shovels, rented from the Phoenix Tool Bank. At 8:00 a.m., student volunteers Chelsea Patchen and Sarah Jones arrived, along Jake Irish from the Ramsey Social Justice Foundation, which has supported Cloutier's project.

Cloutier grabbed a snow shovel and everyone set to work. Each person would collect a pile of rocks then distribute it over uneven spots. Across the street, a dog behind a fence barked, but eventually stopped and watched.

Cloutier moved up and down the row of dark brown rocks, using the snow shovel to rapidly fill the wheelbarrow. He poured out the contents wherever the students worked, rhythmic and relaxed. He made jokes about the ease of manual labor and how he needed exercise that morning anyway.

After an hour, Cloutier packed the tools into his car and thanked everyone for coming.

His happiness works continues. His university has asked him to look at a Surprise neighborhood and his research with this barrio will span another four, exciting years.

If you were to ask Cloutier what makes him happy, he'd tell you, "Oh, so much."

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