

# Perspectives

By Paul Hosford

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## Bar Talk

Like many adventures, it started in a bar. You have a drink or two, get to talking, and one thing leads to another.

Lori and I were staying at the Cornhusker Hotel in Lincoln when I befriended a gentleman dining in the lounge. It turned out he was a visiting teacher and critic of architecture from Australia, Chris Abel. He was in Lincoln as a guest professor at UNL and was focusing on ways to help the Haymarket go green. We had an interesting conversation and he gave me his contact info as we parted.

Over the next several months as our museum searched for ways to improve its climate control methods, my thoughts returned to my conversation with Professor Abel. One of the most significant challenges the museum is facing is energy costs. Housed in a large metal building, conventional heating and cooling methods are simply too expensive for a non-profit organization sustained by donations to meet. And from talking to people with buildings in the downtown, it appears that many of the older buildings are likewise very expensive to heat and cool. Going "green" seemed like a possible way to help both the museum and local businesses with energy costs.

But how do you start? I thought about the Haymarket project in Lincoln. If there were people that close working on ways to decrease the heating and cooling costs of buildings, maybe we could access their expertise.

So I emailed professor Abel in Australia, explaining the situation and asking if he could recommend someone in Lincoln who might be willing to talk to me about applying green technology to help meet energy needs. He responded immediately, recommending a German eco-architect who teaches at UNL, Martin Despang. He even sent Martin an introductory email on my behalf.

Lori and I arranged to meet Martin at the University during Spring Break. Far from the stereotypical stuffy German professor of pop culture, Martin was as friendly and open as Chris Abel had been and we formed an immediate rapport.

We spent hours talking and looking at designs. Martin specializes in passive heating and cooling designs, including a kindergarten in Germany that is "off-the-grid" -- the only external energy they use is for supplemental lighting and running their computers.

Martin explained that part of the University's mission is to provide services to communities so we began exploring the possibility of making Albion one of those communities. In less than a week Martin visited Albion. He seemed impressed with the potential of the community and warmth of the people.

Martin set the wheels in motion at UNL and this summer Lori and I met with the Dean of Architecture, Wayne Drummond, yet another warm and enthusiastic gentleman. We again spent hours discussing the 'Albion project,' a semester-long "studio" where 5th and 6th year students would adopt Albion as their "second home town" and then help identify community needs and design possible solutions.

Lori and I went down for the first day of classes, and I ended up tag-team lecturing with Martin for over two hours. I tried to give his students an in-depth understanding of Albion, its history, its strengths and its challenges.

Two days later the students paid their first visit to Albion, touring the community and getting to know people from all of the towns in Boone County at a dinner sponsored by the Boone County Economic Development Agency.

The students arrived as strangers but I honestly believe they left as friends -- a result of everyone's openness and the warmth that Martin had already discovered characterizes people here.

Hopefully the students will develop a sense of belonging to our community. They will produce over 40 preliminary designs this semester, and hopefully some students will continue to develop their ideas in following semesters. Hopefully too this will be the beginning of a long and fruitful partnership between the University and Boone County -- already a second professor, Erhard Schütz, is considering doing a studio here.

It remains to be seen, of course, what will ultimately come from all this, but I feel we're off to a great start. It's wonderful to see how many people have already embraced the students (even inviting them to stay in their homes) and how this is becoming a community project (rather than just our hair-brained idea). There would seem to be great potential for this partnership to help our area grow.

And all because of a conversation in a bar...