Ecovillages and Urban Change in the U.S.: A comparison of urban and suburban ecovillages

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1. What seem to be the most important characteristics of the rural (or suburban) ecovillage movement that urban ecovillagers can adopt; or vice versa?

2. Assuming significant modifications to the built environment, do cities not have the potential to be more efficient than suburban and rural ecovillages for the vast majority of humans?

3. To the extent that ecovillages actually represent a “movement,” how are they participating in local and national politics to influence broader-level change, and the growth of sustainable communities more generally?

4. Are decision-making structures utilized by ecovillagers applicable to communities with higher population density? What are the disadvantages of consensus decision-making structures to less privileged people, i.e. people of color, ethnic minorities, working class persons, etc.?
EcoVillage Ithaca

Project History
• Architect (of FROG): Jerold Weisburd Coterre
• Founding co-Directors: Liz Walker & Joan Bokaer
• Location: 2.5 miles from Ithaca, NY

Main Project Concerns/
Mission statement
• Conservation of resources
• Lessening Auto Dependence
• Achieving a sense of community
Demographics

- 90 residents: Telecommuters, two-salary professional families

Site

- 90% of which is devoted to remaining undeveloped as natural space

- The remaining 34 acres (10%) contains the village, as well as an organic farm located on nine acres of farm field

- Located on 174 acres of land
1996 – First Residents Group (FROG)
  • 15 duplex houses (30 units) two-story duplexes.

2003 – SONG (Second Neighborhood group)
  • 30 homes, two rows wider apart.

Future
  • Plan for 500 residents in five planned neighborhoods
Los Angeles EcoVillage

Biography

- Downtown Los Angeles, Wilshire Center / Koreatown

- Multicultural, multiaged low-income intentional community of 75 members nestled within the larger community of approximately 500 people

- Founders: Lois Arkin, CRSP, MI, & local community members

- 1994 – Inspired by cultural rift in community, founders begin rejuvenating their neighborhood relationships

- 1996 – 1ST Building (40 unit) purchased

- 1999 – 2ND Building (8 unit) purchased
Site History

- “Bimini” literally means “place of healing”
- Site of popular natural mineral hot springs
- Integration of hot springs causes anger amongst races
- Closure of hot springs is first hit on community’s economy
- Multicultural rift grows over time
- 1994 – Community reaches all-time low in regards to economy & sense of community due to riots spurred by Rodney King beating
Site Information

117 Bimini Place Los Angeles, CA

- Limited parking & slow streets
- Natural resources: Natural hot springs, Sacatela Creek
- Alleyways & yards turned to Greenways & gardens
First Residents Group (FROG)

- 15 duplex houses (30 units) two-story duplexes
- measuring between 900 and 1,700 square feet each
- Price: $90,000 to $170,000 respectively
- Sizes: 1 to 4 bedrooms, allowing for varied incomes & age groups

Common House

- Two-story
- At the entrance to the village
- Cook and dine several nights a week
- Shared laundry room
- Teen room socialize
- Children's playroom (also for yoga, meditation, meetings and classes)
FROG

- Recycle
- Passive solar design
- Airtight construction
- Energy-efficient appliances
- Energy-conserving domestic hot water measures.
- Triple-pane argon-filled windows,
- Greywater reuse
- Composting program
- Common house: radiant floor heating and heat exchange piping in a pond
- EVI consumes just 39 percent of the electric power, 41 percent of the natural gas and 22 percent of the water used by the average household in the northeastern United States.

EcoVillage Ithaca
SONG

• Passive Solar Design
• Fluorescent Fixtures
• Composting Toilets
• Rainwater catchment
• Solar Water Heating
• Greywater Recovery
• Light Tubes
• Vine trellises to mitigate summer sun
• Photovoltaics
• High-Efficiency Thermal Windows
• Hemlock siding
• Tight House Wrap
• Advanced Wood Framing
• ICF (Insulated Concrete Forms)
• SIP (Structural Insulated Panels)
• One straw-bale structure
• Radiant floors and fin-tube baseboard unit
Lessons Learned

SONG, FROG and the future
L.A. EcoVillage
Eco-park redesign
Existing Building Retrofits

• Vary per apartment

• Majority of renovation focused on removal of harmful material & use of local/Green materials

• “Our policies on building materials are to select the least toxic, least polluting, most local and most recycled materials whenever possible and practical.” Lois Arkin

L.A. EcoVillage
Comparing the Social Aspects of EcoVillage Ithaca & LA EcoVillage
Decision Making Processes

Activities and Outreach Programs

Shared Resources

Diversity of Members

Philosophy on Community Structure: housing type and demographics
Social Organization:
Decision Making Processes
Activities and Outreach Programs
Shared Resources
Food Systems
Diversity of Members

Philosophy on Structure of Community

L.A. EcoVillage

EcoVillage Ithaca
Three Components of EcoVillage Economics*

- Social
- Environmental
- Economic

In EcoVillage communities, there is a strong awareness of social and environmental concepts, but economic vision is often lacking.

*Source: Paul Antonelli, Somerville Ecovillage, Perth, Australia
Ecovillage economic models must support both

1. The enterprises owned by residents
2. Community-based/owned enterprises

How?

- The model must be *people-centric*: Based on the residents’ talents, potential, and passions.
- Location, size, needs of residents and the Ecovillage’s overall creative vision must also be factors

Why?

- There are very clear links between the social aspect of a community’s functions and their prosperity levels
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Models</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rental from Cooperative Resources &amp; Services Project (Non-Profit). A Community Land Trust is in the</td>
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<td>process of assisting the switch to a true cohousing model.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Startup with all capital from ecological revolving loans. Rent monies pay for maintenance and eco-</td>
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<td>retrofitting of units.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Labor Contribution</th>
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<tr>
<td>Labor contribution is expected, however, most maintenance is contracted out to residents</td>
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<th>Land Trust and Condominium</th>
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<tr>
<td>Startup began with a founders developing a non-profit in conjunction with a program at Cornell</td>
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<td>University.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The non-profit owned the land, which is gradually paid off by residents. Fingerlakes Land Trust</td>
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<td>protects portion of natural lands</td>
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| SONG members uphold a commitment to the basic maintenance and well-being of the community. No separate |
| currency or labor credits.                                                                            |
Livelihood of Residents

West Haven Farm (CSA - Community Supported Agriculture)
Residents have the opportunity to enjoy seasonal eating and a close connection to their food source, while helping local sustainable agriculture flourish. Consumers who have become members of West Haven Farm CSA pay for a portion of the farm's expenses and receive a share of the harvest in return.

Katie Creeger’s U-Pick Berry Farm - CSA

Frog’s Way Bed & Breakfast - run by the Shapiros

Performance Systems Contracting & Construction
Has been utilized for a good portion of FROG and SONG construction

Live/Work spaces
Crescent Moon Communications
Has produced most of the web pages for EVI businesses
Choice Computing

About 12 residents derive 5% - 80% of their livelihood from contractual work with non-profit. 2% receive the higher amount of livelihood:
- Maintenance and repair
- Vacuum and dust - one person
- Trash and recycle one person
- Cleans lobby, laundry, grounds - one person
- Building management (1 resident full time)
- Bicycle Kitchen

Live/Work Spaces
- Weaving Studio/ Musician/ Computer Consultant/ Garden Coordinator/ Music Director
- Artist Studio - Full Time
- Local café manager…might bring satellite onto site.
Where does the money come from?

Ecological Revolving Loan Fund (ELF)

Rent monies serve as cash flow for maintenance fees

Private Personal Loans
Most startup loans were forgiven

Educational Grants
NSF
USDA

Federal Home Loan Grant for Affordable Housing
Conclusion

Salient differences between EVI and LAEV

Ownership structure and funding:

- Implications for lower income residents, i.e. affordable housing (LAEV++)
- Implications for decision-making, tax status, and maintenance (LAEV+ and EVI to some extent)
- Retrofitting and regeneration of degraded habitats as opposed to new construction (LAEV++)
- Ecological Revolving Loan Fund (ELF), i.e. funds for renovation (LAEV+)

The implications for social change:

- Diffusion of values to local neighborhood residents and larger political community (LAEV++, EVI+)
- Insularity or social movements? (LAEV++; EVI+ with exceptions)
- Exposure in local and national media (LAEV+, EVI+ with exceptions)

The demographic composition and geographic organization of residents:

- Growing the community (LAEV++, EVI+)
- Diversity of environmental as well as social solutions (LAEV++, EVI+)
- Issues of autonomy (LAEV+, EVI-)
Ownership Structure

1. Members of LAEV can rent or buy at low rates, much lower than EVI, and still be members.

2. While condominium rules require voting, most work by consensus. With CLT’s, consensus is an option, but if there are many members, which is quite likely, a representative democratic structure can be (and is in CLT’s across the U.S.) used to facilitate decisions.

3. CLT’s are not-for-profits institutions, and members must reside within the community. The staying power of the institution is increased by its tax status, and the conditions under which it is created promotes local control, and hence community values. In addition, CLT’s can receive local development grants from the municipality, as well as from many other granting institutions.
Illustrates a possible problem with the consensus viewpoint that people are “self-selecting,” because self-selecting might not necessarily mean that a person does not have communal values, but instead may be alienated by the character and composition of the community.

Also makes a case for higher densities, more diversity, and the CLT model of governance to accommodate urban circumstances and goals.

Blackboard quote:

“How many people enjoy being converted to a new religion? Even though I have a great fondness for religion I hate being converted... it could be that hard-core villagers are repelling non-villagers, essentially building walls around their habitats.”