

## Book Review: The Nine Elements of a Sustainable Campus by Mitchell Thomashow

In *The Nine Elements of a Sustainable Campus*, **Mitchell Thomashow** proposes a blueprint for making universities more sustainable. As the former President of Unity College in Maine, USA, he argues that the campus is the perfect crucible for developing ideas and action, engaging diverse communities and teaching the next generation of citizens. **Jon Emmett** finds a book that may not contain simple, ready-made answers to this complex question, but which is hugely engaging and accessible, and full of inspiration for approaches that could be adopted elsewhere.

**The Nine Elements of a Sustainable Campus. Mitchell Thomashow. MIT Press. April 2014.**

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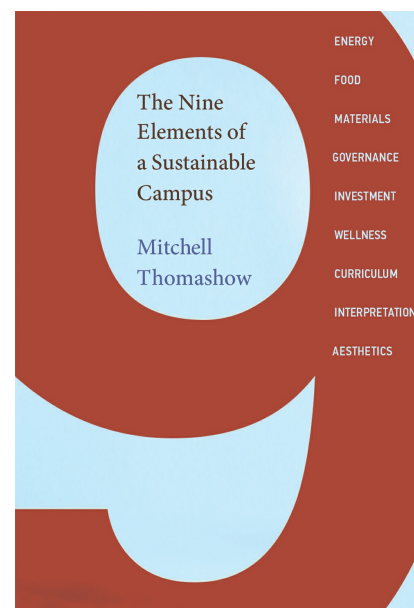
In 1979, US President Jimmy Carter installed solar panels on the roof of the Whitehouse, symbolising a government drive for energy independence and efficiency following the recent Middle East oil crisis. But only two years later President Reagan ordered the solar panels to be removed, as they clashed with his vision of an optimistic, highly-consuming America. The panels found their way onto the roof of Unity College, Maine, in the 1990s, before one of them was eventually [re-installed on the Whitehouse in 2013](#) – where Barack Obama wanted to demonstrate renewed presidential support for solar energy.

This flavour of symbolism and storytelling is a theme that runs pleasingly throughout a new book by [Mitchell Thomashow](#), former President of Unity College and erstwhile owner of the nomadic solar panels. In *The Nine Elements of a Sustainable Campus* Thomashow examines possible approaches to create more sustainable universities, and how this might in turn contribute to a more sustainable society.

Thomashow was a long-standing environment lecturer before becoming President of Unity College, which itself is a university that specialises in environmental subjects. Drawing on this expertise, he developed a distinct structure to provide a diverse but streamlined range of taught sustainability courses.

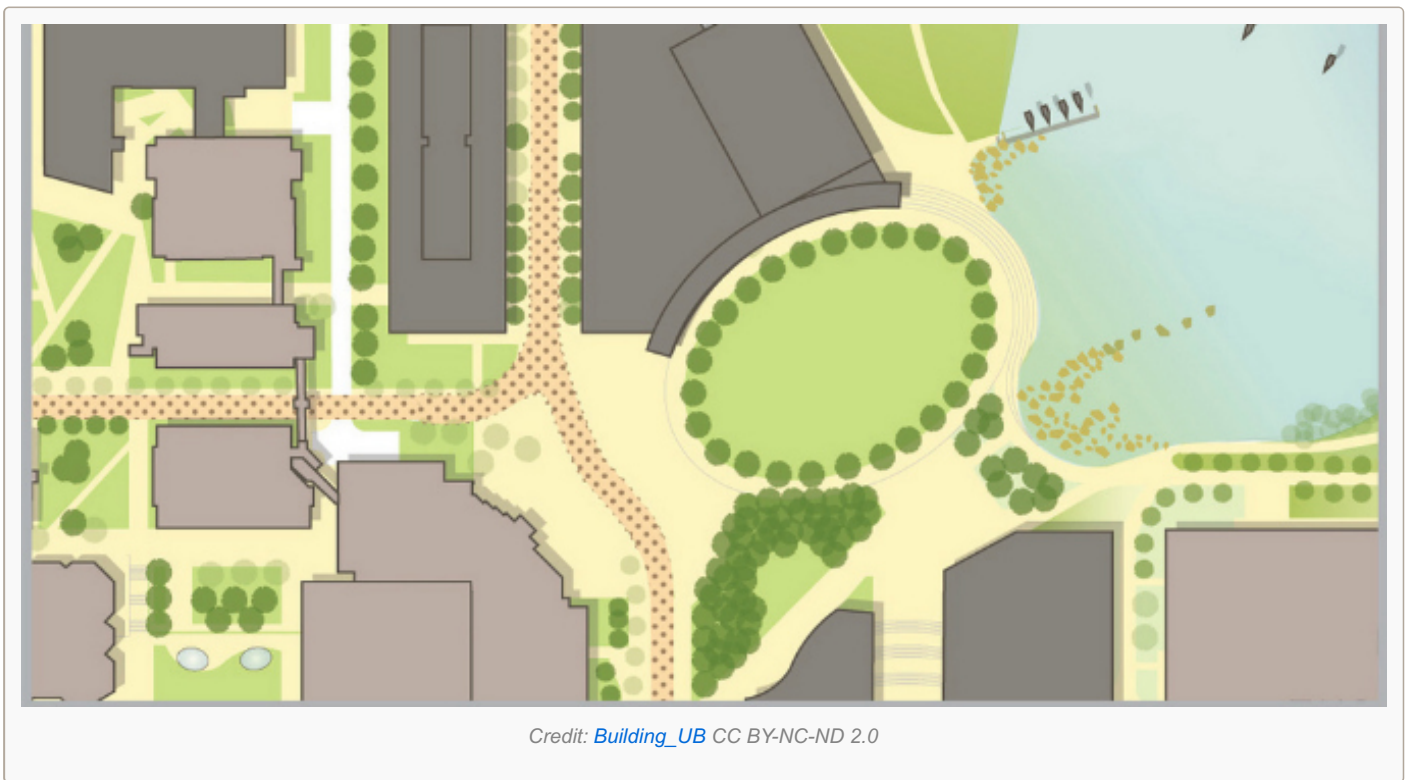
But more importantly than the specific solution adopted at Unity College, Thomashow describes how he sensitively managed the process of change; transforming the curriculum over a two year period by slowly engaging with and gaining the support of faculty staff until everyone was satisfied with the outcome. He addresses many thorny challenges: managing competing strategic priorities; aligning with institutional strengths, weaknesses, and philosophies; bringing the whole campus community into decision-making processes to ensure widespread support; and linking policy with grassroots action. It seems that, just like in the UK, unilateral sustainability diktats don't work in universities – even if you're college President!

Beyond collaborating with the faculty, he also espouses the benefits of the whole campus working together to develop sustainability teaching – leaders, academics, professional services staff, grassroots networks and students. While there has been a great deal of similar work in UK universities (e.g. the [HEA Green Academy](#)), this debate is often muffled by a lack of interaction and coordination between sustainability professionals and academics. It is therefore particularly interesting to hear this view articulated by someone with Thomashow's academic and leadership backgrounds.



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Given the author's background as a lecturer, I was surprised that his view of what constitutes 'university learning' extends well beyond the classroom, and gives equal weight to the experiential learning of inhabiting the campus itself. This seems to derive from his framing of university sustainability as not merely an end in itself, but a vehicle to engage with *people*, and shape society's approach to sustainability as a whole. Just as with the Whitehouse solar panels, the ability of energy efficiency projects to affect people's environmental awareness is awarded just as much emphasis as their ability to reduce actual energy consumption. This reflects Thomashow's apparent aspiration to live a holistic life that transcends boundaries (work, leisure, etc.), echoing of the ideals of William Morris.

He perceives students' experiences of sustainability at university to be particularly critical, because at such 'turning points' in their personal development, they are likely to form new habits which then stick throughout life – including behaviours that relate to the environment (recycling, etc.). This view is also supported by research in the UK, [including by Defra](#), though Thomashow is cautious of jumping to conclusions, and suggests the need for further long-term study.

In the same spirit, Thomashow advocates the importance of the examples set by college leaders: the values of transparency and accountability; sign-posting and explaining sustainability initiatives, not just 'doing' them; environmentally-themed art installations that produce a 'sustainability aesthetic'; and buildings designed to foster an appreciation of their relationship with the materials and energy they use (as LSE attempted with the recent [Saw Swee Hock Student Centre](#)).

However, despite Thomashow's skill in drawing together these diverse strands of university life into a unified vision of progress, readers may be surprised that environmental research is not addressed as part of a sustainable campus, except in the context of conducting research on the university itself in its mode as a 'living lab' for sustainability. Many academics would certainly testify to the importance of robust research in furthering our understanding of environmental issues and informing public policy.

Thomashow's style throughout the book is to provide broad reflections on the issues at play, rather than focusing on technical details of implementing individual projects. This makes the book highly accessible to a wide audience – also helped by its easy-to-follow structure and the excellent clarity of the prose. It also makes the author's insights flexible enough to translate to universities in a variety of settings across the globe. Indeed, I was frequently struck by the familiarity of many of the scenarios, challenges, and even specific conversations encountered by the author in a small specialist college in rural America, compared with my experiences of sustainability across the UK university sector.

The potential drawback to this approach is that seasoned environmental managers probably won't pick up new tips on how to reduce their energy bills. It also left me wanting more – particularly because of Thomashow's highly personal account of his tenure at Unity College. After his struggles with obtaining campus-wide backing for his plans, what happened next? What tangible examples are there to demonstrate the successes of his initiatives?

Overall I found *Nine Elements* an inspiring read. For those already familiar with the field it may not offer startling new solutions to achieving sustainability overnight, but it does provide nuanced insight into how we might undertake the journey in an accessible and engaging way. At a time when we still need many more university leaders who vocally champion sustainability, it is particularly significant that someone in Thomashow's position has added his weight to the growing body of voices calling for profound sustainability transformation, in universities and beyond.

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**Jon Emmett** is the Sustainability Projects Officer at LSE. Based in the Estates Division Sustainability Team, his role is to enhance the environmental sustainability of the campus, and collaborate across the LSE community to engage students and staff. He also represents LSE on committees within the [London Universities Environment Group](#) and the [Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges](#) – networks that help drive sustainability throughout the UK higher education sector. [Read more reviews by Jon.](#)

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