

A photograph of a forest with tall, thin trees and sunlight filtering through the canopy. The sun is bright and creates a lens flare effect in the upper center. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and pine needles.

# Does Language Matter?

## Clarity and Ambiguity

(Can we see the message for the words?)

Melissa Taylor



# Clarity and Ambiguity

- Clarity
- 4 examples of messages
  1. Airtight
  2. Passivhaus
  3. Zero Carbon
  4. Sustainability
- Ambiguity



# Clarity?

“If you can't explain it clearly, you don't understand it well enough”

Albert Einstein

OR

"Verbosity leads to unclear, inarticulate things."

Governor George W. Bush, 11/30/96



# Clarity?

Effective communication is dependent on:

1. The person delivering the message
2. The receiver
3. The content of the message



# Clarity? - 'Airtight'

'Airtight' ... or ... 'Draught-free' ?

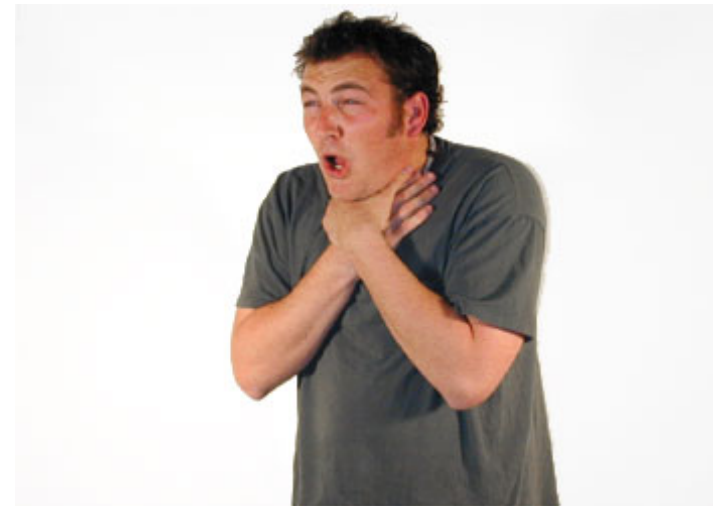
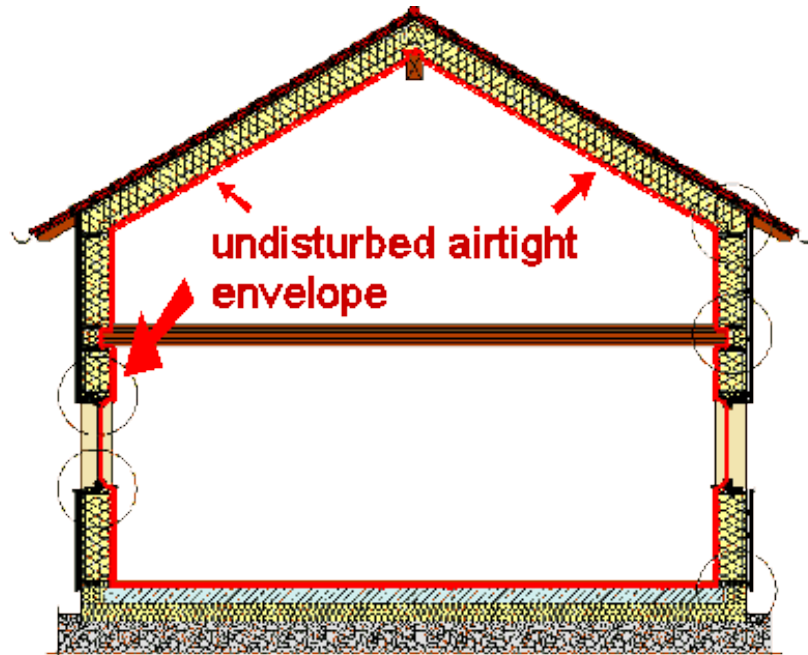


Image from Passipedia





# Clarity? - 'Passivhaus'

'Passivhaus' ... or ... 'Passive House' ?

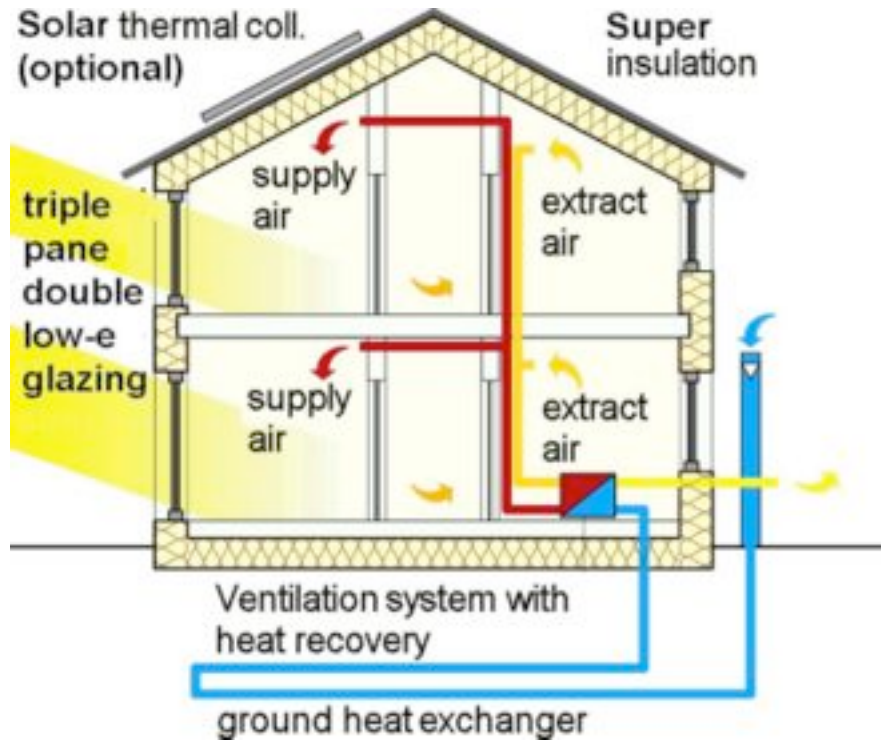


Image from Passipedia

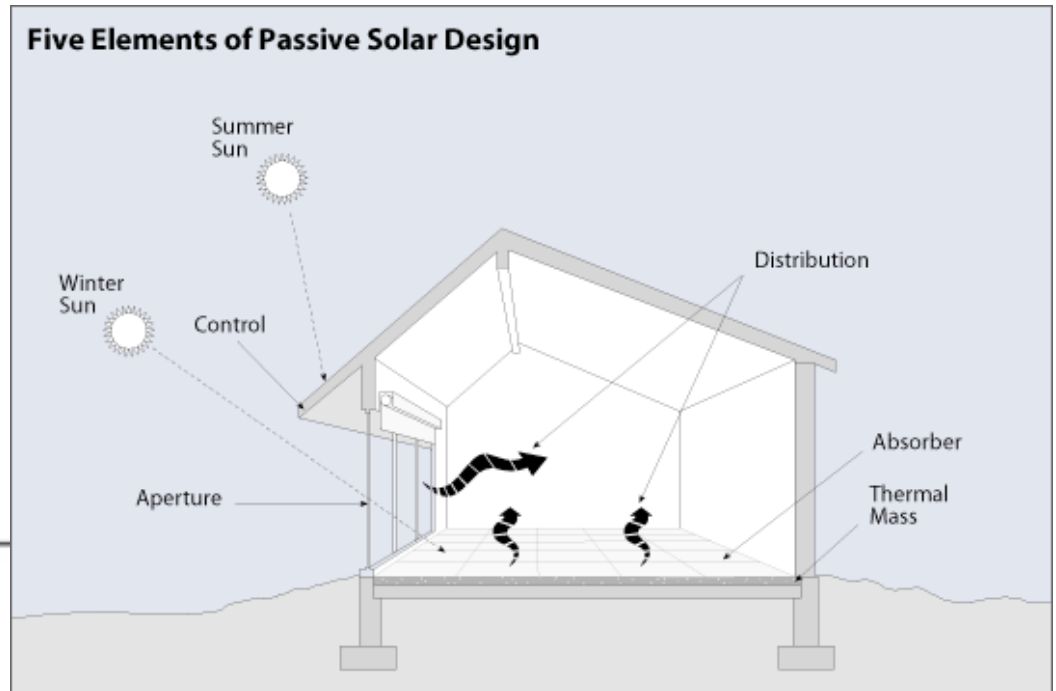
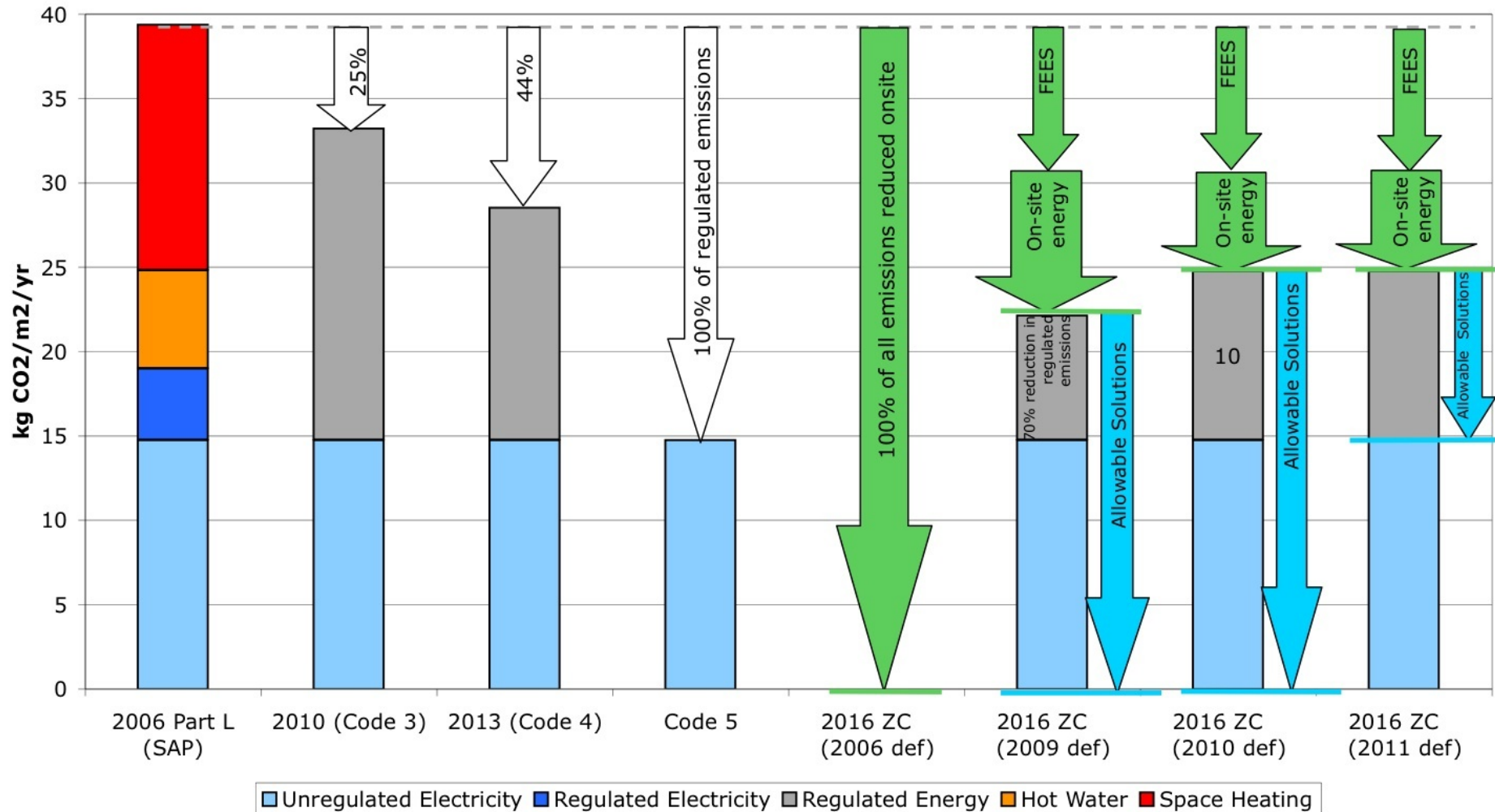


Image from energysavers.gov



# Clarity? – The changing definition of ‘Zero’

## The 'Zero Carbon' definition story (house)



# Clarity? - Sustainable

About 199,000,000 Google results

Sustainable Development  
Sustainable Design  
Sustainable Schools  
Sustainable Homes  
Sustainable Tourism  
Sustainable and Holistic Living  
Sustainable Sourcing  
Sustainable Power Corp  
Sustainable Feedstock  
Sustainable Energy  
Sustainable Stuff  
Sustainable Aviation  
Sustainable Cities  
Sustainable Communities  
Sustainable Love  
Sustainable Television

Sustainable Future  
Sustainable Life  
Sustainable Heritage  
Sustainable Scotland  
Sustainable Food  
Sustainable Economics  
Sustainable Banking  
Sustainable Technologies  
Sustainable Cheshire  
Sustainable Security  
Sustainable Biofuels  
Sustainable Behaviour  
Sustainable Style  
Sustainable Business Network  
Sustainable Marketing  
Sustainable Singing  
Sustainable Sadness





# Clarity? - Sustainababble

In 2008 Ind/Dem MEP, Vladimir Zelezny produced a Written Declaration on overuse of the adjective 'sustainable'

- Highlighting the overuse of the adjective 'sustainable' and its combination with various other words to create expressions that frequently make no sense in the context
- the word 'sustainable' is repeated in almost all policies and strategies, producing empty, meaningless phrases that may give rise to disputes.
- such expressions are being transformed into incantations and cryptography, disguising the real meaning of the concepts we discuss.

Called for European institutions to use this term in a sensible and balanced way, and proposed a temporary moratorium on the word 'sustainable'



# Ambiguity?

Sustainability can be a useful umbrella for encouraging cross-disciplinary working, or a contradictory notion at the conceptual level which proves impossible to put into practice.

- It is overused and manipulated by politicians, economists, policy makers and scientists, each of them giving it their own spin.
- But (maybe because it is an ambiguous term) it is a popular, adaptable concept. And can be applied to the diverse social, economic and environmental conditions in which people live.





# Ambiguity?

Ambiguity can:

- **Bring together diverse viewpoints** - “perceived similarity (between source and receiver) can lead to increased attraction and hence facilitate relational development”
- **Make people feel included or excluded** - Jargon acts as a ‘restricted code’. This makes those who understand it feel part of the group and those who don’t understand feel excluded.
- **Allow room for creativity** - “Effective leaders use ambiguity strategically to encourage creativity and guard against the acceptance of one standard way of viewing reality.”
- **Can preserve power** - “A source deemed credible who speaks ambiguously may be called a prophet, but a low-credible source speaking identically may be dubbed a fool. ... For those who are highly credible, clarity is always risky, since it provides the receiver with new information which can result in a potentially negative reevaluation of character. For those with low credibility, the opposite is true; clear communication remains a risk, but it is one of the only ways they can improve other’s impressions of them through communication.”

(Eisenberg, 1984, *Ambiguity as Strategy in organizational communication*)



# Clarity or Ambiguity?

Any more examples  
of clear or ambiguous terms?

