

CONSTRUCTING A GREEN LIFESTYLE  
CONSUMPTION AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN AN ECOVILLAGE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

Communities such as Ecovillage at Ithaca are redefining ways individuals in the United States are responding to the concern for environmental and social sustainability. These housing developments bring together individuals who aspire to create a sense of community while preserving nature. The new themed communities materialize as isolated parks where the mission of social and ecological sustainability is expressed through the daily practices of its residents. By exploring the everyday life of residents through extensive participant observation and conducting numerous in-depth interviews, this work examines the social construction of a green lifestyle.

Through consuming commodities marketed as “green,” lifestyles hinge on the discourse of natural capitalism, suggesting the possibility of using a capitalist framework to achieve environmental sustainability. The marketing of green commodities has resulted in a convoluted combination of prioritized efforts to reduce human impact on the planet by engaging in practices that at once appear to reduce consumption, while endorsing a culture of green consumption. Enacting a green lifestyle through the construction of new ecovillages creates a juxtaposition for residents who seek to address environmental and social degradation through the consumption of green commodities. Living in an ecovillage is a means to express the need to redesign neighborhoods that encourage reduction in resource consumption, while responding to a nostalgia for community.

Recent history suggests that such idealized communities are exclusionary and contribute to sprawl, yet for small privileged populations, ecovillages propose realistic solutions to a culture of over-consumption. Creating a sustainable community cannot be trivialized to buying undeveloped land, recycling, and sharing resources. Rather, ecovillages are immersed within a larger discourse on class, race, and lifestyle choices that often conflict with ecological and social justice. As new ecovillages expand locally and globally, they have the potential to redirect social and ecological solutions away from remediation and conservation and instead focus on the consumption of green technology and themed lifestyles that address social and environmental degradation within unique spaces. Thus ecovillages in the U.S. elucidate the contradictory nature of green consumption in the struggle to create a socially satisfying and ecologically sustainable lifestyle.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction .....	1
1.0 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Consumption in Western Environmentalism .....	16
1.2 The Intersection of Community and Environmentalism.....	20
1.3 Environmental Co-housing Communities.....	25
1.4 Ecovillage as a Solution to Environmental and Social Problems .....	30
1.5 Thesis .....	32
1.6 Dissertation Structure.....	35
1.7 A Note on Names.....	37
CHAPTER TWO: Community, Environmentalism, Consumption.....	39
2.0 Introduction.....	39
2.1 The Production of Community .....	41
2.1.1 The Ideological and Physical Community .....	48
2.1.2 Incorporating the Ideological Community and the Physical Community ...	59
2.2 Constructing Ways to Live with Nature .....	61
2.3 Anthropology and Environmentalism.....	67
2.4 Consumption and U.S. Environmentalism .....	76
2.5 Habitus, Taste, and Lifestyle .....	81
2.6 Green Consumption and Green Lifestyle .....	88

CHAPTER THREE: A Day in the Life of an Ecovillage.....	94
3.0    Introduction.....	94
3.1    A Day in the Life of an Ecovillage .....	95
3.2    Ecovillage as an Environmental Experience/Experiment? .....	111
3.3    “It’s not Easy Being Green”: FROG on Being Green .....	115
CHAPTER FOUR: Case Study: Ecovillage at Ithaca .....	120
4.0    Introduction.....	120
4.1    Methodology.....	124
4.1.1    Participant Observation.....	128
4.1.2    Archival data.....	130
4.1.3    Interviews.....	131
4.2    Social and Physical Structure of Ecovillage at Ithaca .....	134
4.2.1    EVI, Inc.....	136
4.2.2    FROG .....	137
4.2.3    SONG.....	141
4.2.4    VA.....	145
4.2.5    CSA.....	145
4.3    Peoples and Cultures of Ecovillage .....	147
4.3.1    The People .....	147
4.3.2    The Community .....	149
4.3.3    The Anthropologist.....	156

CHAPTER FIVE: Who’s Green, Who’s Not, Who Cares? .....	162
5.0 Introduction.....	163
5.1 Who’s Green? .....	167
5.2 Who’s Not? .....	174
5.2.1 Defining Nature .....	177
5.2.2 Technocentrism: Solutions to the Ecological Crisis? .....	180
5.2.3 Eco-socialism? .....	183
5.3 Who Cares? Green Consumptions and Green Marketing.....	185
5.3.1 Green Consumption: Shopping to Save the Environment .....	189
5.3.2 Green Marketing: Selling Out, Selling Green.....	194
5.3.3 Green Distraction: Why We Should Care About Social Justice.....	200
 CHAPTER SIX: Making Community Green .....	 205
6.0 Introduction.....	205
6.1 The Place for Nature and the Nature of Place.....	209
6.1.1 Green Sprawl .....	213
6.1.2 Garden Cities, Techno-Cities, Edge Cities .....	217
6.2 Creating a Community for the Environment .....	224
6.2.1 Ageography.....	226
6.2.2 Surveillance.....	229
6.2.3 Architecture.....	235
6.2.4 The Theme of Green Living .....	242



6.2.5	Tensions and Negotiations.....	244
6.3	Constructing Place Through Rituals and Celebrations.....	255
CHAPTER SEVEN: Emerging Green Lifestyles.....		260
7.0	Introduction.....	260
7.1	Constructing a Green Lifestyle.....	262
7.1.1	Characteristics of a Green Lifestyle.....	273
7.2	Class and a Green Lifestyle.....	277
7.3	Significance of a Green Lifestyle.....	287
7.3.1	Green Lifestyle and Green Identity.....	289
7.3.2	Eco-exclusion.....	295
7.3.3	Contradictions of the Exclusionary Lifestyle.....	303
CHAPTER EIGHT: Conclusion.....		309
8.1	Possibilities of the Eco-City.....	314
8.2	Voluntary Simplicity.....	317
8.3	Green Capitalism?.....	321
8.4	Closing Thoughts.....	324
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....		328

## **CHAPTER ONE: Introduction**

### 1.0 Introduction

*Leaving the city of Ithaca by car, an uphill ride past single-family homes, brings you to the top of West hill. The road leading to Ecovillage is not paved with gold; it is paved with dirt. The turn onto the dirt road, only a short distance from the city leads into a unique community. There is no welcome sign, no gate, no guard, only nature: meadows, wild flowers, trees, an occasional deer making its way across this wide dirt path, and a small green street sign that honors the late pioneer of U.S. environmentalism—Rachel Carson Way. The view from the car is easy to take in because the speed limit is 15 miles per hour. Life seems to slow down; the long dirt road seems to draw the traveler closer to nature as the fallow vegetation grows thick and dark green. Today, two women are out for a walk on a grassy path that winds its way around this 176-acre field that once was a small family farm. The traffic doesn't bother them; they look up briefly and wave. Smiling and random acts of kindness are just what people do up here. After a long half-mile along this gently winding road, the first neighborhood comes into view. There is a*

*guest parking lot to the left, again, more dirt, grass, flowers, and butterflies. The Common House stands tall, towering over the clustered and orderly homes that are, by design, friendly and welcoming.*

*On this warm summer afternoon, the neighborhood is buzzing: women chat with each other; young boys run around carrying sticks and laugh, chasing each other between the houses and in the fields that surround them; some adults on the cook team prepare the Common House meal to be served later in the evening. It is easy to see why people moved up here, the walkway between the two rows of houses is only for pedestrians, but if necessary, it can accommodate an emergency vehicle. The path is lined with beautiful perennial flower gardens, neat lawns, and small herb and vegetable beds. Each garden is designed by the respective household and reflects the diverse personality of the residents. The horticulturalist has a well-manicured ornamental garden, while the neighbor, known for her gourmet cooking has vegetables and herbs. Another neighbor works as a naturalist writer and likes the “natural” look. She did not do anything to her garden, which is overgrown with wild grass and wild flowers, including what I’ve heard some neighbors grudgingly call weeds. Unlike some neighborhoods in the United States, this neighborhood is alive, active, and safe: everyone knows each other and makes an effort to create a friendly environment.*

*In an “Ecovillage moment” I join two neighbors who spontaneously meet and start to talk about building a sauna on the land using cordwood and cement. The small room would be built up against a natural brim and have a living roof of flowers and grass,*

*maybe even vegetables. It is a great idea, it would blend well on the land and hardly look like an unnatural structure. It would be part of the landscape. Our conversation takes us into Lukas's home where the now four of us share a cup of herbal tea in custom-fired pottery. It is easy to draw a passerby into conversations and then into homes, the neighborhood is designed that way. We spend the afternoon talking about the sauna and how relaxing it would be for the community. We all appreciate living in Ecovillage and love the land, the people, the experience.*

*By evening, we have dispersed, returning to what we were previously doing in our own homes: cleaning, reading, sending emails, and knitting. At 6 o'clock p.m. sharp, the Common House dinner bell (a large musical triangle) rings and neighbors pour out of their homes into the pedestrian-only walkway, chatting about the day, and asking about each other's families. We stream into the Common House and stand in a circle. Those who don't like the circle, wait by the door. The residents and the occasional guest in the circle hold hands, visitors and dinner guests are introduced. The head cook announces the menu and thanks her assistants. We line up around the island to get our food. Today's pasta and vegetable meal is, as usual, very accommodating. Primarily vegetarian, there is a vegan option, a wheat-free option, and a special dish for the single community member allergic to mushrooms. The dining room is alive with chatter, children asking to sit with each other, and adults struggling to catch up with their neighbors. Suddenly, a gentle tapping on a table turns into a loud rumbling of hands against wood, small voices begin the now traditional chant and we all join in... "YEAH COOKS!" Another "community moment" is played out as we collectively express our*

*gratitude to a hallmark of co-housing. We return to our conversations, and the dish team is already starting to clean up the empty serving dishes. By 9 o'clock, the dining room is empty. The last resident in the Common House has been working late in the offices to the right of the dining room. She makes her way down the quiet neighborhood, a short distance to get home.*

This research is an attempt to describe the ways residents in an ecovillage understand and respond to the growing concern for misguided suburban sprawl in the United States. Specifically, I explore how residents and participants in the Ecovillage at Ithaca (EVI) project construct nature and community, and how ideas of nature and community are incorporated and negotiated in the everyday life of residents. Although the benefits of living close to each other, sharing resources and taking long walks on beautiful trails is appealing to those who live there, other participants have left the project feeling irreconcilable tensions between trying to improve communities yet moving away from them, or the contradiction of being a model of sustainable living, but owning and using more resources than necessary. Residents at EVI often negotiate some of these tensions by consuming “green” commodities, rightfully pointing out that the average new home in the United States is 1000 square feet larger than the Ecovillage at Ithaca homes.

I am interested in exploring the assumption that green consumerism and green technology are the appropriate mechanisms to address environmental and social degradation. I also question the usefulness of suggesting ecovillages as models to re-create a sense of community. My aim is to apply an anthropological analysis to understand how some

U.S. communities are attempting to create sustainable lifestyles. Anthropological exploration is well suited to address these concerns as “cultural critique” because it places everyday practices within the context of larger social and cultural worlds (Marcus and Fischer 1986). My goal is not simply to describe the successes of EVI: I analyze green consumption and its relevance to lifestyles, while discussing what is challenging about creating a sustainable lifestyle in the United States. I attempt to explain why these challenges can be informative to the goal of creating a more ecologically sustainable and socially equitable community.

The search for a better place and way to live has been a preoccupation of the U.S. middle class dating back to nineteenth century European settlers (Durnbaugh 1997). Ideas of an ecovillage, the marriage between environmentalism and creating a sense of community, echoes the work of twentieth century city planners such as Lewis Mumford, Patrick Geddes, and Ebenezer Howard who, instead of ecovillages, planned garden cities that emphasized designing the built environment in harmony with nature (Geddes 1979; Howard 1902; Mumford 1938). The Ecovillage at Ithaca is a design project that emerges out of a long history of creating community and protecting the environment in the United States.

The twentieth century has seen an increase in a concern for two themes in the United States: that of a loss of a “sense of community” and of burgeoning environmental degradation such as pollution, resource depletion, and toxic waste. The concern for community have tended to be expressed through the creation of utopias (Richter 1971),

communes (Melville 1972), and, most recently, gated communities (Caldeira 2000; Low 2001) and co-housing neighborhoods (McCamant and Durrett 1994). Concurrently, the growing concern for the environment has increasingly been expressed through producing alternative technologies and encouraging green consumerism. Ecovillages emerged from the Danish model of co-housing (McCamant and Durrett 1994) which offers a solution to environmental degradation and social isolation, yet unlike earlier efforts that emphasized communalism, ecovillages encourage private space and at the same time offer abundant opportunities for community interactions. Ecovillages are an attempt to design living spaces that model ways to care and repair the environment through the sharing of resources that inspire a sense of community in the process. For example, in EVI the small energy-efficient houses are clustered around a pedestrian-only walkway, which brings neighbors physically and socially closer together while preserving the surrounding land from development. This community design was inspired by images and experiences residents had of living in rural communities of non-Western countries where villagers were perceived as being intricately connected to the environment around them, through living in mud huts, walking barefoot on the land, the absence of cars, and growing their food in small community gardens. The nostalgia for a better way to live with nature and each other reflects a broader concern within one form of U.S. environmentalism that is critical of suburban sprawl, unplanned development and the resulting environmental degradation and social isolation that is evident in abandoned downtown centers and the disappearance of open spaces.

Ecovillages emerge at the apex of intricate social phenomena that are at once in need of an alternative way of engaging with nature and the environment and, at the same time, constrained by exclusionary politics and practices. Influential works in the social sciences have explored ideas of environmentalism and constructions of nature, finding that environmentalism is diverse and multifaceted (Brosius 1999; Castree and Braun 1998; Crumley 2001; Descola 1996). Not surprisingly, different actors use the discourse of environmentalism for personal and communal interests, both in terms of political and economic ends. Scholars have responded to this complexity by analyzing the environment in separate contexts. Escobar critiques development studies as a new form of Enlightenment discourse that substitutes Merchants' Enlightenment analysis of the "death of nature" with "the rise of environment" where he argues that sustainable development continues to impose Northern economic exploits of Southern "Nature" (Escobar 1995; Merchant 1980). Adams argues likewise that sustainable development is "firmly anchored within the existing economic paradigm of the industrial North (Adams 1990). Feminist scholars have been effective in problematizing the ontological duality between Nature/culture and human/nonhuman worlds (Soper 1996). Among feminists critiques of environmentalism is an argument that traces environmental destruction to the Enlightenment era where male-dominated science and industrialization depended on the exclusion or exploitation of women and nature (Haraway 1991; Martin 1998; Shiva 1993a). More recently, building on similar arguments of sustainable development, scholars have begun to more directly question the compatibility between capitalism and environmentalism (O'Connor 1994). This argument of the appropriateness of using a capitalist framework to achieve environmental sustainability is the subject of my thesis



and will be explored in later chapters. Furthermore, works in anthropology and other social sciences are finding it useful to explore the ways these themes are interconnected through the discourse of political ecology and consumption(s). Consumption and environmentalism are intrinsically connected at multiple levels: through the expropriation of natural resources to produce commodities and, as I argue through this dissertation, through creating an identity with specific commodities and creating social relationships around objects that convey a meaning of environmental sustainability (Appadurai 1986a; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Lury 1996; Miller 1995a; Miller 1995b). It is within this interconnected space of politics, ecology, and consumption that EVI is situated within the larger cultural context of U.S. environmentalism and the search for community. Thus this work contributes a Western case study of political ecology, consumption and environmentalism to a growing body of literature on communities and environmentalism outside the United States (Caldeira 1996; Carrier and Heyman 1997; Escobar 1996; Miller 1995b; O'Connor 1994; Peet and Watts 1996; Sponsel 1997; Wolf 1972).

Anthropology's engagement in the study community, kinship and ritual as they relate to the environment and its management (see for example Crumley 2001; Rappaport 1968; Turner 1967) is well placed to explore the creation of communities that are working to protect the environment. My work argues that the tools used to create a community that focuses on environmental conservation is best analyzed through the study of consumption. Ideas that emerge from consumption studies have addressed the importance of material goods in creating identity. Appadurai (1986b) argues that the practice of consumption is not a private or passive affair, but rather it is integral in

forming social relations (Friedman 1994). I argue that the use of the environment and community is one tool the EVI project uses to create a social identity. Bourdieu's (1984) seminal work on class, lifestyle and tastes suggests that *habitus* makes reducing consumption patterns difficult if not impossible, when it is the basis of creating class distinction. Miller (1995b) questions whether the social phenomenon of consumption, as it relates to identity, might come to replace kinship in the anthropological study of communities. I support Miller's assertion by describing the poignant way residents in EVI relate to each other based on commodities. As industrialization continues to reshape the social landscape, the social relations that once drew their meaning from biological ties are becoming reconfigured through identities with commodities. The emergence of an emphasis on commodities to create a green identity (and suggest a solution to environmental degradation through the creation of green communities), highlights the importance of goods as a central focus in the postmodern society (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). In Ecovillage, recent debates that focus on the effectiveness of imposing a "green" tax on non-renewable commodities as advocated in natural capitalism and eco-capitalism are embraced. Sarkar (1999) argues for eco-socialism in opposition to eco-capitalism as perhaps a better means of confronting the contradictions of environmental protection, consumption, and personal identity that are influenced by political, economic, and ecological forces. Thus, in order to understand the ecological and social forces that are at play in the everyday practices of residents in Ecovillage, it may be necessary to examine the capitalist structure in which such communities are embedded.

U.S. environmentalism is a complex subject that has gone through many transformations. As a result, there has never been a globally adopted definition of what it means to be an environmentalist or environmentally “friendly” (Tsing 2001). Instead, environmentalism has come to hold a number of meanings for different actors, at different points in time, and in different geographic regions. In this dissertation I use Milton’s simplistic, elastic, and general definition of environmentalism as a quest for a viable future. Specifically, the commonly used term in Western countries refers to a “concern that the environment should be protected...from the harmful effects of human activities” (Milton 1996:27). This simple definition for a complex phenomenon is useful because it allows for multiple translations and interpretations. This fluidity is what makes environmentalism in Milton’s “industrial society” challenging to identify as one concept, yet it also reflects the reality of an ambiguous environmentalism. Attempting to construct one unifying definition of environmentalism will result in the exclusion of a variety of important cultural constructs of human engagements with nature.

As the dissertation explores the relationship of EVI to its local and global environment, I analyze the multiple constructions of nature and the environment, and discuss the applications and implications of this definition in the everyday practices of the households that comprise the EVI project. I explore a segment of U.S. environmentalism that is preoccupied with personal commitments to the environment through consumption and sustainable ideology. Although this form of environmentalism is often implicitly referred to in social justice discourses of U.S. environmentalism, however, unlike

communities (predominately of color) that are disproportionately affected by polluted environments, they are rarely, if every, examined in depth (Bullard 1994; Fortun 2001).

There are many forms of environmentalism that are interconnected through their concern for how natural resources are managed. My work is an attempt to shed light on the everyday practice of one variety of U.S. environmentalism, one that views nature outside of its political context. I demonstrate the ways this variety of environmentalism relates to everyday realities of consumption within a capitalist society

My research on EVI is a critical analysis of an emerging cultural trend that has gained support from businesses that see a market niche for “green” commodities. This perceived way to negotiate consumption and environmentalism is part of the attractiveness of Hawken, et al.’s (1999) “natural capitalism” because, I argue, it is less confrontational than other forms of environmentalisms where groups were directly critical of consumption and U.S. consumer culture.

Athanasiou (1996) argues that this change occurred with the rise of public relations firms and a new form of environmentalism that is less confrontational and more cooperative with business. Ironically, the current trend that now embraces business-led environmentalism is contributing to misguided environmental strategies. This trend creates the illusion of sustainability, while drawing our attention away from more important critiques of capitalist society such as equity and justice. Much like the sustainable development rhetoric that function primarily as a new means to continue

unsustainable and often destructive practices (Escobar 1996; Hobart 1993), the new market driven environmentalism does little to change the global or local natural environment. While this study is an opportunity to celebrate the success the EVI project has had on some residents who otherwise may not have been conscious of their impact on the environment, it is also an opportunity to critically examine the reluctance of U.S. environmentalism to confront capitalism.

Throughout the dissertation I raise the disconnection between two distinct environmentalisms in the U.S. One form of environmentalism is often described as a white, middle class movement, whereas the other is considered a social justice movement (Harvey 1996a). These two models are separated along racial, class, and geographic boundaries; specifically, environmental justice scholars often focus on communities of non-Caucasians, poor, and mainly people living in urban spaces. The environmental justice groups focus on health, jobs, and the disproportionate use of poor, non-Caucasian neighborhoods as dumping grounds for toxic waste or the locations for industrial power plants and refineries, and polluting highways (Bullard 1994). This is not the environmentalism of EVI, which designs their neighborhoods around open land, toxic-free spaces with healthful fresh food, access to nature, and beautiful views—things many people consider luxuries.

My research also provides an opportunity to engage within a growing field in anthropology that studies middle-class, predominantly white communities. Seldom has anthropology turned its gaze upon middle-class white communities in Western countries

in general, and the U.S. in particular, especially with regards to environmentalism (Brosius 2001; Erickson 1997).

One of the ways U.S. environmentalism has developed is through the suggestion that capitalism and environmental protection are compatible and the best way to protect our natural resources (Hawken, et al. 1999). Other scholars argue that “natural capitalism” and the “eco-economy” merely distracts from larger global social injustice and economic inequality (Sarkar 1999), creating and perpetuating the same problems that capitalism and over-consumption have caused for people and nature. The current trend in Western environmentalism of advocating the consumption of green commodities raises questions regarding the marketing of green commodities and its effectiveness as a solution to environmental degradation. The debate between what Pepper (1993) identifies as *eco-centrics* (those who see humankind as part of the ecosystem and believe in ecologically constrained human action) and *techno-centrics* (who believe that it is possible to reverse current environmental degradation through improved technology) is a useful tool to understand the debate in which U.S. environmentalism is deeply entrenched.

Ecovillages raise interesting questions about the direction of U.S. environmentalism, four decades after Rachel Carson’s (1962) *Silent Spring* ushered in a national call for environmental awareness. My research is an attempt to explore the direction of U.S. environmentalism beginning with Carson’s outward-reaching efforts that urged that industries be held accountable for pollution in the general community. More recently however, some forms of environmentalism have moved away from demanding industrial

accountability and the clean-up of toxic waste, such as in superfund sites, often in poor and non-white communities (Bullard 1990).

Heavily influenced by businesses, a new environmentalism focuses inward and emphasizes personal lifestyle choices, such as consuming organic food, building green houses, and creating new socially and environmentally healthful communities away from industrial pollutants. Acknowledging the very different nature of these forms of environmentalism, I make no effort to compare them, yet I feel that they have too often been separated artificially, when in fact they are related. That is, both forms of environmentalism are on the minds of my informants; they expressed concern, discomfort, and sometimes indifference to the social injustice and environmental racism that their community fails to confront. As a result, residents experience the contradictions of their actions through this lens. Thus Milton's general definition is merely an entry point that points to the complexities of environmentalism rather than clarifies it. I attempt therefore to keep environmental justice in the discussion because it is already there explicitly or implicitly (through deliberate exclusion). Nonetheless, if U.S. environmentalism is to be sincere, it will require an open and realistic discussion of the two divergent views of nature and the human place within it. Many EVI residents are struggling with this effort, and my work aims to shed light on some of those struggles as a way to encourage further dialogue.

I attempt to understand the social, political, and economic implications of ecovillages. What is the relationship between green consumption and environmentalism? Can

environmental degradation and loss of community be resolved through the creation of communities in the form of ecovillages and particularly by consuming green commodities? I explore how residents in Ecovillage foster a sense of community and struggle with conflicting notions of environmentalism. What are the daily negotiations residents make to be more ecological? Finally, I am interested in exploring how anthropology can contribute to the search for sustainable communities and propose solutions to continuing environmental decay.

This dissertation examines the ways participants in Ecovillage try to achieve environmental and social regeneration. In the U.S., emphasis is placed on consuming green products, which in my opinion is essentially the adoption of a capitalist model to solve environmental problems. Like Erickson (1997), I argue that consumption itself is at the heart of U.S. social and environmental degradation, and specifically that the emphasis on certain forms of green consumption is counter to aims of protecting, preserving, and regenerating our communities and the environment.

This study, like the lives of residents in EVI, is situated within the broader context of rapid changes in U.S. housing and community models, as well as in new varieties of environmentalism. New ways of responding to global climate change and social disconnections are providing opportunities to critically consider our engagements with nature and each other. A framework of consumption is useful to explore the interrelated themes that these new “green” suburban communities. Specifically, I am interested in



how the lens of environmental concern is focused on these privately owned spaces that are constructed as social and ecological havens.

### 1.1 Consumption in Western Environmentalism

Ecovillage is answering what is perhaps the greatest challenge to the environmental movement today. It addresses the pressing need for people from wealthy countries to consume less: less land and fewer resources (Bokaer 1997: 1).

It has been well argued that the United States consumes a disproportionate amount of the earth's resources (Erickson 1997; O'Connor 1994; Trainer 1997). This disparity in consumption contributes similarly to global resource depletion, environmental pollution, and social injustice in Western poor communities and non-Western communities (Bullard 1990). At the same time, environmentalism has become part of U.S. popular culture (Kempton, et al. 1996), where the most prominent solution to address environmental degradation has come in the form of the consumer market. Advocates of using the market as a vehicle to improve the environment argue for natural capitalism (Brown 2001a; Hawken, et al. 1999). Natural capitalism suggests that the current rate of environmental degradation of the planet can be slowed, and reversed through creating an economy of alternative energy and resource use. For example, by encouraging the construction of communities that are energy-efficient and reduce our dependence on cars, jobs are created, safe materials can be used and natural resources are preserved. Natural capitalism also advocates for leasing commodities that would remain the responsibility of

the manufacturer the same way apartment rentals are the responsibility of the landlord. Critics of natural capitalism make the central argument that because capitalism is itself the cause of environmental degradation, using a capitalist framework as a solution is problematic at best (Fotopoulos 2000; Sarkar 1999). Natural capitalism and, as I argue, green consumption still encourage a culture of consumption. Register (1996) argues that hybrid cars still require vast amounts of energy to manufacture and run. Thus, natural capitalism still offers a problematic model of production and consumption while we transition into a more sustainable lifestyle; by emphasizing technological solutions, natural capitalism skirts around the inevitable need for U.S.-American culture to confront its obsession with consumption and waste (Shove 2003). Certainly this effort to reduce consumption will not be easy or quickly implemented, yet there are projects that attempt to do just that. I maintain that while EVI currently leans towards green consumption, the EVI concept has the potential to create a community that demonstrates a lifestyle where minimum consumption is possible. Because the central problems of environmental degradation are caused by the rampant depletion of non-renewable resources through production and consumption, as well as disposing the resulting byproducts of hazardous waste and toxic pollution, a model that demonstrates ways to reduce our dependence on these processes would be logical.

Well-meaning residents in Ecovillage want to make choices and decisions that are good for the environment and that do the least amount of harm to non-human nature. Some of the ways residents accomplish this are to consume organic goods, if they can afford them, or by believing that they are improving the environment simply by purchasing a “green”

home in an ecovillage (for example, a home that requires less energy to heat and cool). While residents at Ecovillage attempt to live a simpler lifestyle, they are confronted with conflicts and tensions between living a comfortable lifestyle and protecting the environment. Residents are often torn between possessing different kinds of commodities, some which are considered luxuries instead of necessities. One resident confessed that he had to buy his first car when he moved into the first neighborhood because the community lacked public transportation and the mailboxes are located half a mile away from the houses. These tensions are non-trivial nor are they unique to EVI, but reflect broader questions about how we define nature and where we place ourselves within the natural and built environment.

Consuming green is part of the emerging view that stresses consumption as a means to improve the environment (Hawken, et al. 1999; Smith 1998b). Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of habitus and lifestyle are an appropriate framework to address how perceptions of the need for community, an understanding of nature and environment, and the consumption of specific commodities can be a viable solution to environmental problems and at the same time, create social distinction. These concepts are useful because they emphasize the broader structures in which residents are situated, while acknowledging the importance of distinction in lifestyle and taste. In addition, political ecology is useful because it questions the relationship between land use, environmental degradation and the influence of social, economic, and political power on environmental discourse (Peet and Watts 1996; Wolf 1972). While focusing exclusively in the United States, my work responds to Miller's call for anthropologists to explore the recent

greening of commodities and the function of “green” commodities in “First World” consumption (Miller 1995a).

Athanasίου warns that while it is “easy to dismiss corporate environmentalism...in the end it may be as real a social movement as feminism or civil rights activism” (Athanasίου 1996:5). While corporate environmentalism may not have turned into a movement comparable to feminism or civil rights, it has been successfully integrated into all forms of the U.S. economy and socio-political sphere. Erickson (1997) demonstrates the rush of businesses to attach panda bears, whales, and the revolving arrows (recycling symbol) to as many commodities as possible because “being green” sells. There are now numerous books, magazines, and conferences that are geared to help businesses make a profit with a green identity. What is lacking is a response from environmental groups that is critical of aligning with businesses that are more concerned with their “bottom line” than the state of the earth (Foster 2002).

The extent of the market’s success in diverting attention away from the causes of environmental degradation and replacing it with a solution that is embedded in the consumption of commodities that the market produces is not surprising. Thus, this ideology (that green consumption is a solution to ecological problems) is embraced by well meaning people concerned about the environment. Some EVI residents believe that they are challenging this way of thinking by focusing on long-lasting changes such as the sharing of resources, the reduction of house sizes, and trying to preserve the natural environment around them, yet at the same time the community is entrenched within a

structure that also encourages the construction of new homes and the purchasing of new greener commodities. Other residents who moved out of EVI felt that these efforts of a few residents were minuscule and done out of a self-interest to be identified as ecological rather than to make a strong statement about social and environmental sustainability.

## 1.2 The Intersection of Community and Environmentalism

For me it's a bunch of people coming together to preserve resources, sharing and preserving, again, resources, and having minimal impact on the immediate environment around them--self-sustainability to a certain extent...For example, you grow your own food, or you generate your own energy, or you reuse your garbage into compost, recycling... That's what I mean. Co-housing is definitely closer to that than any other living situation I've been in so far (Sean).

The mid-twentieth century saw the exodus of upper middle class, predominantly white, families from city centers and into suburbs that contained homes surrounded by green lawns and ample yards. This exodus is mainly attributed to dissatisfaction with the city and a desire to return to older values “under conditions that threatened to destroy them” specifically, as cities became more crowded, and the commuter train provided a reliable means to separate work from home, wealthier families moved into clustered suburbs connected to railway lines forming communities such as Philadelphia's Mainline (Jackson 1985). The end of the Second World War, the Baby Boom, and resulting increase in single families homes, as well as the rise of the personal automobile meant that families could live further away from the city center. Facilitated by the automobile, families who could afford it were able to commute to work in socially and economically

depressed cities (Gregory 1998). Not long afterwards, businesses and office buildings began relocating out of these depressed cities and into what Garreau (1991) calls “edge cities.” Garreau points out that city centers became more degraded as businesses and families moved to the outskirts and that this mass exodus resulted in more crime, abandoned buildings, and growing poverty, further contributing to a depressed social and economic environment.

For the middle-class, the exodus out of the city and into the countryside, adjacent to farmland and forest, meant that the air was cleaner, surrounding homes were filled, for the most part, with working families, and households had privacy and autonomy. Fear of crime, increasing social diversity, and an obsession with security resulted in some communities creating small neighborhood associations that governed the behavior and activities of the residents (Davis 1998; McKenzie 1994). These contemporary communities, constructed on former farmland outside the city limits have raised concerns and criticism from anti-sprawl groups, who called attention to the destruction of the land and the impact of an increasing reliance on cars. Similarly the new suburban developments lack the infrastructure to naturally bring people together the way city centers did with walkable access to shops, jobs, schools, and public plazas (Low 1996). Other communities such as gated communities, excluded people from their neighborhood sidewalks by building walls and guarding gates around privately owned enclaves (Caldeira 2000; Low 2001). These gated communities included streets, sidewalks, small parks, and recreation areas. They symbolized new forms of segregation that used surveillance and barriers to control behavior and exclude undesirable people from

participating in the life of the community (Caldeira 1996). Unlike the ideas raised by city planners who called for garden cities and nature in cities as a way to improve the health of the city and the people who lived in them (Howard 1902; Mumford 1938), these new communities were intent on moving into places that already had “nature.”

While communities were continuing to transform open space and farmland into post-war suburbia and gated communities, the environmental movement was spreading to all corners of the U.S. Reaction to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) is often referenced as the beginning of the U.S. environmentalist movement. U.S. environmentalism began with the realization of the negative effects of industrial pollutants on human health through direct and indirect exposure to toxic pollutants like DDT and other industrial pesticides (Carson 1962). Carson’s message of the dangers of pesticides in the environment was accessible to local communities through colorful descriptions of observable decreased robin populations. Other ecological disasters like Love Canal (Levine 1982) continued to provide evidence of the vulnerability of communities to environmental hazards. This awareness, combined with growing political forces around civil rights and women’s rights gave environmentalism its momentum that largely focused on the environment as a national concern for public health. This early environmentalism focused on ensuring a healthy environment for the larger community and not to a small group of private neighborhoods (that is, looking outward versus looking inward). In response to *Silent Spring*, activists worked to improve the broader environment, which included a concern for public parks and public policy. One of the significant gains of this early environmentalism was the establishment of the

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the early 1980s as a federal agency to monitor industrial pollution. Broadening its interest, U.S. environmentalism began focusing on endangered species, wilderness preservation, and other global environmental problems (Cronon 1996; Guha 1989). The new focus on the global environment emphasized nature as needing protection from human destruction and often blamed “Third World” lifestyles for accelerating environmental problems through the neo-malthusian focus on population growth, unsustainable farming practices, such as slash-and-burn agriculture, and over-hunting of wild game (Ehrlich 1968; Harding 1968). Western nations responded by advocating population control, conservation parks, and more recently by encouraging green and sustainable development (Adams 1990). In the U.S., a growing critique emerged that argued against the narrowly focused criticism of practices of non-Western, poor communities. This critique also raised concern over the advocacy of wilderness preservation (game parks) while ignoring the poisoning of the human communities in non-Western countries by Western industries (Di Chiro 1996; Fortun 2001; Harvey 1996a).

Environmentalists in the U.S. did not gather under a single, unifying theme, but rather have been comprised of diverse groups, including anti-nuclear war activists (Gusterson 1996), anti-development, anti-World Bank, and anti-WTO activists (Peet and Watts 1996), wilderness preservationists, deep ecologists (Naess 1988), and a variety of groups protecting endangered species such as the Sierra Club and World Wildlife Fund. Concurrent to the popular concern for the environment was the sudden increase of environmental studies programs across university campuses. In addition to new



departments of environmental studies, established academic fields began including environmental sub-fields such as environmental law and environmental anthropology.

In anthropology, the new arena for analysis of environment and community led to variegated debate that centered on the nature/culture dialectic (although sometimes seen as a dichotomy) and the role of the environment in facilitating social, political, and economic regulation in communities (Brosius 2001; Escobar 1999; Harvey 1993; Rappaport 1968). As environmentalism was debated within academia in the United States and by scholars who collected data primarily in developing countries, scholars from non-Western (and some Western) countries were critical of associating nature with indigenous groups, mainly because these associations have often justified control and oppression of these groups, either through neglect or blame for ecological problems. Specifically, many of these critiques argued that invoking the noble savage—that third world people are closer to nature, and purer until they are corrupted by contact with Westerners—justified control over indigenous resources through development and more recently, sustainable development, while at the same time ignoring political forces that exploited their way of life, or romanticizing their lifestyle as inherently harmonious with nature (Trainer 2002). Debates over power, access to resources, and social justice are scrutinized in the various orientations of political economy, political ecology and liberation ecologies. Common to all these debates is the fact that over-consumption of the world's resources in the first world is disproportionately impacting the global environment (Escobar 1996; Guha 1989; Merchant 1980; Peet and Watts 1996; Shiva 1993a; Trainer 1997), yet there is little analysis of consumption patterns in the countries

whose everyday practices and lifestyles significantly affect the global environment. In addition, efforts in over-consuming Western countries to conserve and preserve the environment often emphasize conservation and preservation<sup>1</sup> in non-Western countries.

I argue that through the marketing of green products, conserving and preserving the environment has become a commodity, specifically, as it applies to new ecological housing communities. Efforts to unearth the growing concern for environmental degradation and loss of community have come together through the creation of new ways of living, what I refer to as “green lifestyles,” and by consuming commodities that are constructed as “green.”

### 1.3 Environmental Co-housing Communities

Ecovillage is a general term given to what is commonly known in communal studies and co-housing circles as an ecological co-housing community. Co-housing, a term coined by architects McCamant and Durrett (1994), describes a U.S.-American version of the Danish *bofællesskaber* where a neighborhood is intentionally constructed, usually with the participation of future residents, to encourage a sense of community. Households purchase homes that are built close together and that are deliberately designed to encourage and facilitate social interaction amongst neighbors. Although co-housing communities have different personalities, co-housing is generally defined as having 25-30 households, a shared common house where residents have the option to share weekly

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<sup>1</sup> I use the concepts of conservation and preservation to refer generally to efforts to conserve resources and preserve “natural” non-human resources.

common meals, make collective decisions on issues that affect the neighborhood, and share amenities like laundry facilities and children's play areas.

Co-housing communities are mushrooming around the U.S. and although they seldom identify themselves with a particular ideology or mission (McCammant and Durrett strongly recommend that for co-housing to work, it should not be attached to an ideology) many new communities are calling themselves ecovillages, a term that suggests a proactive stance towards living in harmony with nature and the environment (FIC 2000). Most co-housing communities are located on the outskirts of cities; although there are some urban co-housing communities in larger cities in the United States such as Swan's Market in the heart of downtown Oakland, California. Many co-housing communities view their lifestyle as an attempt to create both social and environmental sustainability (Meltzer 2000). Ecovillages, for the most part, have adapted the model of co-housing but take the concept a step further by embracing conservation and preservation of the environment as their primary mission. Many of these ecovillages are in suburbs with access to land as well as to nature (thus providing a way to model the sustainable use of the land they occupy).

Ecovillages in general, and EVI in particular, presents itself as a community where families who move into the neighborhood embrace both the desire to live in community and participate in environmental protection and conservation. The intersection of environmentalism and community brings an assortment of competing actors together. In the United States, social and environmental sustainability is being expressed through co-

housing communities. As such, ecovillages are being designed as “green” spaces for middle-class families to create ideal communities that are environmentally clean and socially safe. According to Trainer:

those who are concerned for the fate of the planet and for the building of a sustainable world order should focus their energies on the establishment of example alternative communities that will illustrate the new values, arrangements, technologies and economies that must eventually become the norm in rich and poor countries (1997:1219).

Concurrently, Fotopoulos points out that ecovillages exclude people from lower social classes from participating in these alternative communities. Fotopolous contends that social change will not come about by “a plurality of groups ...operating within their own context and trying to bypass the political and economic power structures rather than confront(Anderson) them” (2000:288). At the same time, other groups such as environmental justice groups are working to improve the environment and social reality of communities that have been disproportionately targeted for waste incinerators and landfills (Di Chiro 1996).

Co-housing communities are not an isolated housing phenomenon in the United States; on the contrary, they fit into a broader national discussion of how to plan, build, and improve neighborhoods, communities, and cities (Joseph 2002; McKenzie 1994; Miller 1995a; Putnam 2000). Co-housing and ecovillage communities can be placed within the context of urban renewal and themed spaces. Tangentially, they react to interest in transforming spaces like downtown shopping centers into national privately owned shopping malls and office complexes (Garreau 1991). The rapid transformation of public

spaces, from historical sites of political protests and democracy into private corporate sponsored shopping malls, theme parks (Sorkin 1992b), and neighborhoods (Ross 1999) is changing the political and ecological landscape of the United States. According to some residents in EVI, their former suburban communities lacked a way to get to know their neighborhood and failed to provide an ideal space for their children to grow up.

Thus, the EVI project was set up in order to create a private space that would conserve and preserve land from development, for example, by creating easements. By building smaller homes, residents are preserving the surrounding land for “nature”, in a community that helps them, through guidelines and support networks within the neighborhood, recycle, compost, and reduce their reliance on automobiles<sup>2</sup> and material goods. The community becomes a commodity that residents are able to purchase and consume. The consumption of community as a commodity can be seen in places like Celebration Florida where families can live in a manufactured fantasy city (See for example Hannigan 1998; Ross 1999). Like environmentalism, residents in Ecovillage are able to purchase a home where a sense of community (neighborliness) is built into the physical design of the homes as well as the functionality of the everyday decision-making process of consensus. A resident of the First Resident Group (FROG) explained that while he knew many residents did not like the four-hour long community meetings, he saw them as wonderful opportunities to get to know his neighbors and be in community with them.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the many contradictions in EVI is that there is ample opportunity to reduce vehicular usage, yet, as I demonstrate throughout the dissertation, few residents make use of these opportunities. Thus while the opportunities to be less dependent on a car is celebrated, few residents actually reduce their car usage.

While urban spaces continue to become desolate and suburbia becomes more isolating, families have begun to look at corporations such as Disney to provide a commodity: the “American dream” of single homes with white picket fences in safe, friendly, walkable neighborhoods, modeled on idealized communities of the past that never actually existed (Ross 1999). Parallel to these new themed housing developments, co-housing communities in the U.S. are being constructed, many on former farmland, with the intent of creating a built-in sense of community. These communities, although varied in their mission, share a common goal of creating a “sense of community.” The primary means by which these new living spaces are constructed is through the market, thus it is appropriate that we explore ecovillages through the lens of consumption.

According to Miller (1995b), the shift in emphasis away from production and to consumption in anthropology may result in the study of kinship being replaced by the study of consumption as the focus of anthropological inquiry. As families look to commodities to fulfill ecological and social needs, ecovillages become an attractive option and thus more prevalent in the U.S. Thus instead of identifying with kinships ties, many residents feel connected to each other through their consumption (through purchasing a home) of a common place. My anthropological work in an ecological “village” is focused on consumption rather than the kinship relationships between residents. The EVI experiment provides a unique opportunity to explore these new trends in the U.S. It also offers the occasion to apply anthropological inquiry to middle class white communities in the U.S., an area we have often ignored. Residents struggle to

make sense of their community and the environment. Placing ecovillage within the larger historical context of environmentalism and community studies in the U.S. can shed light on the challenges of merging community and environment within consumption, and more specifically within the context of green capitalism in the United States.

#### 1.4 Ecovillage as a Solution to Environmental and Social Problems

The model that I'm interested in (Ecovillage) being, I do not know that we are (Barnett) yet, but we might just be in process. [My vision] has to do with what I consider the cutting edge of human evolution. It has to do with learning. I think that on this planet with a population the way it is, we are going to have to learn how to live more closely together without fighting, without killing each other. And I mean animals in experiments and stuff. I think we have to change our chemistry. I think this [community] is a movement in that direction. And eventually there could be big disasters in our world, ecological disasters that require us to rely on each other more and live closely together. Maybe some places will be uninhabitable so it is just going to happen in some way or another, so we have to change how we relate to each other, how we are inside in order to do that; that is how we are being a model in our own little fledging way (Joshua).

Ecovillage at Ithaca (EVI) is the first community of its kind. It is the first co-housing community that is creating a village with more than one neighborhood in the context of a larger vision that includes an education center to teach the general public about its model of sustainability, create viable work opportunities for the village residents through cottage industries, as well as being self-sustaining by growing and consuming their own food and recycling waste water. EVI was conceived in response to the growing environmental and social problem its founders identified as suburban sprawl. Since its inception in 1991 the project has become internationally known as the first co-housing community to attempt to

create an entire “village.” Unlike most co-housing communities that follow the recommended 24-30 household limit (McCamant and Durrett 1994), EVI intends to build a community that could accommodate 150 people. For residents, the community was designed to be a place where families could raise their children safely; elders can feel a sense of community and, at the same time, live close to non-human nature. Simultaneously, EVI is also meant to model a new way for suburban developers to create neighborhoods that do not result in sprawl.

As a community that strives to create a comfortable lifestyle for U.S.-Americans who could otherwise afford to live in suburbia, EVI is an ideal opportunity to explore a small segment of the U.S. population. As a contained community, Ecovillage provides a convenient unit of analysis for this study; this unit is comparable to the efforts of nineteenth century anthropologists to understand small villages around the world.

Ecovillage also offers the opportunity to explore anthropological methods for studying upper-middle class white communities. The community is not just an opportunity to study “at home” in the United States, but also to study those who have power instead of those who are affected by the powerful. Nader’s call to *study up* asks what anthropological theories would look like if “anthropologists were to study the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty?” (Nader 1969:289). At a time when environment and community degradation focuses on poor urban communities or third world poverty, looking at the consumption habits of Western culture, which is



responsible for much of the world's resource depletion, seems an appropriate area for anthropological exploration. Reversing the emphasis within anthropology to study environmentalism from the perspective of non-Western communities and their struggles for conservation to instead study the consumption habits of Western environmental community might reveal larger questions about social and ecological power, a political ecology of U.S. environmentalism. Ecovillage provides a context from which to view U.S.-American culture of consumption and the implications of this culture of consumption that is becoming green.

## 1.5 Thesis

The purpose of Ecovillage at Ithaca is to redesign the human habitat by building a model village for up to 500 residents that will carefully integrate design for human needs (shelter, food production, social interaction, energy, work) with land and water conservation and ecosystem preservation. As a living laboratory associated with an internationally prestigious university, Ecovillage will become a teaching center with a global audience. As a national and international model, it will showcase systems and methods that are sustainable, practical, and replicable. (Ecovillage 1992)

This project is an attempt to study the intersection of environmentalism, community, and consumption in the context of the U.S. environmental movement. A capitalist model that relies on (and supports) production and consumption of goods as a means to conserve the environment and community is a contradiction in itself, as I argue that it is production and consumption that are some of the root causes of environmental degradation. How can the environment be improved by consuming new green products, while the major problem in the environment is over-consumption itself? I suggest that capitalism and

environmentalism are antithetical, and in order to move towards greater environmental and social sustainability, we need to question the role of capitalism in creating the current communal and ecological degradation.

This dissertation argues that the focus of the U.S. environmental movement should emphasize reducing consumption of resources by western nations and the wealthy in non-western nations. Ecovillage has accepted the consumption of “green” commodities as a viable solution to environmental degradation, instead of discouraging *consumption* of either green or “non-green” commodities. Efforts to reduce consumption through calls for simplicity have been challenging for a variety of reasons, but primarily because of taste and lifestyle. I argue that because it is not “necessary” to conserve the environment, the drastic changes needed to stop further degradation will be prolonged. Simplicity in Ecovillage often occurred when residents had no alternative. Referring to the increased building cost of his new home, one resident said “our family is forced to live more simply because the house is getting too expensive, so that is a good thing” (Max). Consumption of resources was reduced only when it has to be, either by being required by law or, as in the above case, when residents were faced with personal financial limits. When given the choice, living comfortably takes precedence over the environment.

I argue that solutions to environmental degradation and social isolation are not to buy green products and build new houses (although that is better than using unsustainable products), but rather to change the way we think and behave in relation to each other and to what we consume. It involves a cultural change in how we define the environment and

community; a holistic definition that includes social justice, human rights, and an economic model that is not based on continuous growth, personal wealth and the exploitation of a lower class. Communities such as Ecovillage are attempting to facilitate a national dialogue on how we live by modeling an alternative to suburban sprawl. Yet in creating a new model it has itself become sprawl, a product, albeit a green one, of the culture in which it is deeply entrenched.

Ecovillage for its part encourages voluntary simplicity at a personal and community level and some residents celebrate the mantra: “simplify, simplify, simplify.” The community makes recycling, composting, and being a good steward to the environment easy. It showcases simple, yet effective ways to live a lifestyle that put nature and the environment in the conscience of residents on a daily basis. At the same time, residents acknowledge the limitations of environmental conservation and try to balance living a comfortable lifestyle while maintaining a commitment to environmental conservation and preservation. Green consumption has emerged as a way to negotiate the conflicting theory and practices of living comfortably and conserving the environment.

It is through the very things that Ecovillage encourages—communication, sharing, open debate about consumption and resource use—that we can begin to confront the larger problems of community and environmental degradation. Ecovillage offers a venue for middle class families living in the U.S. to begin an honest dialogue about habits acquired from living in a country that puts individuality before community, capital accumulation before conservation, and consumption before preservation. Ecovillages raise questions

that extend far beyond meadows and organic farming; they are an opportunity to seriously explore the absence of social justice and the existence of environmental racism at a time when communities across the U.S. are under immense environmental hazards. Specifically, this study attempts to shed light on the construction of nature and environment that lead to the exclusion of a more critical examination of U.S. environmentalism.

## 1.6 Dissertation Structure

The dissertation is divided into four sections. The first section includes Chapters One and Two and discusses the literature in which the framework of the dissertation is situated. These chapters place Ecovillage within the context of U.S. environmentalism and the search for a “sense of community.” I describe chronological trends in communal living and the history of green city planning and urban design. I explore the rise of suburbia, which ushered in the current trend in co-housing and ecovillage development. Parallel to the changes occurring in new urbanism and city planning, the environmental movement gained momentum and became a significant contributor in U.S. society, from national environmental regulations to “green” labels on everything from coffee to clothing. Chapter Two also presents a detailed description of how consumption has become an integral part of U.S. environmentalism.

The second section includes Chapters Three and Four. This section is a comprehensive look at Ecovillage at Ithaca. Chapter Three describes a typical day and explores how

residents interact with each other creating a sense of community in the process. Chapter Four describes the methodology I used, as well as provides the history of the community and explains the legal structure, bylaws, and the social rituals that construct a “sense of community” and support environmentalism.

Section three includes Chapters Five, Six, and Seven. The section includes an analysis of the data that connects ideas of consumption, community, and creating a green lifestyle.

Chapter Five presents a discussion of green consumption in the U.S. and in Ecovillage. It raises questions about the meaning of consuming green and examines how the construction of nature influences how and what “nature” is conserved (James 1993).

Chapter Six is a discussion of the ways in which Ecovillage is an environmental and community experiment. This chapter describes the challenges residents have to negotiate on a daily basis. Specifically, I explore how the EVI project reflects the trend to create themed spaces as new communities. The importance of particular green spaces, meadows, young forest, and organic gardening helps to define Ecovillage as an environmentalist space. At the same time, I discuss how work, leisure, and gender are constructed through invented rituals. Chapter Seven analyzes the connection between consumption, communities and environment by describing the EVI project as an experiment in creating a green lifestyle. I discuss the creation of a green lifestyle as a means to help residents explain the choices they make around community and environmental conservation.

The final section is the conclusion and includes an analysis of doing ethnography in a middle class community in the United States. Chapter Eight discusses the challenges residents found while living their green lifestyle. I also question the role of the anthropologist when studying in the U.S.; specifically I scrutinize the trend of encouraging ‘native’ anthropologists to study in their “home country” (or among their culture group when studying in the West), while continuing to encourage Western anthropologists to study others. Although anthropologists have moved further away from the “exotic other”, there is still a significant amount of work that emphasizes work on exotics at home such as low income communities of minorities, drug addicts (Bourgois 2003), prostitutes, and urban criminals (Fleisher 1995). This chapter explores the challenges of working in a white middle class community and asks why anthropologists seldom study this group in the United States. Finally, I suggest that the analysis of the EVI project is a starting point in redefining a new environmentalism that goes beyond the personal and aspires to improve the environment and communities of all peoples.

### 1.7 A Note on Names

Except for public statements by the founders that help to give context to specific decisions, all names, occupations, and at times families are re-created to ensure the privacy of my informants. It is not my intention to criticize individual behavior or subject them or the community to ill feelings amongst their neighbors. I edited long quotes to remove identifiers that would expose an informant to an outsider reader, but also to a reader within the community. Participants often expressed fear that they would

be excluded or resented in the community if they openly criticized EVI, yet they also realized the importance of raising issues that continued to remain as “elephants” in the room. It is with that spirit, giving voice to the concerns and joys of residents who want the community to address issues that have been left unsaid, that I present this work on Ecovillage at Ithaca.

## **CHAPTER TWO: Community, Environmentalism, Consumption**

“All environmental-ecological arguments are arguments about society”  
(Harvey 1996a:159).

### 2.0 Introduction

The recent emergence of ecovillages as modern forms of intentional community is both a reaction to the reality of global climate change that signals the unsustainability of our current lifestyle and a response to green marketers who argue that capitalism is the best vehicle to achieve ecological sustainability (Smith 1998b). These new communities raise valuable questions about the direction of U.S. environmentalism and the role consumption has come to play in effecting social and ecological change. Furthermore, ecovillages provide an opportunity for anthropology to reflect on the ways that classical ethnographies (primarily from non-Western regions) are used as blueprints to construct sustainable “villages” in Western countries. It is also an opportunity to engage in contemporary debates that critically explore the disappearance of public space, an area



that until recently has been dominated by geographers, sociologists and historians (Harvey 1996a; Low 1999; Soja 1992).

This chapter outlines the multi-layered ways community, environmentalism and consumption have merged to create a green lifestyle that at once provides a realistic opportunity for residents to make social and ecological change and, at the same time, contribute to the very crisis that manifests itself in suburban sprawl and social isolation. These concerns are not trivial. The current U.S. lifestyle is enshrined in a culture of consumption while at the same time capitalism, as a vehicle for environmentalism, is seldom scrutinized as problematic (Hawken, et al. 1999; Miller 1997; O'Connor 1994; Smith 1998b). This combination of consumption, community and environmentalism has created a logical commodity—a green lifestyle. The green lifestyle can be described as the consumption of green commodities (in the broadest possible sense, in what Appadurai describes as “things with a particular type of social potential” (1986a:6) where, for our purposes, “things” are confined to commodities with the purpose of demonstrating or actuating sustainability) in response to, and as a way to express environmental sustainability. This chapter sets the stage for the making of a green lifestyle by exploring the trend of constructing new communities and the parallel efforts to respond to a global environmental crisis<sup>3</sup> (Lee 1995).

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<sup>3</sup> Visible evidence of environmental stress such as glacial melting, ozone depletion, and plant and animal extinctions has resulted in varying perception of a global environmental crisis. One prominent perception argues that we are on the verge of an environmental apocalypse, specifically that the planet has reached its capacity for absorbing waste and toxins, and as such, we are about to witness devastating ecological mishaps.

## 2.1 The Production of Community

Communities are, therefore, bound up with the modern but they are also complicit with capitalism itself, and to the operations of the marketplace (Watts 2004:197).

Ecovillage at Ithaca (EVI), is an experimental project that exemplifies the marketing of a community predicated on a specific lifestyle, one that is itself bound within a capitalist model. By design, the community is the production of both physical and ideological commodities that are then marketed to the larger society. Specifically, the physical boundary of an imagined space that consists of a homogeneity of ideas (among other characteristics which I explore in later chapters), and an ideological experience of cohesiveness and unity are what make the ecovillage a marketable commodity. These I contend are the spaces where the production of community and environmentalism converge, creating through green consumption, a green lifestyle.

The concept of community has been the location of much anthropological discussion. While one variety of community embodies what could be understood as a distinct physical space, other forms focus on the ideological varieties of common unity. “Community” has at once an elasticity and a tension that allows the word to be used to express “unity,” but it also becomes the location for exclusivity. That is, while community includes, it simultaneously excludes. Residents of EVI often see the community as the personification of the physical bounded place in which they receive and give nourishment to their lives. The community in EVI serves at once to mark the external boundary between the residents and those living outside the neighborhood, but it

also helps to define the internal dynamics of the residents, such as the deliberate expectations of specific behaviors (caring for each other, providing friendships, etc.). Thus, community can be expressed as an idea and as a place delineated by mountain ranges, streets, gates, economic status and political persuasion, ethnicity and lived experiences. Anthropologists and other social scientists have grappled with the persistence of the concept of community, which endures because “communities” are the locations of our subjects (Kushner 1969).

Anthropology’s engagement with the concept of community stems from its effort in the early twentieth century to gain an in-depth understanding of local small-scale communities and the ways that these communities maintained their lifestyle. Although anthropologists are focusing more on the larger contexts in which culture change occurs, the community is still a convenient location for analysis because as is the case with EVI, it is the place our subjects relate to in their daily lives. Early twentieth century discussions about community in anthropology focused on two perspectives on the meaning of studying community. On one hand, studying small communities would provide a window into an understanding of the larger complex society that engulfs them; scholars argued that studying small communities was useful to understand how a particular group of people lived and engaged with their local environment. However, other scholars argued that it was impossible (or unrealistic) to try to understand the larger society or nation through experiencing only one village (Kushner 1969).

Ecovillage at Ithaca (EVI) represents a multitude of the social and spatial interests of community that anthropology has explored and offers a new perspective on old debates. Anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers have examined the exclusionary nature of community (Liverman 1999). In the 1950s sociologist Herbert Gans studied the creation of a “sense of community” by residents in Levittown, one of the first planned suburban developments in the United States. He argued that through various levels of social interaction, such as through class and ethnicity, residents were able to create what they felt was a comfortable and meaningful lifestyle (Gans 1967). Although EVI shares some similarities with the intention of the Levittown project, EVI also represents another level of community engagement.

Other forms of community align individuals with common interests or social objectives through the creation of an artificial, though useful social distinction such as the scientific community, or an ethnic community such as the Hmong (Koltyk 1998). These communities of cultural, social or political identity emphasize the common attributes of the members while minimizing other markers of individualism and diversity, thus giving the appearances of uniformity. The community (not necessarily physically connected) functions as a vehicle to include those who possess the unifying characteristics that distinguish members from non-members (Cohen 1985). Feminists who saw their “community” as a vehicle to confront male domination were rightfully criticized for excluding groups within the feminist community that were not white or middle class. Thus, like US environmentalists, early feminists were criticized for failing to account for the different needs and struggles that stemmed from the diversity within the community,

specifically, class and race (hooks 1981). Not surprisingly, EVI as one form of U.S. environmentalism experiences some of the same struggles that earlier groups experienced.

“Community” in EVI represents a variety of intertwined political ideas and complex social webs. In fact, there are multiple layers of community that exist simultaneously, but also in opposition to each other. For some residents, some times, “community” refers to a bounded unit of neighbors. At other times, community represents a natural extension of one’s home, or a constant drain of personal energy that one has to protect one’s family against. The EVI community in general is often an imagined ideal; a modern utopia that accounts for the failings of previous communal experiments. Another layer of meaning in EVI is that the community symbolizes some homogeneity, the coming together of like-minded individuals who appreciate and celebrate a shared notion of “nature” and the “environment.” The often divergent and contradictory ideas that exist within and between individual households is often silenced by the emphasis placed on being a “community.” So strong is this influence that one household mother told me she struggled to keep her partner focused on her family because he often preferred to do things for the community rather than his home. The Ecovillage “community” thus served as an escape from individual or family problems for some families. Ironically, one household felt they had to leave the community in order to escape the encroachment of the community into their private life. The community represents a diversity of physical and ideological locations of engaging with neighbors and nature.

The physical and ideological space that brings EVI residents together is often used interchangeably with “village” when comparing their community with an “African” village or what some felt was a form of pre-urban, pre-industrial space. The effort to re-create a more “primitive” society emerges from a frustration that modernity in industrialization has caused the loss of a sense of community as automobiles dominate the landscape and families moved further apart from each other (Lynd 1956; Stein 1960). This irony represents nostalgia for an idealized village that is conceptually constructed from anthropological ethnographies like Margaret Mead’s description of Samoa, and Roy Rappaport’s analysis of ritual in New Guinea. For other residents, creating community is the social, and though not necessarily physical, answer to isolation and the disconnection that some felt were the trade-offs of modernity. Cohen (1985) examined this nostalgia by pointing to three myths of community which he argues stem from 1950 anthropology: the myth of simplicity, the myth of egalitarianism, and the myth of conformity. In his description of these myths Cohen demonstrates that so called simple societies are not necessarily less complex, but instead had a “multiplexity” (1985:30) that involves discriminating roles that inform expected behaviors of community members and leaders. According to Cohen, the myth of egalitarianism fails to distinguish between ideology, rhetoric, and pragmatism with “a description of actual social relations” (33). Thus the modernism that ecovillages are responding to supposes that the current complexity of our society is not sustainable or beneficial. The project fails, however, to explicitly acknowledge the exclusionary nature of the community as expressed through class separations that are implicitly present in a modern intentional community like EVI. The egalitarian ideology that everyone should be equal fails to recognize that in reality, subtle

class distinctions exclude potential residents, result in families moving out, and creates tensions within the community when group financial decisions are made by consensus.

Redfield (1962), a significant contributor to a cultural understanding of community, distinguishes two forms of civilizations: the isolated homogeneous folk society and the heterogeneous complex civil society. He argues that as communities came in contact with urban centers, they would “make communities on the periphery less like their former selves... and will turn them, instead, into small-scale versions of the centre itself” (Cohen 1985:36; Kushner 1969). Redfield’s myth of conformity points to the contradictions that many ecological cohousing communities confront. Ecovillages identify themselves as an alternative way to live that is more socially sustainable than the everyday experiences of households living in the larger communities, and as such, they suggest Tönnies’ (1957) ideas of *Gemeinschaft* (the cohousing community) and *Gesellschaft* (the larger society in which the community is embedded). These new communities envision themselves to be smaller versions of the larger society where race, class, and other distinguishing markers of difference exist and are negotiated in ideological and physical spaces. In an effort to find an environment that is considered sustainable, the city versus the rural suburb, ecovillages represent spaces where individuals can reconcile *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Durkheim (1964) emphasized this point by describing the community as an important intermediate structure between the state and the individual. Thus EVI, as a community of individuals living outside the city, becomes a community that residents feel does not violate the unsustainable density and degradation that is associated with cities, instead, their neighborhood design attempts to avoid the destructiveness of

suburban sprawl. Yet how is this negotiation advancing efforts to model sustainable living when consumption of land and space is a crucial ingredient to create the EVI project?

This reality can be explained by the fact that ecovillages in general are not aimed at addressing root causes of social and environmental degradation and do not attempt to challenge modernity or question capitalism, rather, they offer a unique lifestyle for those who can afford it, to function within the social, political and environmental structures that already exist. Redfield argued for the study of communities as a “unit of observation” (understanding the community for its own sake) and not as a way to infer the larger society, “units of representation.” Building on earlier critiques of Redfield, Wolf (1966) argues that social and political forces influence how civilizations are constructed. The late twentieth saw the emergence of world systems theories that argued that global processes such as colonialism and capitalism have transformed communities and indeed nations (Wallerstein 1995; Wolf 1982).

The EVI community embodies a contested and reinvented ideology that a community living in harmony existed in the past and can therefore be re-created intentionally (Watts 2004). While this ideology binds those who live in the neighborhoods and excludes those outside its boundaries, it is also the site of internal struggles, challenging the project’s effort to be socially and ecologically sustainable. Like Putnam’s description of suburbanization as “finely distinguished lifestyle enclaves, segregated by race, class, education, life stage...” (Putnam 2000:209), EVI represents a new lifestyle trend that



uses the themes of social and environmental sustainability to construct a new kind of inclusive and exclusive community.

While the main focus of the dissertation is on the ways residents engage with the environment through consumption, the creation of a community serves as the means to define the location of the “green” lifestyle. Thus the discussion of community as a theoretical linkage encompasses its spatial form, as well as how it includes and excludes Nature, people, ideas, and ultimately I demonstrate how it is invoked in the process of defining a green lifestyle.

#### 2.1.1 The Ideological and Physical Community

“Our goal is to re-develop the tribe” (Stefanie 2000).

Residents construct a lifestyle that aims to connect their social and spatial life to each other and to the environment. The location of the community functions to bind residents to the land while at the same time, the social construction of the project aims to encourage residents to reduce their consumption of material goods and thus live a more sustainable lifestyle.

Why do residents feel that creating a new community is the best method for achieving environmental sustainability and how does it bring people together socially? Who, how and why does it exclude? There are various categorical ways that residents in EVI relate

to the ideology of “community.” Some residents consider themselves to be part of a larger extended family (several residents are biologically related), while others see the community as a social and political space or affiliate themselves with spiritual bonds. Many residents, however, define community generally as establishing close relationships with neighbors, family and friends. Another important consideration for residents is the continuity of the community; families envision growing old in their homes and their children living in the subsequent neighborhoods that are planned to be built (Newby, et al. 1978).

Physically, the location creates community by the products—organic farming, fallow fields, young forest, community pond, winter and summer trails, open space—that are contained within the boundaries of the EVI land and serve to bring residents together. But the concept of what constitutes a social community is problematic at best.

The production of community, or the desire to find “a sense of community”, is often invoked in response to a crisis; that is, people often search for community when something is perceived to be lost or deficient. Joseph (2002) observed from her study of a gay and lesbian theatre in San Francisco that community is created “when people imagine themselves bound together by a common grief or joined through some extraordinary effort” (vii). This observation holds true for the recent emergence of cohousing communities that are responding to the crisis of social degradation and alienation. It especially holds true for ecovillages that believe the environmental crisis, including the increase in suburban sprawl and unplanned development, has driven them

to bind together and create an alternative way of living and modeling “green” community development.

Two themes of several varieties of anthropological studies on communities range from the study of small hunter-gatherer societies (Mead 1928; Rappaport 1968; Turner 1967) to exploring Western neighborhoods and political communities (Arensberg 1955; Bourgois 2003; Brown 2001b; Caldeira 1996; Gregory 1998; Koltyk 1998; Stack 1974).

The EVI project focuses on two of the ways community is imagined as a site that emphasize ritual celebrations as the means to pass through life transitions (Benedict 1959) and ways to regulate the environment and human population (Rappaport 1968).

More recently, anthropologists have begun to explore contemporary communities and the experiences of race and class in forming the broader U.S. populations (di Leonardo 1984). EVI residents are encouraged to be open and engage in new ways of communicating and celebrating each other and their environment, in doing so, the residents make an effort to adopt new rituals, remove power structures (anti-structure) through enforcing consensus, and create a common lifestyle, representing the spirit of Turner’s *communitas* and liminality (Brown 2001b; Turner 1969). Turner’s (1969) idea of liminality, argues that once people are freed of their expectant social roles, they are able to create bonds that engage the creative imagination and thus allow for the creation of a new society.

Drawing parallels to Turner’s work, individuals in EVI moved into the community from a variety of distant regions to create a new social and ecological society through bonding

with new neighbors and working as a group to envision and plan an ideal community.

What emerges is the extension of liminality and what Turner calls *communitas*.

*Communitas* then are the new ideal communities that form as a way to pursue the vision in a de-structured manner (Turner 1969). For example, in EVI two informants identified themselves as vegetarians, yet, they often ate meat when they dined outside of the EVI boundary. The tension between aspiring to be vegetarian as a sustainable lifestyle choice, and, at the same time, being unable to fully commit to that lifestyle, meant these informants often felt uncomfortable with the contradictions of the community and choose to conform when inside the community. Consensus worked in a similar manner; imagined as a more transparent process, some residents (the most vocal) advocated and successfully adopted consensus as a de-structured means of making decision. However, some scholars have argued that consensus is not as structure-less as residents might wish to believe (See for example: Mansbridge 1980).

The ideological boundaries of a community are equally as important as the physical boundaries. Similar to Redfield's (1962) "little community" the physical boundaries of ecovillage are well pronounced inside and outside of the community. In fact, the boundaries help to define the community as a distinct unit and locale. Although Redfield argues that small community units can be homogeneous, this may be apparent only upon first inspection and at a superficial level. When one looks deeper within the complexity of the unit, one finds conflicts and contradictions. Indeed the EVI community and its relationship to the physical space as a place to be in harmony with nature has some of the same challenges that exist in the larger community in which it is embedded.

The physical location of EVI also embodies nostalgia for Redfield's imagined community. As will be discussed in Chapter Six, the characteristics that are used to create definitions and boundaries of communities such as homogeneity, smallness, and self-sufficiency are characteristics that find support in EVI. Instead of self-sufficiency (providing all the community needs from within the community), EVI uses the language of sustainability. But like the myth of self-sufficiency, sustainability fails to acknowledge the influence of the political economy of ecovillages which include: the available time to participate in the community, and the economic (class) access to the physical space which allows residents to be physically part of the ecological community.

There is a multitude of ways that individuals, groups, neighbors, cities and nations are creating community out of physical spaces. Low (2000) emphasizes the use of plazas as a way to bring people together, while Putnam points to the importance of playgrounds (Putnam 2000), "[playgrounds] bring about fine community spirit, awaken civic consciousness and co-operation, and make for a whole-souled companionship instead of individualism and isolation." (Scudder 1912, quoted in Putnam 2000:395). In the case of EVI, the physical community serves two purposes: it helps to create the boundary for the ideology of community in harmony with nature, and it serves to insulate residents from the unfamiliar outside community. That is, the location defines what is and is not ecovillage principally by where residents are living and where non-residents are located.

The emphasis on constructing new physical spaces to define the ecological village in general stems from a long and varied history of city planning in the United States where efforts to bring people closer to nature resulted in green urban spaces like New York Central Park and National Parks like Yosemite (Spirn 1995). In EVI, nostalgia to create a sustainable community is expressed through the nostalgia for a village. This effort to re-create the village echoes a desire to live a simpler lifestyle. One informant expressed a desire to live a more primitive lifestyle, but admitted that she was not clear what this would realistically involve (Redfield 1962). Three themes in community and urban planning help locate ecovillage within a broader context of planning that emphasizes a sense of community and integrating nature with people. The physical location of the neighborhood builds upon the contributions from the Garden Cities and New Towns movement, the Intentional Communities movement, and New Urbanists' responses to sprawling suburbia. Ecovillages reflects the desire to both privatize the commons and share them within a specific social class.

Ecovillages are an attempt to combine the best of communal living (effortless social ties, minimal isolation, shared festivities, etc.), while at the same time, providing social and financial independence, lifestyle choices through new neighborhood architectural designs and purposeful landscaping. These communities also attempt to be committed to solving social and environmental problems through suggesting an alternative to suburban development and preserving open land. For many residents, this effort has been very successful, while for others it raises more questions about the virtues of achieving social and environmental sustainability through the creation of new exclusive communities.

The assumption that Third World (rural and urban) communities are more communal, cooperative, and thus socially and ecologically self-sufficient and sustainable has been propagated by anthropologists (Redfield 1962). Thus, for some residents, in order to change the U.S. Americans way of life to be socially and ecologically harmonious is to adopt a lifestyle that is closer to pre-industrial societies. Ecovillages are emerging from another lineage, one that reflects ideas from utopias and early communal movements.

### **Utopias**

As long as you have private property, and as long as cash money is the measure of all things, it is really not possible for a nation to be governed justly or happily. For justice cannot exist where all the best things in life are held by the worst citizens: nor can anyone be happy where property is limited to a few, since those few are always uneasy and the many are utterly wretched (More 1975:30).

The search for a more “livable” way to live has always been a preoccupation of social movements. As various popular utopias sprouted and wilted, so has the appeal of creating yet another ideal and perfect society. However, many traces of today’s new urbanism and modern intentional community continue to draw on characteristics that grew out of these early experiments. Plato’s *Republic* and Thomas More’s *Utopia* are perhaps the most common starting points. Both writers emphasized key characteristics that can be found in EVI’s mission: simplicity and harmony. It is not surprising that More’s term Utopia, a reinterpretation of the Greek word outopia (meaning no place) and eutopia (the good place) was the term he chose to describe the ideal community (Kanter 1972). Utopian ideas have best been recalled as encouraging the transformation to a

society that is socially and ecologically harmonious. It is thus not surprising that various forms of city planning would draw on utopian ideas.

### **Garden Cities and New Towns**

“Even in death, Lewis Mumford managed to escape the grasp of technological society. To die in one’s sleep, in one’s home, at the age of 94 requires more than good luck and good health; it also requires a community of family and friends close at hand committed to the care of the old and frail” (Blake 1991:187).

Early nineteenth century city planners, Mumford and Geddes, have been characterized as “urban utopians” for advocating the inclusion of greenery into the city and rejecting the megalopolis (Fishman 1987). The garden cities were designed on the premise that cities were harmful to valuable social relations and that being surrounded by nature greatly improved the physical and psychological health of individuals. The Garden Cities included public parks, tree lined streets, and emphasized leaving the outskirts of the community undeveloped. The communities were imagined as healthy communities of modest size connected to other, equally modest communities, by a short distance. By promoting the combining of nature and the built environment, sharing some resources, but not financial ones, ecovillages, built in part on the garden cities model, distance themselves from seventeenth century communal movements that emphasized shared identity over individuality (Howard 1902; Spirn 1995). Critics of Garden Cities contend that suburban sprawl is a direct result of dismantling the city in favor of building in the country (Rodwin 1945).



Mumford believed that “the organic society is necessarily cooperative and integrated” though not necessarily communal (Casillo 1992). Mumford moved increasingly towards *Gemeinschaft* when it became clear that urban growth *Gesellschaft* was materializing without restraint causing a loss of community. Mumford’s argument differed from earlier communal movements because he emphasized individual autonomy, diversity, and regionalism. According to Casillo (1992), Mumford was not against urbanism, but rather against what Geddes called megalopolitan. Thus, like Mumford’s concept of “social organicism” which argued that societies functioned best when individuals know each other and work together with other members to better their society, EVI is constructed and idealized as a *Gemeinschaft* (through collective individual action), where each individual relates to the other with common bonds and obligations (Mumford 1938; Tönnies 1957). Howard’s (1902) Garden Cities are being incorporated into greening the urban spaces despite their failure to account for the political economy of creating new towns.

### **Intentional Communities**

The examination of the garden city provides insight into the meanings and values placed on the location of EVI in “nature”, while the scales of the social construction of the community can be traced to the U.S. intentional communities that formed in the early 1700s. Colonial U.S. American communitarian societies were based for the most part on religion and spiritual principles (Durnbaugh 1997). Many of the communal societies that settled in North America were escaping religious persecution in Europe (Durnbaugh

1997; Pitzer 1997). While opposed to the intolerance of religious teachings in Europe and in favor of religious liberty when they relocated to North America, the communities that remain successful today have stringent delineations between who is and is not part of the community. Thus these communities were, and remain, separatist in ideology and in physical location from the wider society. At the same time, strict rules and discipline, such as celibacy and deprivations, made them susceptible to failure. “Members accepted a highly ordered regimen of meditation, work and worship, including lengthy nighttime meetings...they used wooden benches for beds, blocks of wood as pillows. Food was limited. It was common for members to hitch themselves to a wooden plow to break ground” (Durnbaugh 1997:24). After observing these communal projects fail because individuality was suppressed, the new intentional communities aimed to avoid the earlier pitfalls of their predecessors.

The twentieth century has ushered in a movement of new intentional communities. Unlike the larger city on which they rely, the new intentional community creates new spaces to live through imagining, designing and constructing community with architectural designs and plans. Inherent in the design is the pursuit of an alternative lifestyle that differs from the values of conventional society. The new intentional communities are not, nor according to Bouvard (1975) have they ever been, shallow and idealized spaces. Rather these intentional communities have been living laboratories for social, political, and in the case of EVI, environmental change.

However, when scrutinized, intentional communities raise concerns of exclusion. Bouvard (1975) questions whether intentional communities are escapist and withdrawn from the larger communities in order to avoid the confrontations and complexities of human society. As I demonstrate in Chapter Six, while EVI is modeling an alternative way to live in harmony with nature, it avoids confronting larger questions of social and environmental equity by removing itself from the spaces where these contestations occur, that is on city streets, in front of town halls, and in plazas (Low 2000). Transitioning from the intentional communities are new themed communities and what McKenzie calls *Privatopias* (1994). These new private communities are providing less of a political and social alternative and more of an economic opportunity for families who can live in spaces that are exclusive. Instead, the private spaces of the community remove residents from the spontaneity of diversity. While some of these new forms of housing use large gates, massive stonewall and electric fences to keep outsiders out (Caldeira 1996; Low 2001), others use more subtle distinctions like location, accessibility and affordability to distinguish themselves from the larger public of non-members. The obvious concern of these new public/private spaces is the lack of discourse that is possible in more conventional urban spaces. That is, because the residents (through the larger EVI community) privatize the “public” spaces, they are insulated from wider social, political, and environmental discourses that occur outside their enclave (Low 2001; Soja 1992; Sorkin 1992b). In defense of these new communities, Schaub (2000) argues that “there is an increased need for communities and other private sector groups to step forward with ideas and energy” to meet a growing sense of isolation and dysfunction in our society (Schaub 2000:9).

Jackson (1985) observes that the way our communities developed historically is revealing of the attitudes and disposition of the population. In this sense, EVI is imagined as a 21st century intentional community. Similar to the social structure of EVI, some of the early common ownership communities had deeds which protected land, lakes, and other resources which were meant to sustain different ownership (McKenzie 1994). Intentional communities cater primarily to those who reside within their borders. “By 1928 scores of luxury subdivisions across the country were using deed restrictions—including racially restrictive covenants—as their legal architecture” (McKenzie 1994:9). These covenants ensured that residents who violated the rules were expelled.

### 2.1.2 Incorporating the Ideological Community and the Physical Community

“American real estate development corporations, with government as a silent partner, have chosen to build a new kind of community that serves as a monument to privatism” (McKenzie 1994:8).

The U.S. American landscape is rapidly being transformed into what McKenzie calls privatopias. Unlike Jackson’s *walking cities* of the early eighteenth century, housing developments across the country are emphasizing privacy, individualism, and security (Davis 1998; Jackson 2000; Jackson 1985; McKenzie 1994). In a complex and contradictory way, ecovillages are responding to this transformation by creating a unique privatopia that is characterized by being green, under the pretext of environmental conservation. Although wealthy families relocating outside of the city in exclusive

suburbs marked the turn of the century, this trend is now reversing itself as urban spaces become gentrified. Steven Gregory's ethnography of Corona, New York, documents the movement of white families out of New York City and into Corona, only to "escape" further into the suburbs as the black middle class began to move into Corona (Gregory 1998).

The expansion of houses into the suburb is creating a host of competing challenges that are not limited to race and class, but are also resulting in the disappearance of farmland and open space. Although urban centers are increasingly seen as overcrowded and polluted, the mass exodus of white populations further away from the city center is resulting in the loss of businesses, as shopping malls followed these families into open space. The slow disintegration of the city with its spontaneous social transactions leaves many people feeling isolated and fearful (Davis 1992). In addition to the disintegration of the social fabric that held neighbors together such as churches, local stores, school and town hall, the physical environment is showing signs of stress.

Many scholars attribute the decline of the *walking city* to the automobile (Davis 1998; Jackson 1985; Miller 2001). During the mid to late 1800s, the introduction of cable cars, steam ferries and other vehicles started an exodus of families out of the city centers and into the suburbs, inaugurating the trend we see today of suburban isolation and urban desolation.

It is in this vein that the ecovillage concept attempts to re-create the “walking city” by concentrating houses on a small area, creating clear distinctions between those inside and outside of the community, and creating enterprises within the boundaries of the community as a way to reduce travel. Establishing small businesses in the neighborhood would provide more incentives for families to remain in the neighborhood; the design of the neighborhood houses provides residents with proximity to the center of the community and, at the same time, gives them access to views of undeveloped land. One of the founders summarized her vision as such:

My dream is that we will transform the world into one in which existing cities become pedestrian and use the spaces now taken up by cars to develop food production, urban ecology villages. The cities will grow inward and upward—no longer outward. Suburbs will be replaced by ecovillages that are connected to the city and to each other by electric rail systems, bicycles paths, and walking trails. Travel from one city to another will be by train and bicycle. Beyond the Ecovillages will be wilderness (EVI July 1993).

## 2.2 Constructing Ways to Live with Nature

“We are becoming native” (Jill).

“Nature is part of my spirituality. Taking walks on the land, I feel held by the mother, I receive something profound by that. Taking in sunsets, sunrises, just all the beauty: the smells, the sounds, the quietness, all of that... it kind of sinks into my pores and that is a huge support for me” (Jessica).

Most scholars agree that nature is a social construct, and as such, is mired in a host of political and personal interests (Brosius 1999; Escobar 1996; Smith 1996). The historical

context in which nature has been constructed, for the most part, is based on human contact with the natural environment. Specifically, some environmental thinkers like deep ecologists take the view that nature, or Mother Nature<sup>4</sup>, flourishes best without human intervention (Naess 1988; Soper 1996). This perspective, while romanticizing indigenous groups as both primitive and holders of sacred knowledge and having a connection to the earth that Western communities lost to modernization (Bookchin 1994), also suggests that “nature” is always amicable with human needs, constant, and in need of human intervention to return it to its ideal state. Contributing to this dichotomy in EVI is the belief that modernizing homes, creating technologically innovative green communities, will somehow bring us closer (if not back) to the romanticized sustainable indigenous lifestyle. Indigenous peoples are assumed to be better caretakers of nature and in some cases being nature itself, their presence and dependence on “the land” is a model that some residents feel is a void in their own postmodern lifestyle.

Environmental groups like EVI advocate a return to a simpler lifestyle, allowing nature to heal, trusting that we can help nature return to a healthy planet by removing invasive species and allowing land to grow fallow. Keulartz (1999) points to this irony in a discussion of *nature development*, a concept he uses to describe the engineering of nature that emphasizes a cultural specific view of nature that excludes the multiplicity of understandings of “Nature.” Keulartz argues that the idea of re-creating nature, inevitably through human and technological intervention, is “questionable and dubious”

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<sup>4</sup> Gaia emphasizes a connection to mother nature that is equated with the feminine as care giver, producer and sustainer of life. Ecofeminists also make a similar argument but do so in the context of a critique of patriarchy (Mies 1993).

(Keulartz 1999:84). The effort to return nature to its original, or close to its original state is problematic because it assumes a static and unchanging nature. It assumes that someone knows what original nature should be. Furthermore, restoring nature assumes that there are no aspects of undisturbed nature that are not friendly to people or, for that matter, the environment such as disease and earthquakes. In EVI this point was made clear when the deer population, lacking a natural predator, began to devour vegetables in the community farm—eventually the farmers intervened in what would otherwise be a “natural process”, and shot the deer.

Critics of the view that nature is always corrupted by human intervention point to the fact that nature has always been influenced by humans and argue that emphasis on a pristine nature maintains a cultural politics that intentionally brings some groups together while at the same time sidelines others (Bookchin 1994; Escobar 1999). This debate plays out within mainstream U.S. environmental groups which have focused on improving the “environment” which is often disconnected from the discourse of political ecology (Escobar 1999; Guha 1989). Environmentalism in the United States has for many years been dominated by what Harvey (1996a) calls the big ten, among them such groups as the Sierra Club and the World Wildlife Fund. These organizations, while valuable in their own right, are large, wealthy, politically influential, and primarily white. Most of the emphasis in these groups has been on protecting the natural beauty of the world’s pristine environments, this in contrast to Bullard’s (1994) concern for environmental justice (Di Chiro 1996).



Guha (1989) criticizes the deep ecology movement in the U.S., for emphasizing wilderness protection instead of integrating a concern for the environment along with a concern for social justice, livelihood, and work. Guha further points out that that a U.S. model of environmentalism that emphasizes nature for its own sake would not work in the developing world, where citizens are dependent on the land for their daily lives. He argues that “a truly radical ecology in the [U.S.] American context ought to work toward a synthesis of the appropriate technology, alternate life style, and peace movement” (Guha 1989:82).

My data suggests that what makes it challenging to maintain a commitment to environmental ideas in ecovillage is the overabundance of commodities and a systematic effort to avoid confronting social justice. Residents desire to live what they believe is a simpler lifestyle typical in non-western countries. At the same time, some residents want to continue to have the luxuries of an upper-middle class lifestyle, such as the ability to drive to natural parks or participate in eco-tourism vacations. Negotiating a simpler, but comfortable, lifestyle makes the conservation of local resources and decreased consumption difficult, if not impossible. Residents found it difficult to meet a deeper commitment to environmentalism because they do not have to, and because the commodities that enable a family to have a comfortable lifestyle (building a new eco-house) are often antithetical to simplicity. Ecovillages thus appear as a simple way to attain both a comfortable upper-middle class lifestyle under the auspices of simplicity and community.

The realization that the earth has limited resources to support the consumption needs of U.S. households is generally accepted, but instead of advocating a reduction in our consumption behavior, there is emerging a growing belief in the ability for science and technology to replace nature's limited resources. The result means that it is possible to continue to live comfortably (such as in EVI) while imagining that the act of living with less commodities than the average U.S. American is improving the environment (Dobson 1992).

An informant often mentioned that his family wanted to drive less, have fewer cars, live in smaller homes, but when given the choice, he chose to consume more than he felt he needed and wanted. Although it is difficult and perhaps not useful to set a standard for how much one "needs", this informant felt that he wasted resources he could live without and found it difficult to consume less despite his intentions. This realization points to the fact that having access to resources is not conducive to making conscious decisions to live with fewer resources and instead promotes engaging in unnecessary consumption. Informants found this logic to hold true simply because they were most likely to share a ride or take the bus if their car was at the mechanic. The idea of not owning a car or using the bus is not perceived as a realistic option. Although many agree that the single most polluting contribution to environmental degradation is the personal automobile, it is when one doesn't own a car or it is unavailable, that public transportation is used.

Another example of the challenges to constructing ways to live with nature is when a family who advocated for simplicity and was critical of McMansions chose to build a

new larger home. In response to questions of contradictions, a member of the family described his efforts as “pushing the green envelope.” He described this process of pushing the green envelope as an opportunity to demonstrate environmental ingenuity in reducing heating and cooling costs, using solar power, and creating a toxic-free home (one that did not involve the use of harmful chemicals). In the process, this particular family, as well as others, turned simplicity into an expensive and complicated project to showcase green possibilities. While some informants found it challenging to give up comforts that often required the consumption of non-renewable resources, EVI is designed to address this paradox by making it easy and desirable to live in a smaller house, recycle clothing, carpool, compost food scraps, and share resources if one chooses to do so.

My ethnographic fieldwork revealed that residents are more likely to make an effort to protect the environment if doing so does not compromise their standard of living or if practices are made easy, convenient, stylish and innovative. The marketing of green products has been effective in making environmentalism stylish and desirable, providing practical and easy solutions to environmental problems, but not compromising comfort and luxury. This trend has become the dominant paradigm in U.S. environmentalism in the twenty-first century.

### 2.3 Anthropology and Environmentalism

Various orientations of environmentalism have been explored in anthropology. Julian Steward's work on cultural ecology changed the direction in anthropology towards a new form of cultural evolution. Steward's concept of cultural ecology focused on the adaptation of individuals to their multiple environments (Steward 1955). Steward predicted that all human populations relate and adjust to their environments in similar ways, where culture emerged not only because the spaces anthropologist work were becoming noticeably affected by changes in the physical environment (Hardesty and Fowler 2001). Kay Milton's work calls for anthropology to be concerned with human ecology and contests the idea that "nature" is solely a cultural construction and calls for the analysis of both cultural and interpretative meanings in environmentalism (Milton 1996). Milton's definition of environmentalism as the protection of the environment through human effort raises important questions on whether humans are best suited for this task. While attempting to move away from romanticizing non-Western societies and their engagement with the environment, Milton falls short of questioning broader issues of capitalism and how over-consumption in the West is contributing to environmental degradation around the world. Other perspectives focus on natural resource conservation, arguing that disappearing landscapes need to be managed while suggesting that local populations can sustainably maintain these spaces by using them for ecotourism. Poncelet's exploration of the human-environment relationship focuses on ecological modernization where the modern industrial society is blamed for environmental problems

and instead advocates for cooperative approaches to managing the environment (Poncelet 2001).

Yet my interest in understanding environmentalism is closely tied to the concerns that specifically confront capitalism and its impact in both the social and political realms of culture. Political ecology has been a useful tool in analyzing the relationship between social and political forces in the discourse of the environment. Specifically, while political ecology scholars focused on the role of social and political oppression, primarily in non-Western countries, that leads to environmental destruction, little has been applied to the U.S. (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987). Emerging out of political economy and cultural geography, political ecology argues that world systems, political and economic, dominated by Western countries depend on the underdevelopment of non-Western countries to provide natural resources and cheap labor (Wallerstein 1995) and that this dependence results in ecological and social degradation (Orlove 1980).

Political ecology emerged as a means to broaden the understanding of community and environment to include social, political, and economic factors that impact all communities. Thus the utility of political ecology in anthropology is an appeal to integrate land-use practices and political economy (Peet and Watts 1996; Scoones 1999; Wolf 1972), reflecting a growing need to integrate theoretical concepts of global and local political economy and the emerging politics of environmentalism (Bryant and Mohai 1991; Moore 1996; Peet and Watts 1996; Redclift and Benton 1994). Political ecology analyzes the relationship between power, land, and its effect on communities that

directly depend on the environment for their immediate livelihood (unlike in most Western countries where our food and shelter are removed from the source, prepackaged, and used by people who may have little knowledge of the production process). The general argument of political ecology is that local communities and their interactions with the environment need to be understood within the framework of larger global political and ecological contexts, furthermore, political ecologists argue that the environment is socially and politically constructed (Harvey 1974; Smith 1996).

In the case of EVI, the project creates a community that overlooks the impact of broad political ecological considerations, thus empowering its residents to focus on a narrow and insular environment. EVI does not incorporate a careful analysis of political ecological factors from outside the neighborhood that are acting on the lifestyle of residents in the community. Similar to other anthropological engagements with the environment, political ecology has overwhelmingly been applied to non-Western countries. Thus, I suggest that a political ecological perspective can be applied in the context of U.S. environmental community development. In Moore's (1996) analysis of environmental struggles in Kaerezi, Zimbabwe, he argues that political ecology is concerned with issues of access to resources, control of those resources, and the political process that influences land rights. The EVI controls who has access to the land, the resources, and the "public" spaces of the neighborhood through a structuralized consensus decision-making process. Particularly, the internal political process disadvantages residents who have limited key resources (time) to participate in the process.

Blake (1995) has argued, that “perspectives on environmental change must be gauged from the viewpoints of different actors” who usually have different agendas and competing interests (quoted in Scoones 1999:485). In the broader context, U.S. environmentalism engages various actors, including marketers, corporations, the federal government, and local community activists in struggles for different, often conflicting objectives, from environmental de-regulation to increasing market shares of green commodities, to advocating the clean up of toxic sites by corporate polluters. Political ecology is a useful framework for the analysis of U.S. environmentalism because such an environmentalism is deeply embedded in social, political, and economic thinking, and because it questions the relationship between power and class (Peet and Watts 1996; Wolf 1972).

The context in which residents of EVI are attempting to change their lifestyle needs to be understood within the broader U.S. social context. Specifically, EVI is embedded within a cultural context that emphasizes a social constructedness of nature as wilderness and separate from human communities (hence the motivation of the project to reconnect humans and nature) and a belief that capitalism is the means to achieve that reconnection. Yet, this construction of nature, while focusing on the non-human environment, ignores the dominance of class and power and thereby making it possible for environmentalism to be experienced outside of social justice. Instead, social and environmental justice concerns are replaced with mundane and marketable inventions such as recycling and acquiring expensive alternative energy (green) commodities that allow continue

engagement in non-sustainable practices or simply provide a distraction from root causes of social and environmental degradation.

One example of the use of green commodities to distract from addressing larger political ecological questions within U.S. environmentalism is in the creation of ecological cohousing communities. The EVI non-profit corporation (EVI Inc.), the umbrella public education charity (501(c)(3)), was able to purchase former farmland through loans from generous individuals (Walker 2005). The purchase of the land fits into the current trend of developing farmland into suburban homes. Although many EVI participants believe that their project is a model for positive environmental development by preserving open land, the community itself is creating a new kind of “green sprawl.” The idea of creating a new green community is much like the discourse of sustainable development that fails to challenge or question the sustainability of development (or in the case of EVI, the construction of new neighborhoods), but simply replaces the old discourse with a new “greener” one.

Political ecology challenges the discourse of development and sustainable development as a way to improve the social and environmental conditions in the South, by arguing that development planning ignores inherent power structures. Development projects have been criticized for blaming the victims of development projects for unsustainable practices while ignoring the reality that often development projects benefit only a few families (often the upper class). Thus through the guise of sustainability, green development projects keep destructive capitalist power structures in place (Adams 1990;



Escobar 1991; Hobart 1993; Horowitz 1989). In the context of the construction of U.S. environmental communities that are emerging in the name of sustainability, it is appropriate to ask who benefits, and who is displaced, from this new wave of Western sustainable development? Scholars have questioned whether sustainable development is merely a substitute for sustaining capitalism (O'Connor 1994). Like green consumption, sustainable development is vigorously being adapted by the same multinational organizations that were blamed for causing devastating ecological and social crises (Adams 1990). Does an emphasis of creating green commodities distract from creating a more just and sustainable community for all persons? Does green consumption simply maintain the status quo for political and economic ends while adopting a green vocabulary? The creation of new communities on the outskirts of the larger established city results in the very kind of development ecovillages are claiming to model a sustainable alternative to.

Political ecology rightfully questions these contradictions by analyzing the origins of environmental degradation and the politics behind the definition of an environmental problem (Blaikie 1995; Escobar 1996). These questions are relevant for a study of EVI, because the origins and problems of environmental degradation in the United States are deeply embedded in social, economic, and political forces. If U.S. environmentalists want to succeed, they should examine the broader political economic context undermining the environment and our communities (See Bryant and Mohai 1991; Bullard 1994; Harvey 1996b).

When the environment is discussed in the Western context, especially in the United States, it is often discussed as a social movement (Merchant 1980; Milton 1993). Literature on U.S. environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s differs significantly from the environmental discourse today (Carson 1962). Environmental activism in the 60s and 70s emerged, to some degree, concurrently with civil rights, women's rights, anti-war efforts, and other social and political activities. Thus it focused its gaze on larger community programs, culminating in the establishments of such government agencies as the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Parks Services, projects that benefit a larger community (parks, schools, and other public spaces). The last 20 years however, represents a shift away from confronting larger power structures and instead focuses on a personalized environmentalism where individuals have become engrossed with personal connections to nature and the environment through the consumption of green goods and building green homes<sup>5</sup>. Instead of working with elected officials to require the enforcement of Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act, the trend has moved towards encouraging eco-tours to the last remaining unspoiled environments in non-Western countries. Popular environmental magazines<sup>6</sup> advocate the consumption of green technology and eco-clothing as a way to improve the environment. This effort is much different from the approach of Rachel Carson to mobilize citizens against the dumping of industrial toxic chemicals into rivers and lakes.

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<sup>5</sup> While I support the use of recycled materials and renewable wood in home construction, I'm arguing that this is not sustainable if it is at the cost of neglecting larger, more global environmental concerns such as climate change and inequality, areas that disproportionately affect the poor. These greener products are also emerging at a time when public services such as transportation, education, and health, are being cut by local and federal government.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the Environmental Magazine ([www.emagazine.com](http://www.emagazine.com)) and Plenty Magazine ([www.plentymag.com](http://www.plentymag.com)).

Many of the “spoiled” places environmentally conscious people have moved away from are spaces that have become marginalized by white flight and suburbanization, resulting in “land degradation [that] is both a cause and a result of social marginalization” (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987:23). This begs the question few in the ecovillage movement have raised: is ecovillage another example of suburban sprawl that is composed of families who leave the city in search of “pristine nature” and escaping from urban ills like poverty and crime (Fotopoulos 2000; Gregory 1998; Marcuse 1997)?

The concept of an ecovillage as a model of environmental living in community also has to be understood within a historical context of designing neighborhoods and communities, and within the social and political discourse of environmentalism and housing in the United States, which have historically included deep ecology and wilderness thinking (Lee 1995; Manes 1990; Pepper 1993), suburbanization and white flight (Davis 1998; Gregory 1998), and the social and environmental justice movements (Bullard 1994; Di Chiro 1996; Harvey 1996a). Political ecology allows us to question the economic and social experience of people who are trying to improve the environment by looking at larger social and political forces at play. I suggest that by critically examining consumption in the experience of residents of EVI, this study can help to reveal the challenges to achieving the goals of environmental sustainability.

The struggle to preserve land and create environmentally friendly communities is submerged within these broad political and ecological debates. Their emergence reflects deep tensions that families are confronting, in their desire to be agents of change. Yet,

why, in postmodernity, are people responding to environmental and social degradation through the context of constructing new green communities? And are their responses genuine when they are narrowly focused on personal lifestyle choices instead of political and social change? Anthropology is well positioned to raise these questions in the U.S.

One of the criticisms of political ecology is that analysts mainly focus on Third World and “Southern” environments, where resources are deemed to be ‘endangered’, ‘running out’, and in need of preserving (for extensive discussion see Escobar 1999; Moore 1996; Peet and Watts 1996; Shiva 1993a; Shiva 1993b). EVI offers the opportunity to explore these assumptions in Western countries, especially the United States. Critics of political ecology have also contended that although neofunctionalists and processualist thinking have been addressed, “much of this work still accepts that—at least in the past—balanced, harmonious, and traditional systems existed” (Scoones 1999:485). Thus similar to what residents are experiencing, there is a lack of engagement with complexity of “traditional” systems, or the complicatedness of community life in the past.

Western constructions (and definitions) of nature represent one of the challenges confronting consumption in U.S. environmentalism. Analyzing how nature is constructed can help to address the question of how communities can be used to effectively improve the environment. Residents practice environmentalism through ideological and material practices, for example through the consumption of specific green commodities deemed to be good for the environment (hybrid cars, organic food). The belief that environmentalism and capitalism are compatible and that capitalism can be a

solution to environment degradation has gained prominence in U.S. environmentalism (Brown 2001a; Hawken, et al. 1999). These works focus on the consumption of “green” commodities as the most realistic alternative to replace polluting products. Critics of the idea of mutual compatibility argue that in general, ecology and capitalism are opposed to each other, and that most industrial nations of the world depend on practices that degrade the environment to support capitalist expansions and use non-Western countries as sources for raw material or as dumping grounds for used goods (Foster 2002; O'Connor 1994; Smith 1984).

#### 2.4 Consumption and U.S. Environmentalism

Ecovillage is answering what is perhaps the greatest challenge to the environmental movement today. It addresses the pressing need for people from wealthy countries to consume less: less land and less resources (Bokaer 1997).

The study of consumption is becoming customary in anthropology, and rightfully so. Recent studies on the consumption of specific goods illustrate the flexibility of meanings attributed to commodities, specifically, the ability of commodities to construct personal identities such as “being green” (Burke 1996; Wilk 1999). Appadurai’s (1986b) examination of the social importance of commodities is useful to understand Marx’s concept of fetish, specifically, that commodities gain a life of their own and assume meaning that “accompany, conceal, or displace the actual state of relations between people” (Burke 1996:5). In addition to embodying symbolic meaning when consumed, the meaning of consumption as it relates to environmentalism can be understood as the

production of “sign value”, where the significance attributed to goods are essential to the maintenance of modern capitalism. Baudrillard (1981) argues that assigning goods a cultural value adds to the ability of capitalism to generate value. Thus while the life of specific commodities contribute to individual and community identity (Friedman 1994), these commodities can be manipulated to create surplus capital (Baudrillard 1981; Smith 1998b). This connection between commodity sign and capital accumulation plays out in the study of ecological cohousing communities. Specifically, green identity is created and maintained through the meaning given to specific “green” commodities. Thus, I argue that the meaning attributed to these green products is economically constructed as a way to add surplus economic capital (Athanasίου 1996). Erickson’s ethnography of the consumption of energy-efficient products to reduce resource consumption and “be green” demonstrates this disconnection between life of the commodities and life of the people who consume the commodity (Erickson 1997). The green lifestyle increases the wealth of some individuals and some businesses, while not necessarily improving the natural environment.

In exploring consumption, anthropologists have until recently focused on the producers and the production process, and not on consumers (Carrier and Heyman 1997; Smith 1998b). As anthropologists increasingly study upper middle-class white communities there is an opportunity to ask some of the same questions we addressed in non-Western contexts. Furthermore, as the world’s largest consumer of material goods, consumption will inevitably be relevant to any study of U.S. communities.

My work attempts to address the interconnected ways that consumption has come to dominate Western environmental discourses. Because Western cultures, led by the United States, consume a disproportionate level of the world's resources (Guha 1989; Miller 1995a), it is not surprising that solutions to ecological degradation rarely problematize consumption (Foster 2002). Scholars critical of development projects have argued that consumption in the United States is responsible for the dismal condition of the global environment (Frank 1975; Guha 2000; Mies 1993). As the world's largest consumer of fossil fuels, the United States produces the majority of the world's greenhouse gases, resulting in a host of ecological, health, and social problems (Durning 1992). Recognizing the ecological destruction of suburbia, EVI as an alternative model of housing development is aimed at addressing this crisis by focusing on shifting everyday consumption practices that contribute to these larger trends. EVI argues that changing consumption patterns in U.S. lifestyles will have a significant impact on global and local resource depletion.

It is within this context of changing U.S. lifestyles that Ecovillage at Ithaca is attempting to locate itself as a less destructive way to live. By advocating the creation of ecologically and socially friendly communities and encouraging the consumption of eco-friendly or green commodities, EVI is attempting to create a model for other U.S. communities where nature can be both enjoyable, educational, and preserved in the process (Smith 1996). My study responds to Miller's concern for a lack of anthropological literature "on major shifts in first-world consumption and their

cosmological foundations” (Miller 1995b:153) and specifically, his call for an analysis of “the rise of green goods and associated practices” (ibid).

In order to understand the complex relationships between consumption and environmentalism in a U.S. ecological co-housing community, I adopted Miller’s (1995) definition that consumption is holistic and inclusive of a variety of circumstances including material goods, food, and through ideology (that is, “buying into” an idea of green consumption). This generalized concept of consumption encapsulates a plethora of circumstances where consumption occurs on multiple levels. I agree with Friedman’s (1994) assertion that consumption is about identity and argue that the consumption of green commodities is as much about creating a social identity and distinction as it is related to reducing resource consumption in the interest of ecological sustainability. Residents at EVI identify and celebrate a green lifestyle by creating the physical and social spaces that makes an identity with living sustainably possible through the creation of an ideal village. This process necessarily involves the consumption of land, ideas, and a new home with green features. Thus material goods (an non-material goods) represent a means of creating a green community identity that is at once communal and privatized.

A discussion of what it means to be “green” and how U.S. environmentalism is defined needs to be clarified. I denote “being green” to generally include social, political, and more recently economic and industrial efforts to incorporate protecting and preserving nature and the environment, into products, social behaviors, political thought, and the marketing of commodities. Although green consumerism once represented an alternative



to ecologically harmful commodities (Adams 1990; Athanasiou 1996), it has increasingly been co-opted by the same industries it initially challenged (Princen, et al. 2002).

Another more complicated definition is that of U.S. environmentalism. A thorough analysis of U.S. environmentalism is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I generalize U.S. environmentalism to include ideas about nature and the environment that have been perpetuated by the large environmental organizations such as the Nature Conservancy and the Sierra Club (see Chapter One). I adopt Guha's (2000) critique that Western (especially U.S.) environmentalism is mainly focused on wilderness and pristine nature, where the health and safety of nature and wild animals are emphasized to the exclusion of the human condition in such things as poverty and violence.

In EVI, consumption of environmentalism and community is complex and involves a multiplicity of actors. I generalize the definition of consumption so that it incorporates a variety of contexts in which objects, ideas, and experiences are acted out. At the same time I am interested in how consumption and consumerism can be functional in understanding the environmental discourse by including the complex relationships between production and consumption. Production can be seen as the first location of consumption (the production of an ecovillage community); secondly, the individual consumer choice of "eco-soap" and organic cotton represents the consumption of green commodities. In the case of this research, I argue that green consumption has been led by green production and green marketers who, within a capitalist framework, ultimately desire to create an identity with environmental sustainability that results in increases in profits. In order to achieve this ends, marketers construct nature and the environment in

ways that appeal to its target audience (Price 1996). Such constructions of nature as void of human engagement or extracted through exploitive means, is instead marketed as tame and controllable. In a logical cycle, the aspiration for green commodities leads to the production and marketing of green commodities; but more importantly, my research suggests that the converse is just as relevant—green marketing has dramatically increased the consumption of green commodities and in some cases, helped to define what is green (Smith 1998b). In effect, the market is increasingly defining what consumers should purchase in order to protect the environment, a position that is wrought with internal contradictions. Some economists and environmentalists celebrate this symbiosis as evidence of the ability of “the market” to resolve ecological problems (Hawken, et al. 1999).

## 2.5 Habitus, Taste, and Lifestyle

Bourdieu’s (1984) idea of habitus and lifestyle is an appropriate framework to address the question of how the need for community and the effort to protect nature and the environment are played out in the everyday life of EVI residents. Specifically, it can help us understand how and why individuals believe that consuming green commodities is a viable solution to environmental degradation. Habitus is the knowledge and practice that is not necessarily formally learned, but that is experienced consciously and unconsciously throughout one’s life. Habitus reflects the worldview that influences an individual and can be described as the culture and behavior that is acquired by an individual without

conscious effort. The everyday experiences of the individual are then translated into everyday practices without effort. This habitus is expressed as second nature in thought, beliefs, tastes, and lifestyles. Furthermore, habitus is passed on through conscious and unconscious observation, imitations, and adoption within one's social environment. Each community consists of its own practices and knowledge, what Bourdieu calls *cultural capital*, which is then passed on through the habitus, across time and space—from person to person, and historically from generation to generation. It is within this context of habitus and cultural capital that I found struggles in EVI to be situated. The idea to live simply is one that has roots in Enlightenment thinking that primitive cultures live closer to nature and in harmony with their environment, and residents who have themselves lived a middle-class lifestyle want to re-create this image, without the hardships that lifestyle often encompassed. On the other hand, the historical and spatial constraints of cultural habits reveal this goal to be unattainable in part because residents are part of a larger culture of consumption that makes class distinctions based on (among others) material goods. In EVI one has to move beyond a “comfort zone” of being consumers of luxury goods, be it for green commodities or otherwise, in order to reject the wasteful and needless material objects that residents themselves see as unsustainable and thus undesirable.

Veblen (1931) emphasizes that material goods are symbolic markers of power and class and as such, this consumerism, which he calls conspicuous consumption, of leisure resources such as alcohol and foods that go beyond sustenance, is a distinguishing mark of social class and social status. Following along similar lines, but not focusing primarily

on commodities, Bourdieu stresses cultural capital, an individual's possession of the skills and "know how" to function in any given community. By design, co-housing communities, especially in the form of ecovillages, require the possession of a green cultural capital that includes the financial resources and desire to live a separate and distinguished life from those in the surrounding community, but also the social resources to participate in the community that values leisure time in nature. In some instances informants were comfortable living separately from the larger community because they had always lived in communities that were disconnected (suburbs) from the city. That these informants were now living in a separate green community is a positive change within the context of their suburban lifestyle. But just as consuming organic food does not necessarily "signal buying into the environmentalist cause" (James 1993:207), living in EVI does not automatically mean residents have stronger interest in preserving the environment, rather it symbolizes a desire by some actors to be part of an innovative and designer community.

Exploring questions of consumption in Western environmentalist communities (that base themselves on imagined non-Western communities) can shed new light on the deficiencies of assumptions that suggest non-Western communities live simpler lifestyles and therefore consume fewer resources. This idea further challenges the belief that a simple lifestyle can be achieved through the consumption of green commodities—a green consumerism instead of a lifestyle that reduces consumption and promotes shared resources. My research analyzes a community that, in part, bases its vision of an ecological co-housing community on the very assumptions that some anthropologists

once touted, but are now questioning; the idea that communities in non-Western countries are less materialistic, have fewer commodities, live in small bands, and therefore live simpler, more meaningful lives. This imagery of the primitive culture engaged in simple hunting and gathering is often equated with living harmoniously with nature, the environment, and with each other. An increasing number of communities are designing co-housing neighborhoods as one way to “return” to this imagined community as a means to protect the environment and re-create a sense of community.

In *Distinctions*, Bourdieu differentiates between the working class and the bourgeois through distinctions in lifestyle, and taste, where class structure determines and is determined by the consumption of particular goods (symbolic markers of class distinction). He differentiates between consumption as necessity instead of a luxury, such that “the true basis of the differences found in the area of consumption, and far beyond it, is the opposition between the tastes of luxury (or freedom) and the taste of necessity” (Bourdieu 1984:177), where the working class consume commodities necessary for survival and the bourgeois are able to consume luxury goods such as more refined meats and fresh fruits and vegetables as a necessary class symbolic marker.

I argue that through necessity, and not as a luxury, community and environmental preservation have been, and are likely to be, achieved. In other words, the luxury to recycle yogurt containers (putting differently colored and textured items in appropriate containers) is different from the necessity to produce one’s own yogurt to save money and maximize the life of the container. The same can be argued about automobiles; those

who have the luxury (access to capital) tend to consume private vehicles and not use or advocate for public transport, even though there is general agreement on the environmental merits of public transportation. A more detailed discussion of green marketing and the efforts of companies to “green-wash” their products to actually encourage consumerism is explored by critics of the merging of capitalism with sustainability (Athanasίου 1996; O'Connor 1994; O'Riordan 1981; Smith 1998b) work on green marketing. Why is it challenging for people, who share a strong commitment to an alternative way of life, socially and environmentally, to act on their beliefs through advocating public transportation? And why is it hard to break out of this practice? Bourdieu's concept of habitus (and its implications for lifestyle) is helpful because it creates the framework from which to understand class and ideology. I argue that EVI enables families to live in the neighborhood without explicitly confronting the class structures that exist. By creating the structures for egalitarianism, specifically through the ideology that decision making through consensus secures the group from questions of inequality, residents can systematically remove class from the possibility of creating a sustainable village. Taken a step further, some residents argued that EVI was affordable to families who are not middle and upper class (Walker 1996). In reality however, only families who can afford to live in the community would be able to engage the discussion, if it occurred. Furthermore, the ideology of the community means that only families who share the cultural capital of U.S. environmentalism (and as mentioned above, the emphasis on nature and wilderness) would have access to the community.

Bourdieu's argument that cultures are learned and perpetuated through conscious and unconscious habits means that one can only function within a particular social context if one has the cultural capital to appreciate it, and that the social behavior is only acquired through being exposed to it and adapting it consciously or unconsciously (Bourdieu 1984). Residents are therefore engaged in a struggle to change their individual behavior and also contribute to social change on a larger scale. This commitment to change a "culture of over-consumption" is what makes some residents hopeful that better ways to live with nature and community are possible. My data suggests that overcoming this habitus is a challenge that goes to the heart of how residents identify who they are as individuals, but also as a community, and as a model village of ecological living.

Why in postmodernity are new communities striving for the very things (physically and ideologically) they moved away from, such as densely packed urban spaces that provided easy access to the amenities of the city (McKenzie 1994)? Or, are families actually moving away from the individualized lifestyles and replacing it with something communal? Are they moving away from a consumer-oriented society (Douglas and Isherwood 1979) or merely redirecting their consumption practices to something more politically desirable (correct) and more green? My research on an ecological co-housing community attempts to address these questions through the exploration of lifestyles, consumption habits, analysis of the types of commodities consumed, and the social, political and economic process these commodities and behaviors embody. I argue that families are seeking social distinction, in this case, a green lifestyle, that mollifies the

social isolation of the post World War II suburbs, but maintains the social distinction of suburban life.

I argue that what is needed is more work on “why people over-consume and mis-consume,” and anthropologists are in a good position to explore these questions (Myers 1997). An ethnography of ecovillage reveals what residents do to protect the environment often begin with personal habits such as recycling or composting, or purchasing green commodities that are deemed to be good for the environment such as organic food or locally-produced products. This identification with a green lifestyle based on personal lifestyle changes is in contrast to the political activism of the 1960 and 1970s where people who were concerned about the environment reached outwards and used social and political structures to respond to increasing environmental degradation (see for example, Carson 1962; Levine 1982). Today many environmentalists, especially in Western communities embrace nature as symbolic meaning and, except for a few political and social activists and non-profits, have been led by green marketers to consume green commodities, reconnecting with a nostalgic “pristine” nature.

In summary, my research aims to demonstrate the emergence of a green lifestyle that is based on nostalgic images of nature. I explore the role of ecovillage in shaping a new kind of U.S. environmentalism that instead of criticizing capitalism, uses capitalism as a vehicle to effect ecological and social change.



## 2.6 Green Consumption and Green Lifestyle

Make your green vivid: You've watched America discover that green living can be magnificent. Celebrate your vision with products that bring nature's brilliance into your surroundings, your state of mind, your life. Gaiam inspires the art of being conscious (Co-opAmerica 2005).

...eco-entrepreneurs did not like the rules. So they changed them. Their innovations and commitment to sustainability are transforming the way everything from food to energy is produced and consumed—and they're turning a profit while they're at it (Cortese 2005).

Green consumption has become a hallmark of U.S. environmentalism, specifically among middle class environmentalists. Prominent environmental groups and activists have looked to the market to design products that are ecologically friendly, not surprisingly, the market has responded by producing, and in fact leading the way for environmental activism, by suggesting that the consumption of green commodities is a realistic solution to environmental degradation and sustainability (Brown 2001a; Hawken, et al. 1999; Smith 1998b).

Other works that relate identity to consumption situate green consumption as a marker for a green social identity (Friedman 1994). Baudrillard (1981) writes about commodity-sign and argues that in a capitalist society, what is most important is not the usefulness of the commodity but rather the meaning it conveys. Thus, between the marketing of green products and the identification with green commodities, ecovillages are designing a green lifestyle. This section builds on this relationship and explores the wisdom of consuming green commodities as a way to improve the environment, or at least prevent its further

degradation. Specifically, I cast doubt on the ingeniousness of using capitalism, arguably a cause of ecological destruction, as a model for finding solutions to those very problems.

In *The Myth of Green Marketing*, Smith argues that green consumerism does little to affect long-term political and economic structures that are in part responsible for environmental damage (1998b). Other scholars argue that green consumption is still consumption (Bookchin 1994; O'Connor 1994) and that, because most modern production in industrial societies requires vast amounts of energy and produces equally large amounts of waste, we need to move away from unnecessary consumption, which raises the questions of what commodities are necessary and for whom. The EVI project points to a major contention in U.S. environmentalism, the maintenance of a lifestyle that is not sustainable (Sarkar 1999), despite the opportunity to use more energy-efficient appliances and live in smaller homes. EVI contributes to a dialogue on the merits of sharing resources, thus opening the opportunity for reducing consumption. If consumption could be described as the hallmark of capitalism (Durning 1992), then the current trend in the U.S. to consume green commodities or participate in a larger culture of green consumption needs to be scrutinized as ecologically problematic (Foster 2002).

The 21st century has seen a wave of commercial environmentalism, including the rise and expansion of natural health food stores, earth-friendly shops like the Nature Company (Price 1996; Smith 1996), organic food consumption (James 1993), popular “green” magazines like *Plenty* and *E-Magazine*, as well as alternative investment firms that will invest your money in conscientious green companies and alternative technology

such as fuel cells. The trend to market and consume green as a way to solve environmental degradation has been expressed in the growing area of green marketing, eco-economic, and natural capitalism (Athanasίου 1996; Brown 2001a; Hawken 1993; Hawken, et al. 1999; Smith 1998b). Natural capitalism argues for the inclusion of the true social and environmental cost of commodities in the retail price; by adding an ecological price to commodities the products will become more expensive, thus increasing the chance they will be consumed sparingly and used wisely. Scholars have challenged the idea of green capitalism and have questioned the compatibility between capitalism and environmentalism arguing that reducing our consumption of goods, green or not, is the best solution to solving the current ecological crisis (Foster 2002; O'Connor 1994; Smith 1998b).

In EVI, voluntary simplicity is touted as the ideal solution to the impending ecological crisis. Ecovillage aims to make resource sharing and living in small houses comfortable and effortless, and thus desirable. Voluntary simplicity can be defined as the conscious effort to refrain from consuming commodities in order to reduce consumption. Green consumption and voluntary simplicity in EVI is manifested through daily negotiations of personal needs and desires, and implicit and explicit community expectations. Some residents make a deliberate effort not to consume particular products such as meat, cars, dishwashers, because they believe such items to be non-essential and contributing to environmental decay. Although residents often admit to occasionally consuming some of these self defined “ecologically forbidden” objects, departures from their commitment are mainly carried out in private.

Ironically, environmental groups in the U.S. are becoming vocal about the upcoming middle-class in China, arguing that if the Chinese attempt to obtain a lifestyle like that of the U.S. middle-class, the fate of the planet is sealed. “In China, the combination of over-plowing and over-grazing to satisfy rapidly expanding food needs is creating a dust bowl reminiscent of the U.S. Dust Bowl of the 1930’s—but much larger” (Brown 2001a). This line of reasoning has been met with stark criticism from activists in non-Western cultures who rightfully point out that “we cannot demand that the Brazilians do not destroy their rainforest while we in the industrial North continue to destroy the world’s climate by...an ever growing car industry and private transport systems” (Mies 1993:253).

The debate on whether technological advancements will make the impending environmental crisis obsolete reveals the tension between the need to give up certain luxuries and the urgency of “saving” the planet. The reliance on innovative technology to supply energy-efficient homes, cars that get better gas-mileage, and use of solar panels will continue to diminish resources and enable U.S. Americans to continue to live a lifestyle that is unsustainable with less incentives to moderate behavior (Erickson 1997). In Erickson’s study of consumption among environmentally conscience residents in the U.S. and Sweden, she found that after changing to energy-efficient appliances, households still continued to engage in wasteful practices such as leaving lights on unnecessarily (see for example Erickson 1997; Foster 2002).

Frederick Buell (2003) argues that our current response to the environment has moved from fearing a major catastrophe like Three-Mile Island or Bhopal to accepting “the environmental crisis” as a way of life in which we make minimal lifestyle adjustments. He points out that conservative groups, unwilling to face the evidence of over-consumption and its global ramifications, are now advocating that technological innovation and green capitalism are realistic solutions that will require little or no sacrifices on part of U.S. lifestyle. Green marketing and the marketing of “nature” have emerged as alternatives to making sacrifices on consumption (Price 1996; Smith 1998a; Smith 1998b).

Critics of natural capitalism caution against using capitalism, itself the cause of environmental degradation, as a model of environmental sustainability. Sarkar argues against the marketing of green commodities and especially points out that natural capitalism is not the most appropriate way to address ecological degradation because it fails to address the root causes of social and environmental degradation. Like EVI, modern environmentalists exclude class distinction from the dialogue on the environment. Various scholars have advocated for eco-socialism as a way to integrate social justice (work against racism, sexism, and classism) into the environmental debate (Bullard 1994; Di Chiro 1996; Sarkar 1999).

While integrating social justice into mainstream environmentalism has been challenging, recent works on the relevance and necessity for this shift have been a positive sign. Scholars are beginning to doubt the effectiveness of a concept like “sustainability”, a

term that has come to be used to mean almost anything to anyone (Harvey 1996a). O'Connor questions the usefulness of sustainable capitalism, and points out that "capitalism is self-destructing and in crisis; the world economy makes more people hungry, poor, and miserable everyday...and nature, however 'ecological sustainability' is defined, is under attack everywhere" (O'Connor 1994:154 ). Why have these fundamental issues in our society failed to be addressed in mainstream U.S. environmentalism? Single-issue environmental groups are focused narrowly on their areas of expertise and thus lack the resources to address broader factors, leaving areas outside their expertise to other single-issue groups to address (Harvey 1996a; O'Connor 1994). Consequently, as I argue in this dissertation, the narrow focus on green consumption, instead of exploring larger political ecology questions, is indicative of an interest in maintaining a specific lifestyle and taste, than with an effort to address environmental degradation. In the next section I consider Bourdieu's concept of habitus and lifestyle and offer it as an explanation of why green consumption, instead of reduced consumption, has gained favor amongst U.S. environmentalists and amongst several residents in EVI.

## **CHAPTER THREE: A Day in the Life of an Ecovillage**

### 3.0 Introduction

The ecovillage project is, and continues to be, a complex project. It is complex in its efforts to deal with local and global problems of degrading environments and disconnected communities by creating an ideal village that aims to solve both problems at once. This chapter describes a day in the community; it could be any day, but it is by no means a typical day. There are no typical days. Each day is unique in what it presents, from the weather to a family crisis where neighbors spend their day helping each other, to an explosive email that raises difficult questions and can lead to hurt feelings. The chapter illustrates the way people in the community traverse the concern for the environment and community within the larger context of one aspect of U.S. American culture—consumption.

The chapter attempts to give an honest picture of one particular day. It is an account of my experience, as a researcher and member of the community. I attempt to demonstrate the ironies, joys, the paradoxes, efforts, conflicts, and cooperation that individuals display

while trying to protect the environment and connect with each other. It is also an attempt to give context to the rest of the dissertation, which includes the analysis of consumption and environmentalism in this community in particular and in the U.S. in general.

### 3.1 A Day in the Life of an Ecovillage

#### A Friday in August

Although most people are asleep, Hannah begins her day at 5:30 a.m. with a quick snack. She puts on her walking shoes, and along with her daughter, she heads down the hill in her Honda Civic, about 2 miles from ecovillage. Her family occupies four of the thirty houses of the first neighborhood in Ecovillage. She tells me how she started the EVI project as she parks her car at the bottom of the hill and we begin her morning exercise routine. Her daughter will go for a swim in the pond today before she leaves to teach at the local elementary school. The long hike up Elm Street Extension's gradually inclining slope is great for getting one's heart rate up, she says, then goes on to describe the moment she discovered the land where EVI is located. (She was pivotal in deciding where the community would be built.) She often struggles with the consequences of the decisions she made almost ten years ago. 'Someone had to make the decision' she says, and she made the best ones she could. She knows that not everyone agreed with her, but she believes that if she hadn't acted quickly, the project would have fallen apart and might never have been realized. She wishes people could see her side of the conflicts, but accepts being the target of disgruntled residents and former residents as part of her



role as a pioneer. After breakfast, she leaves and walks half a mile down the long winding dirt road. She catches the 7:00 a.m. bus that runs down the busy State Highway 79. She will take the bus down the hill to where she parked her car earlier this morning, and then drive the rest of the way to work. She is one of only three residents who regularly ride the city bus from Ecovillage. We talk about alternative transport and I'm told that early in the project, free land ten miles away from the center of town was offered to the group. The generous offer was turned down because it would have meant residents would have to drive too far and early planners did not see that image fitting into their model of ecological living. A few residents have made the effort to use alternative transportation; I observed two people who regularly bike to work throughout the summer and on warm winter and spring days.

At 7:30 a.m. Francine and I meet for a morning hike. We've become friends and because we both work at home, we often call each other to take a walk when we need a break from the community. We pass Lenny, Tanya and Carol who are on their way to meditate in the Common House. On our way to West Haven Road, Francine and I pass the chickens, which run to greet us in hopes of getting some bread or lettuce. None of the chickens are killed and eaten, at least not by residents. There were a few instances where an animal was attacking the chickens; it was rumored to be one of the neighborhood dogs, but as far as I know, nothing was ever proven. We walk down the emergency access road and head towards Route 13A. The three-mile roundtrip hike is very hilly, which is the primary reason why many residents do not bike more often. It gives Francine and me a good workout, allows us to chat about the weekly happenings in our

personal lives, and it is an opportunity to vent our gripes about community meetings, emails, and workloads. Although we enjoy walking around the perimeter of the land, we gradually become tired of the mid-August mud and trade a scenic hike on the Ecovillage land for a mud-free walk on black top. When things dry up, we'll resume our picturesque hikes along the boundary of the 176-acre former farmland that Ecovillage sits on.

By the time we get back, the kids are off to a variety of schools in their various carpooling teams. Not all the children attend the local elementary school, thus they do not have free public buses that take them to school. Instead parents drive several children across town to a more diverse and popular school. It's Howard's turn to take a van full of kids to Bell Sherman Elementary School. Many of the older kids go to an alternative high school just down the hill from Ecovillage. Wesley hops on his bike and rides down the hill to the Alternatives Community School (ACS), passing up a chance to get a lift with the other young adults going to ACS. Beatrice stays home along with her brother Peter and a couple of other children who are either ill, home schooled or unschooled. Beatrice is one of two children who is 'unschooled'; that is, she learns what she wants at her own pace. No textbooks, no assignments, no bedtime or designated playtime. A mother of an unschooled child tells me that she finally decided to purchase a math textbook, as her daughter really wanted one. From my conversations with her, she does not appear to be behind any of the kids her age. But that isn't the point; in fact her parents discourage competitiveness and emphasize personal achievement. There are several mothers who stay and work at home; they've preferred to quit high paying, highly

qualified jobs to be full-time parents. Some are doctors, computer engineers, and teachers.

Rikki has returned from putting her many loads of laundry in the community laundry room. Although it is cloudy now, she hopes it will clear up soon so she can hang her cloth diapers on the clothesline. Not everyone likes to hang laundry on the line, but it is certainly widespread here. Rikki and I chat about the joy she finds in doing her daily chores as 18 month-old Maya gives passerby's a "high five." After our brief conversation, Rikki collects last night's kitchen chicken scraps and heads down the middle of the neighborhood with Maya on one hip and a bucket of salad scraps on another. Just as she approaches the far end of the neighborhood, the chickens will run up to meet her and she'll probably collect half a dozen eggs. Feeding the chickens kitchen and leftover food scraps is just one of the ways ecovillage recycles.

The community listserv, a voluntary email list managed by the "geek team" (computer specialists in the neighborhood) is almost always active. Every family has opted to be electronically connected to each other; the listserv includes some participants who were part of the ecovillage project at some point in the past. For many residents, especially households with children or busy jobs, checking email is a love/hate relationship. It is a great way to know what is happening in the neighborhood to the minute, but it easily gets overwhelming. Today the topics include:

*Whoever folded our laundry? Thank you and thank you. Ruth and Alexander*

*We will be meeting this Sat. at 9:30a.m. at Vivian's house.  
This is a notice to the FROG [First Resident Group] neighborhood for people who may wish to attend or may have concerns to bring up with the Process Steering Committee.*

It is turning out to be a warm day as the sun peeks out from behind the thick August clouds. Amy is working in the Common House garden. An amateur yet avid gardener, she works on the outdoor team to keep the Ecovillage grounds in top working condition. Her garden, and the one she maintains for the Common House, is full of colorful, ever-changing perennials. She grows herbs and vegetables along side Marigolds, Echinacea, and Columbines. Her garden is only one of many flower gardens that will burst to life every spring and throughout the summer. Aside from putting in more than the required three to four hours per week of community work, Amy volunteers hundreds of unseen hours calculating the cooperative's complicated finances.

The 200-foot walk from the beginning of the neighborhood to the end takes a good 4 hours. I run into Peter and Lilian who are on their way to a political rally to protest the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. After a ten-minute conversation and a quick glance at my palm, I'm grabbing my notebook and go along with them and another resident, Cecilia, who saw us from her window and had a feeling of what we were planning. We drive down, across the valley and up hill to the Cornell University campus. We meet other Ithacans we know from other teach-ins. I'm introduced to a protester as the Ecovillage anthropologist. He briefly tells me that he often wonders how ecological

Ecovillage really is; being up on the hill and needing a car really makes him suspicious of what the place is all about. I encourage him to visit.

Back on the hill Max, a SONG resident and one of the construction management team is finishing up the loft he recently installed in his self-built house. He is one of the residents who are paid by SONG members to manage part of their housing development project. Unlike in the FROG's construction process, the SONGs have welcomed the chance to employ people from within the group. Some future residents of SONG tell me that it seems like a conflict of interest to hire some of their members to work by the hour and not by the job. Some residents in both neighborhoods also found it confusing that some workers were paid and others volunteered for various community tasks. It is a hard topic for residents to talk about and my informant would rather not elaborate. With trust in the process and good intentions, he tries not to worry about these feelings of mistrust and doubt that otherwise would seriously be of concern to him.

I stop by the Common House to see who is "around." Heather from SONG and her son are playing. She likes to visit the Common House just to be near her future home. I ask her how her house is coming along. She is frustrated that the houses are getting bigger at the same time that her finances are getting thinner. But she is confident that it will all work out; she trusts the process. The benefits far outweigh the losses and she has already become very close to some of the people who will be her future neighbors. The whole process has been a big change for her family. They both left good jobs and careers to be

part of an innovative community, and they risked everything including selling their previous home in a depressed market.

Families like Heathers' have moved across the country with, in many cases, a home on the market and a lot of trust in strangers. Without jobs, some have volunteered hundreds of hours to run meetings, provide childcare, and organize finances.

I'm off for another walk, this time with Vivian, a resident of FROG. We brave the mud and walk into *mudvillage*--the SONG site. The second neighborhood is designed differently from the first. About a third of the houses in SONG have a wooden shell and are looking rather large. The profile is pronounced because there is no landscaping, and siding has not been installed. Clearly the houses on the south are wider, longer, and higher than the ones on the North side. Most of the houses are built to the Architectural Review Committee (ARC) recommended maximum, which happens to be larger than the FROG maximums. Several things make walking through the second neighborhood unique. Each house is designed differently, a feature which apparently was very attractive to the people joining SONG. At the same time, it meant households could build as individuals with less concern for the group product. Vivian comments that she wishes she could have designed a bigger home in FROG. Many of the houses in SONG have private office spaces, extra rooms for guests, attached apartments, full kitchens, and especially on the South side, livable basements, all amenities that make their price and stature high.

My companion comments on how important it is to be out in nature, to see the seasons change and watch the wildlife. The fields are turning bright yellow from the goldenrod towering over the spent blackberry and black raspberry plants. She is worried about the dogs running free and chasing deer. An email went out recently encouraging children (and adults) to help chase the Canadian geese away from the pond to prevent them from nesting there. According to a resident “they poop everywhere and are a pest to this region.” Some residents are very concerned about non-native species (plants and animals) in this region.

The EVI land is relaxing and pleasing. There is no noise from cars and buses, no loud music, and it is easy to hear the sounds of nature that we often only find at The Nature Store. It feels safe. Kids have returned home from school. They run up a large gravel pile left for the day by workers repairing the road. Tiny pebbles slide down the pile like flowing water. The older boys are fast, they stake claims to the top while the younger ones struggle to climb the sinking sand of stones. The girls are not impressed and look for adventure further in the woods. A parent comes out to help supervise and joins our conversation. Eric is a computer programmer and works out of his office. He works 3 days a week and makes his own hours.

In the current global climate it is hard to have a conversation longer than 30 minutes without the subject of Palestine and Israel coming up, or the state of U.S. politics and the rise of what one woman sees as an emerging Christian theocracy. My companion’s political views are more conservative than mine and I welcome Eric’s interruption.

Ecovillage is not politically homogenous, though most of the residents tend to be liberal democrats or greens, like the rest of Ithaca. When the boys have exhausted their enthusiasm for the gravel pile, they collect long sticks and run around. An older resident returning from work looks at us and shakes her head. She's both irritated and annoyed that the kids are so wild and that the parent doesn't seem to react the way she did as a parent. Of course this is why many of the residents moved here; the young, old, playful, serious, shy, and politically motivated all find a sense of community in an ever-changing day. The sun was out just long enough to dry the diapers on the line, and now Sandra asks her husband to help her carry the loads home. His "see you later" is genuine; we'll have many opportunities to spend time together.

Today is one of the three evenings a week when we can share a community meal and the cook team meets at 4 pm to begin preparing the evening's Common House meal. Maisy is making her famous fried tofu. Her two assistants Tanya and Katrin begin chopping tofu, preparing organic brown basmati rice, and washing fresh farm lettuce for a salad. We run out of nutritional yeast, but it is not a problem, one of the assistants begins walking through the neighborhood asking neighbors if they have any we can borrow. She returns with more than enough. This is a great meal for the cooks because it is wheat-free, dairy-free and doesn't have mushrooms; there is no need to make a special dish for vegans and vegetarians. In an earlier discussion with a member of the cook team it was suggested that, like the vegetarian options at every meal, there should be a meat option available. About thirty adults and twenty children have signed up before yesterday, giving the shopper enough time to go to Wegmans and purchase the right



amount of items requested by the cook. The head cook adds about 10 more people to count for the late sign ups and potential visitors; the team of three will prepare a delicious meal for sixty people in two hours. Preparing the meals together is a great time to catch up on each other's lives. The recent exchange of email messages about the Common House guidelines and the problem of the overflowing garbage dumpster are the topics of discussion. The general consensus is that we should encourage residents to throw away less stuff and not get a second dumpster, but the reality is that the dumpster overflows and attracts undesirable animals. A small group discussion like this allows us to get to know each other's views and feelings between slicing carrots and seasoning the tofu.

There will be a team of journalists from a Spanish magazine at dinner tonight. A lot of different groups come to Ecovillage throughout the year: journalists, city planners, potential residents, and students like myself. It makes the place feel like being in a fish bowl. Some residents complain that after a full day of work, the last thing they want to do at dinner is talk about why they live in Ecovillage. "It's my chance to wind down and not engage in some research project, as a result, people must think we are a rude bunch, but we are just too tired to be interviewed at dinner" (Helen). It is rush time, 5:50 pm. A total of six residents have asked if there is enough food for them to sign up at the last minute—no problem. Joshua has set up the dining room for a buffet style meal.

Various children gather and check out the kids' table, it usually contains a blander version of what the adults eat. Not all families are happy about a separate meal for the children. Today's serving table has baked tofu marinated in tamari sauce, plain rice, salad, and sliced oranges. Josiah rings the dinner bell and soon residents who have been

congregating on the steps to the Common House stop their conversations about West Haven Farm's new deer fence, and come into the dining room.

In a large circle that fills the room we hold hands. Lots of smiles send greetings as we face a neighbor on the other side of the circle. Maisy welcomes everyone and describes the meal. After thanking the assistants, including two younger girls who helped cut oranges for the kids' table, she asks if there are any announcements. The Spanish magazine folks are introduced and a friend of Susi's from downtown has come for dinner. A few residents who do not like being part of the circle stand patiently outside and wait until Maisy gives the "ok" to begin. I ask a resident why they don't like the circle and they say it seems too cultist.

Evening greetings of "how was your day", "isn't it great weather", and "could we meet after dinner" fill the food line. Although there are plenty of tables, it is not always easy to decide where to sit, once you have your food. The largest table seats ten and usually fills quickly; this is the place to sit if one is worried about eating alone. Based on your mood, some people talk too much, some people don't talk enough, sometimes the kids are too loud, and at other times the topic is not interesting. The noise level is especially high tonight and a resident at my table is complaining that this is not what they had expected when they moved to Ecovillage. He had imagined dinner to be a quiet, peaceful time to catch up with neighbors and get to know each other. Instead he feels exhausted and irritated by the kids running around, children calling for their parents, and babies impatient from sitting. He rushes to finish his meal and leaves. The rest of us completely

understand the occasionally frustrating dinner, but we don't mind it tonight. Our table is lively and we talk about how exciting the SONG site is looking and the free vegetables the farmers left for residents outside the Common House. Claire plans to make zucchini bread and freeze it, giving us all a great idea. She tells a story that happened two years ago. Neighbors got together and collected the pounds of surplus tomatoes from the farm, built a huge bonfire and canned several jars of tomatoes. Claire doesn't have the energy to organize the canning this year and fears that it might not happen. We are all excited at the thought of tons of good organic tomatoes left on the field. The magazine journalists are looking for people to interview and a few residents talk with them. Those remaining at our table dread them coming to us and we try not to notice them, or be noticed.

Brian rings a small bell hanging from the kitchen island signaling an announcement. Some kids from ACS are selling chocolate for a class trip and they ask if anyone is interested in buying some. Co-housing is a good market for social fundraisers. Three more announcements are made: a group is going to see the film "Together" a comedy about life on a commune in Sweden; a meeting of anyone interested in building a sauna; and the "Tune Café" gathering after the sauna meeting. Our table continues to talk about the Spanish TV crew. A resident makes the comment that they had no idea they would be under such a microscope by moving into Ecovillage. Lenny jumps in and says it is a wonderful thing, last week EVI was featured in a Japanese magazine. It is a chance to model the many good things we have here and possibly influence how other communities are developed, although he realizes that we still have a long way to go with meeting the mission of the community.

We continue chatting over empty plates full of leftover salad dressing and juicy tomato seeds. A member of the dish team asks if he can take our plates. Concentrated on our conversation, we haven't noticed the dining room emptying and a small group gathering for the sauna meeting. The dish team has turned up their music and is hurriedly gathering the remaining plates from our table. Most people have bussed their own table, scraping their leftover tofu snippets and lettuce into red tubs for the chickens and compost piles. Very little food is wasted. It is too distracting to continue the conversation as someone has come to the table to ask if one of us is attending the meeting. The meeting heads downstairs to the recreation room. It is not a big deal to end our conversation, as we know we can pick up where we left off another time. We agree that being such close neighbors means there is always 'another time'.

I pass Eleanor's house on my way to the Tune Café and stop in for tea. Her house is warm from the afternoon sun. With large south facing windows, the passive solar design allows the houses to receive maximum sunshine all winter. Three panels of glass in the windows keep the warm air in, saving energy and providing spectacular views of deer playing in the open field and residents chatting by the pond. I ask if she is planning to go to the café, but after a long week of teaching she needs to unwind with a smaller crowd. She'll go to the movies with the regular group of young women whose husbands will stay home and watch the kids. After the movie they'll probably head to a café and splurge on dessert and great conversation.

A bunch of us head to Adam's house. We bring our favorite CDs with songs picked out to share with the group. There is a dessert potluck full of a variety of cookies, cake, fruit, tea, and coffee. Although some desserts are homemade, many come from Greenstar, the local health food store, and Wegmans, the large regional grocery chain. Garrison says a brief welcome and we are introduced to his friends from the greater Ithaca community. About one third of the guests are not residents and Francine comments that it is nice to mix with local community members. Valerie puts in Tracy Chapman's "Give me one reason" and says that it reflects the way she is feeling this evening. Everyone gets a turn to play a tune and we hum, sway, and laugh about the memories the songs invokes in us. Garrison has been hosting Tune Cafés for several years. He has a large collection of Putumayo World music CDs and plays a tune from the South American collection. Like many of his neighbors, he has traveled outside the U.S. quite a bit. He recently came home from a bike tour in Canada with his wife and stepchildren. A former member of the SONG group has just come in; we chat, and she tells me that her family is struggling with the decision to continue to be a part of the second neighborhood. The costs continue to increase and the houses continue to get larger; their income is fixed and limited and the financial strain is causing problems in her relationship with her partner. It is no secret that many current, soon to be, and former residents are disappointed and discouraged by the high cost of living at Ecovillage. Some soon-to-be residents are ashamed to admit that things are rolling out of control and they don't know how to have a discussion about these uncomfortable situations. A new song is played and we are distracted by the lyrics:

*"Get your bags together, come bring your good friends too, the time is getting nearer, it soon will be with you. Cause I'm on the edge of*

*darkness, there rides a peace train, peace train take this country, come take me home again.”*

The ongoing conflicts around the world are depressing. Hilda, a former member who could not afford to build in the SONG but tries to stay connected to the group despite living downtown, comments that it makes her small tribulations seem insignificant, compared with larger global problems such as war and AIDS. She and a couple other residents are planning to attend an upcoming political rally in Washington, D.C.

People come and go from the Tune Café; by 9:30 pm the group is dispersing. As people leave, I stay and help the hosts clean up; it is a chance to observe their home and learn more about their lifestyle. Most houses were designed without full ovens and with an electric range, although this household made a special request to have a gas stove and a full oven, they prefer to use gas over electric. The neighborhood has a lot of households that made an exception to the community guidelines. These exceptions are aimed at meeting people's personal practical and comfort needs, and yet few of these minor changes are publicly known, thus helping to give the community a sense of unity. Some residents who do not have a personal dishwasher in their home commented to me, with disappointment, that one or two households went ahead without group permission to install dishwashers and other appliances the group had decided not to acquire. We end the evening with a hug and I make my way across the neighborhood to my house.

I don't think twice about walking alone past 20 homes at 10:30 pm. Although there are a few lights on in the homes of EVI's night owls, the sky is dark. Without glaring

streetlights, cars parked away from the neighborhood and thus no automatic garage lights, one can see the stars brightly lit in the sky. The evening is still except for the sound of water gently splashing at the pond. I walk south along a narrow stone path separating two duplexes and see that there are some residents swimming. The swimmers have their clothes laid across the picnic table.

I'm greeted and encouraged to join the small group of skinny dippers at the pond.

Treading water, Jonathon reflects on why he moved to the community: it is for moments like this that brought him here. Swimming with his neighbors in a relaxed environment was something he did not, and knew he would not, find in his former suburban neighborhood. Because there are very few lights in the neighborhood, we can see the stars. There is a meteor shower and we stare desperately to spot the next shooting star. We only get out to go home when our toes and fingers are shriveled and pruned. We quietly walk back to the neighborhood and say hi to a late night neighbor who is leaving her office in the Common House and heading home. We talk for a minute or two. She asks who was at the pond and I tell her. She wishes she had known as she was stuck on a problem at work and could have used the company and down time. But like many things at ecovillage, things just happen, and if not this time, there will always be another.

When I ask residents what community means, they struggle to find the right order of words to express their definitions, but a "sense of community" becomes clear to me after observing daily life in ecovillage. This is the kind of day many residents moved here for, it is what community means, it is the sense of community that is so hard to define in a

couple of words because it is a day, a week, a month, years of living together and knowing each other and changing together.

Creating a “sense of community” for many residents means knowing that a conversation can be interrupted because it can be picked up again soon. It is feeling safe and having the opportunity to enjoy simple acts of kindness on a regular basis. It is a lifestyle that engages residents with the natural world around them and, at the same time makes them feel good about protecting the beautiful land they inhabit; but it is also a sense of responsibility for saving the land for future generations. The lifestyle of conservation and community is created through the consumption of ideas and material goods; for residents, the cost of living in ecovillage is a small price for the lifestyle it offers.

### 3.2 Ecovillage as an Environmental Experience/Experiment?

We are moving to showcase a lifestyle that ‘parallels the diversity, stability and resilience of natural ecosystems’. Bill Mollison.

Ecovillage is an environmental and community experiment. The founders envisioned EVI as a response to images of Los Angeles with its super highways and sprawling communities that are disconnected from each other (Bullard 2000; Davis 1992). They were concerned that an alternative needed to be found and implemented before the entire country was overwhelmed with asphalt and identical houses. EVI would be a model, an example of how technology can make our life more comfortable and greatly reduce our negative impact on the environment. Ecovillage as an environmental and social



communal experiment is designed to prevent the mistakes of earlier experimental communities. EVI attempts to pressure individuals to behave in eco-friendly ways such as by recycling and composting; yet it does not challenge individuals who deviate from the expectations of the community such as sharing work and resources. The community attempts to balance cherished U.S. values such as individualism and mass consumption, while maximizing social interaction (Trainer 2000). I observed three characteristics the project adopted in order to prevent fissures and ultimately breakdown.

First, the community reaches out to a particular class of people. Specifically, the project would attract those who could afford to build a new home on expensive land. The project attempts to indirectly discourage the creation of sprawl, by demonstrating how families could enjoy a better life by building homes closer together and saving the surrounding land for recreation and passive enjoyment. One of the EVI founders felt that wealthy families were to blame for the creation of suburban sprawl; this informant felt that the families who built large homes on open land wanted all the things EVI was now offering: land, nature, views, and safety. EVI was designed to attract upper middle class families who had the financial resources to work from home, have one income, or not have to work at all, because participating required significant amounts of time and energy that most working class families could not easily afford. Down payments and high financial risks at times also limited who would be able and willing to participate. A prominent member of the community informed me that the poor were not responsible for sprawl: they lived in smaller houses and used public transportation. According to her, there was no need to offer a green alternative to the poor, since their lifestyle was already simplified

out of necessity; there was, however, no alternative offered to wealthier families to live more simply.

Second, although the community makes decisions through consensus, it is structured with explicit and clearly defined legal language and responsibilities, including guidelines on the private and public ownership of key resources in a way similar to neighborhood associations (McKenzie 1994). The legal separation of the non-profit from the neighborhood would help residents secure their homes; should the non-profit be unable to pay for the land debt at the same time, it would protect the non-profit from liability risk associated with being a developer. All residents would be on equal footing in the community; specially, the bylaws insured that the community would not subsidize any family in the neighborhood. Each household would be an independent unit, all decisions in the community would be made through consensus, thus according to its founders, ensuring a more democratic process. Despite the extensive use of consensus, many residents felt that consensus does not in fact produce a democratic process, but instead ignores power structures that were seldom challenged (Mansbridge 1980).

Finally, the community explicitly avoids defining social behavior, political attitudes, and monitoring the consumption of residents. The community attempts to refrain from officially defining who can move in and sets minimal goals of what a potential resident should accomplish before joining the community, for example, the requirement to attend

at least one community meeting and agreeing to all decisions made prior to joining<sup>7</sup>. Although community guidelines were established ten years after the community was designed, the guidelines do not include an “eco” or communal enforcement mechanism as there is with the legal and financial obligations. There are no checks and balances for households who do not recycle, compost, or fully participate in the mission of the community. This is significant because not all residents recycle or joined the community with the intention of being committed to environmental preservation. The community works hard at accepting people where they are along the environmental and community spectrum. However, implicit forms of social control exist. For example, some residents felt excluded neighborhood parties or ignored during group conversation. Other subtle ways of imposing social control occurred through gossip and indirect referencing such as complaining about a neighbor’s untidy yard, or complaining about the behavior of a resident’s child.

These three experimental characteristics and the flexible ecological guidelines were not always clear to all participants, especially at the beginning of the project when ideas of how the community would evolve were still being planned. These points were significant in defining how the neighborhood would function both socially and environmentally. It tries to balance creating a cooperatively functioning neighborhood, while providing space for personal choice and privacy of a typical neighborhood, but with the option of working as a group on projects of one’s choosing. The same protections that were designed to allow the group to prosper and be viable also prevent it from requiring ecological and

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<sup>7</sup> This requirement has changed since my research ended in 2002. The new requirement is for potential residents to spend at least five nights in the community.

social standards. The ideological diversity and flexibility of the community and its mission is what makes the community acceptable to many residents and thus able to maintain itself. The balance between being green and being a community requires compromises that not all participants agreed with; those who disagreed were often encouraged to move out.

According to many residents I spoke with, it is not easy being an environmental community. Some residents felt that EVI merely represented an example of the many struggles and tough choices middle-class families in the U.S. are facing around the environment and community. They felt that the community exemplifies the challenges of balancing personal desires and larger societal needs in a culture that emphasizes individualism and consumerism.

### 3.3 “It’s not Easy Being Green”: FROG on Being Green

I could summarize it as it’s not easy being green. You... don’t know if your lifestyle is really sustainable, or if you can improve it to make it more sustainable, and is there any point in doing that when everybody else in the society around us is doing something else (Jeff).

And that’s not to say, ‘well you could walk to the mailbox’, well, of course you can, but... it shouldn’t take 40 minutes every day to get your mail. You know, and the papers come there, too, so it’s like... ahmmm... you know, if it weren’t for that, I might not even need a car here (PJ).

Identifying the EVI project as an environmental experiment begs the questions of what makes ecovillage eco and what makes it a village? What makes EVI eco and a village is

different depending on whom one talks to and how one defines eco and village. In general, residents in FROG felt that the design of the community, from the arrangement of homes, the large Common House, and the land are conducive to sharing resources and meeting neighbors. The land where 30 houses are built is small and it allows most of the EVI land to be left undeveloped for outdoor recreation. The FROG homes are built small with small kitchens and generally do not have personal laundry facilities. The Common House, a large communal space, contains several energy-efficient washers and dryers, and provides easy access to a clothesline<sup>8</sup>. The Common House also has a large kitchen designed to accommodate preparing meals for eighty or more people, and a recreation space for yoga, meditative, and rainy day play. Related to the design of the homes, the community is structured to allow residents to “check-in” on each other, and through observation and participation, residents are surrounded by subtle pressures to recycle, compost, re-use, drive less, and participate in activities that are defined as green.

Most importantly, what makes ecovillage green are specific features that are designed to conserve energy. The new homes were built to specifically limit the amount of space they occupied, to reduce their ecological footprint. Small homes require less energy to heat and cool. According to the architect-design team, the houses are oriented to maximize passive solar heat and retention. Energy-conserving features are easily accessible. There was no need to search for a place to recycle batteries or Styrofoam. An

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<sup>8</sup> Some residents felt awkward when they did not hang dry their clothes, while others refused to be pressured not to have the soft, fluffy quality of machine-dried clothing. Another resident felt the Common House laundry was not that special, since she knew that many people in the country used Laundromats; she was bothered that FROG made having shared laundry a special and unique feature of the community.

outdoor team manages the compost with someone who takes the needed time to make sure it is done correctly. Finally residents purchase 'green' commodities. There were three hydrogen-gas hybrid cars, several bicycles, and extensive use of energy-efficient light bulbs, detergent, and organic food consumption. Residents attempt to consume locally grown, healthy, and organic products. This is made possible by the organic CSA located a short walk from the FROG.

It is not easy being green but many residents try hard to make choices that do not cause further harm to the environment.

I also think it is great to save the earth, but as long as I don't have to give up my dishwashers, my washing machine, my disposal, my air-conditioner, the theory of saving the earth is great. But I have missed all of these creature comforts. I wish I had a washing machine I certainly wish I had a dishwasher and I wish I had a washing machine in house. It is like a Laundromat going to the Common House and I wish I had AC on those hot days in the summer<sup>9</sup>. But I do everything the way I'm supposed to here so and it is good, great exercise. I probably wouldn't walk around the corner if I were in a regular house, where as here I am hauling trash, hauling laundry and that is very healthy. And I feel good, I'm not against it is just that I had to do it kicking and screaming (Lisa).

The environmental aspects in Ecovillage result from a host of factors, including personal choice, attitude, commitment to the environment, and personal financial resources available. Many residents commented that living in EVI made them conscientious of their environmental impact and the community gave them the resources they needed to reduce their impact on the environment.

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<sup>9</sup> Soon after I left the community, some residents installed air conditioners in their homes.

An example of an effort to reduce environmental impact and consumption in the community is in the significance of solar panels in the two neighborhoods. The FROG opted against installing solar panels, because the price of the houses continued to increase beyond the capacity of the group members to pay. The houses were, however, designed to accommodate solar panels in the future. The homes in the first neighborhood were designed to be small and take full advantage of passive solar energy. On the other hand, the homes in the SONG, considered to be more “green” than the FROG homes, are in general larger, taller, and more expensive. The homes at the same time are “greener” with solar panels, made of locally grown woods, chemical free paints, and some with composting toilets. This paradox, of larger homes with solar panels and smaller homes with passive solar, can be a significant indicator of what it means to be “green” in the United States in the 21st century. Specifically, it points to the fact that creating a green community is an expensive endeavor (Fotopoulos 2000; Trainer 2000).

Ecovillage and its neighborhoods are not unique in this trend to identify the consumption of ‘green’ commodities as an act of environmentalism. Yet, purchasing products that are clean, green and good for the environment is not, and cannot be, the only solution to the current environmental crisis. I argue in the chapters that follow that the current environmental crisis has been caused to a large extent by over-consumption, especially in Western countries and by the wealthy in non-Western countries, whether it is for “good” or “bad” or “green” commodities. The drive towards green consumption has resulted in little more than a green washing of fundamental environmental problems— a lifestyle of

consumption that the earth can no longer sustain, even for the few in the world who are able to afford such a lifestyle (Athanasiou 1996).



## **CHAPTER FOUR: Case Study: Ecovillage at Ithaca**

### 4.0 Introduction

Building ecovillages, rather than fighting against capitalism, is the most sensible thing to do here and now in order to maximize our long term contribution to the transition from consumer society to a sustainable society (Trainer 2000:281).

[The first goal should be] beyond upper class white ghetto – diverse class and people. The second is that we're really doing something for the planet (Jody).

It is hardly questionable that the increasing number of suburban developments in the United States is causing long-lasting environmental damage. Suburban sprawl is often associated with white flight, the movement of white families out of communities where non-white families have begun to move in (see for example Bullard, et al. 2000; Gregory 1998). Families moving to the suburbs can afford to build new houses and are doing so in large numbers, cutting down trees, bulldozing over open farmland, building new roads, decreasing dependence on public transportation, constructing new schools, and ultimately taking valuable resources out of the city and into smaller, often exclusive suburban developments. These new suburbs are responding to a growing desire for some families

to feel safe, send their children to specific schools, and have access to green space, among other concerns. The desire to own land and the freedom to move into the outskirts of town is not a new phenomenon in the U.S., but its environmental and social impact are becoming more apparent as city centers become more desolate and dependence on the private automobile becomes more widespread (Jackson 1985).

Ecovillage at Ithaca (EVI) suggests an alternative to the typical suburban development that puts one house on one acre with little emphasis on the preservation of open space. It suggests that the opportunities to plan, design, and create a neighborhood that rethinks the way we view and develop new communities will lead to a more sustainable environment and community (Trainer 2000). EVI offers a green alternative to the rapidly growing suburban developments that consume open space and destroy farmlands.

Ironically, like other contradictions, tensions, and negotiations that exist in the EVI project, the choice of building on former farmland is not intended to challenge suburban sprawl or respond to the social and environmental consequences of white flight, rather, the community attempts to create a model which conserves the open spaces of suburbs and reserves them for private usage. More specifically, it attempts to create a model for middle-class families to live outside the city and remain connected to nature; to benefit from such urban features as pedestrian-friendly walkways, community buildings in the form of Common Houses, community activities such as celebrating significant life events, and to reinvigorate participatory democracy. EVI attempts to model how residents can fully participate in the design, building and functioning of their community. By using consensus to make community decisions and mediation to resolve conflicts,

EVI endeavors to empower residents with the ability to determine how their community operates, which many believe is the key to eliminating environmental and social degradation.

This chapter outlines the methods I used to gather data on the development of the EVI and document its everyday life. The chapter also presents a brief definition, description, and analysis of the way the various components of the EVI project fit and work together. At the end of the chapter I briefly discuss some perspectives on race and diversity in the community and I also describe the significance of my position as ethnographic researcher in the project.

The EVI project is complex. It involves various levels of participation from individual family members who moved into the first neighborhood, to undergraduate students at the local college and university whose research into soil types and architecture aided the project early in the planning process. I focus on one part of the EVI project and by no means attempt to capture the entire process. Specifically, I emphasize the relationship between the non-profit (EVI, Inc.) and the resident groups. Within that relationship, I focus on the daily lives of residents who make up the community. I chose to focus on the residential component of the project because it is the most appropriate location to address questions of consumption and U.S. environmentalism. The daily life of the residents is the dominant force behind the community and the primary location for negotiating environmental choices and community decisions. For example, while the educational component of EVI, Inc. is significant, it is not as well developed as the neighborhoods,

which were the priority of the board during the first decade of the project. I was less interested in the future development of the community and more intrigued by the ways residents work and live together to create a new model of sustainable living.

Data for this section of the dissertation is a compilation of archived material and miscellaneous notes from early meetings and planning sessions, which were given to me by current and former residents. Extensive data came from informal interviews with the planners, architects, residents, and former EVI participants. Many residents were happy and excited about being part of the EVI project. Some participants were critical of the process in which the community was built; some were suspicious of the intentions to create a middle-class haven, while others were angry about being excluded due to financial limitations. Overall, the complexity and intricacy of the project, such as the extensive land debt, makes the history of EVI an interesting and challenging story. Without question, and despite differing perspectives on the process of creating EVI, all participants, happy and unhappy, see the EVI project as an experiment, a response to the realization that the way communities are being built today is not sustainable and that an alternative desperately needs to be sought. EVI is an attempt not only to call our attention to the dangers of sprawl, but also to offer an alternative in theory and in practice. Ecovillage at Ithaca is such an attempt to put theory into practice by being a model of what a sustainable community might resemble. The next section describes how I gathered data that demonstrates this effort.

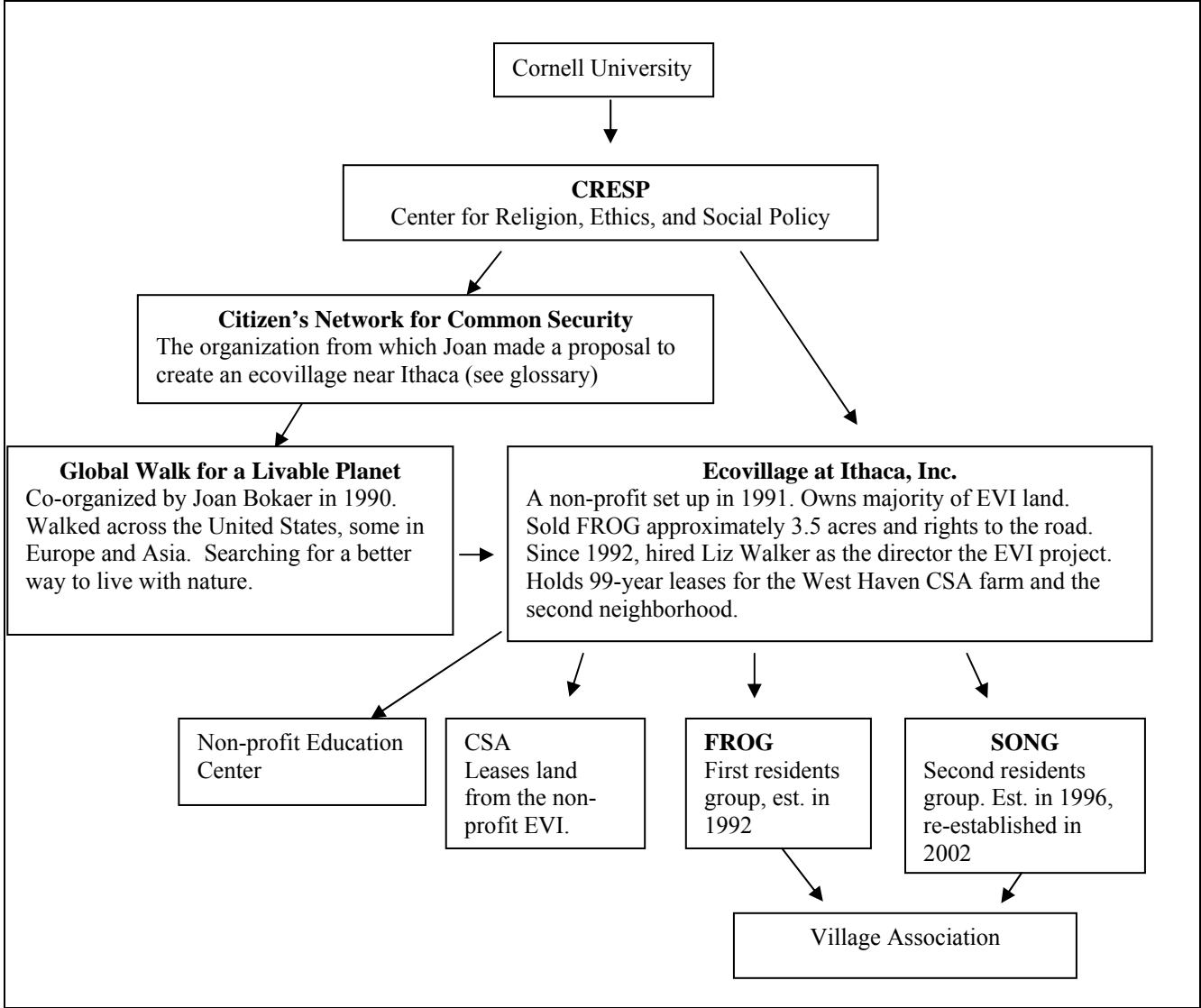


Figure 1: Diagram of ecovillage structure

4.1 Methodology

“What we are doing is reinventing the tribe” (Elena).

I came to study Ecovillage at Ithaca in part to protest the assumption that as a Zimbabwean national studying anthropology in the United States, I would study at

home—my home. While there is nothing wrong with Zimbabweans doing anthropology fieldwork in Zimbabwe (something we desperately need), like most of my U.S. colleagues, I was interested in understanding something different than my culture. Why are so-called native anthropologists expected to study their own community? I propose that we think critically about the trend of encouraging western students to study the “other” outside of the U.S. context and at the same time, encourage non-western and non-white students to stay within their own community. Despite anthropology critically examining the “other”, there it is still expected that students in anthropology engage in a rite of passage by studying an exotic other. What is defined as exotic has explicitly been abandoned, yet, even when anthropologists are studying at home, we are still engaged in populations that occupy the “exotic” margins of mainstream U.S. American society: homelessness, prostitution, drug addicts, and social gangs. We are still reluctant to explore what is by default, the “norm”—white, middle-class, heterosexual communities. It is ironically, then that non-U.S. students, who are studying in the United States are encouraged to return to their home countries to collect field data. Likewise, African American students in anthropology are expected to study within their own ethnic “community” in the U.S. This double standard was painfully obvious when I attempted to apply for a Minority Dissertation Fellowship from the American Anthropological Association (AAA); at the time<sup>10</sup>, only projects that impacted minority groups would be funded, thus in effect, constraining minority students (who wanted support from the AAA) would have to work within their own community, or at least one that was equally marginalized as they were. Why are non-white, non-U.S. students discouraged from

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<sup>10</sup> The stated guidelines that minority scholars had to work on projects that affect minority groups has since been deleted.

studying communities outside their own experience, as other students are encouraged to do? Laura Nader's (1969) work on "studying up" is inspiring to many young anthropologists. I see EVI as an opportunity to explore a different side of sustainability and U.S. environmentalism. A friend from the Ithaca community knew I was looking for such a research site and over her delicious lamb biryani we discussed the EVI project. I decided to apply anthropological research to this new community forming up on the hill.

My interest in ecovillage was encouraged and intrigued by three interconnected sites of inquiry: first, the community is an upper middle-class white community, a group seldom explored in anthropology. Secondly, the community is attempting to create a village, as idealized from traditional work in anthropology including ideas such as kinship and the tribe. If the community was using anthropological work in non-Western countries to create a "village" in the U.S., perhaps a study of Ecovillage would reveal how anthropology has contributed to romanticizing non-Western peoples. Thirdly, the physical location apart from the larger Ithaca community served as a natural physical and social boundary. Initially this somewhat bounded community represented a manageable group; those who lived within the boundary would define the limits of my research. It also reminded me of a gated community (a green gated community) without the gates and fences. I was interested in giving both those living inside the community and outside, a glimpse of what was happening within this small enclave in Ithaca. However, as I began to meet residents, former residents, and other non-resident participants in the project—individuals who approached me and asked to tell me their story—it became clear that I would need to extend the community boundaries through time and space.

Initially, I intended to focus my research on the first neighborhood and the daily practices of residents within the village. This idea changed quickly as I became familiar with the multiple competing agents of the project and the various components that contributed to both creating a sense of community and working to become an ecological model of neighborhood development. During the ten years that it took to build the FROG, many participants came and went; approximately half of the neighborhood was not part of the original planning group when I began my research in the summer of 2001. The community attracted families and individuals with a diverse set of ideas that would need to work together to achieve the ambitious goal set forth in the EVI mission. For many residents, the ecovillage concept and the co-housing model it is based on were unfamiliar until they joined the community. I was interested in describing the community by extensive participant observation, garnering in-depth interviews, and collecting life histories. In the end, I only conducted three life histories due to what some participants said was a lack of time to talk extensively about their life. The longer I stayed in the community, the more comfortable informants were with me and the more my presence represented normalcy. I felt that the less exotic my role as anthropologist became, the less time some residents wanted to engage with me on a professional basis. That is, while some residents said they did not have time for an interview, they definitely had time to go for non-interview walks and talk with me about neighborhood and non-neighborhood issues. Occasionally those non-interview walks would naturally evolve into interviews and with verbal permission I would bring out my cassette recorder. This method



however was not conducive for gathering life histories because of the haphazard directions the conversations took.

In the process of gleaning an understanding of the community, I wanted to give something back to the residents. In addition to the variety of activities I engaged in during the course of participating in the daily life of the community, this dissertation is meant to give useful insight into the community that I hope will encourage residents, and the broader audience, to continue to pursue ways to simplify their lifestyle and become more critical of middle-class community development. As a resource into the struggles of individuals and the community, I hope residents who read this are motivated to pursue an even deeper dialogue on how to improve our communities and our environments.

#### 4.1.1 Participant Observation<sup>11</sup>

I moved into the home of one of the first EVI residents in May of 2001 and immediately attended a community dinner in the Common House where I was introduced as the village anthropologist. I joined the cook-team<sup>12</sup> as a way to informally meet residents. I

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<sup>11</sup> During my fieldwork in EVI, the first of five planned neighborhoods had been completed. While residents of the first neighborhood had lived in their homes for approximately five years, the second neighborhood was being developed and constructed. Thus I had the opportunity to witness not only life in a co-housing neighborhood, but I also observed the creation of a co-housing community from the early stages of recruitment, community discussion and design, to finally helping the residents in the second neighborhood move in. Although I attempt to include as many experiences from both the first and second neighborhoods, the majority of my data comes from residents in the first neighborhood which was already well established when I arrived in the field in the summer of 2001 and began living a different, environmentally friendly lifestyle.

<sup>12</sup> The Cook team is one of five official work teams that is recognized by the community. The other work teams include: outdoor, maintenance, dish washing, and the finance team. While almost everyone (I notice

attended a variety of meetings including neighborhood FROG meetings, EVI Inc., board meetings, various work-team meetings, SONG meetings, the Village Association, and a number of small committee meetings such as the walkways improvement committee, sauna and Common House sharing committee. My attendance at the meetings was to observe how the community functions in such occasions as the pre- and post-meeting rituals, how consensus is achieved, and to observe who from the community participates in the decision making process. I also used the meetings as a way to experience an important component of EVI life and as a means to get to know residents.<sup>13</sup> During these various meetings I took scratch notes (Sanjak) on the meeting agenda, but also on how people acted; that is, who said what and how the community responded to issues that were raised. I also identified follow-up questions to be posed during a later interview with an individual.

As part of my participant observation I also worked on the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm. I harvested vegetables, prepared produce for market—polishing red peppers and washing spinach—and helped with miscellaneous projects when volunteers were solicited. I provided childcare when it was more important that a parent participate in a meeting than for me to observe it (sometimes the parent only wanted to stay until consensus was reached, then return to play with their children while I returned

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4 adults who did not work on an official work team, although two of those adults did other things to help the community) does the required 2-4 hours per week, there is no penalty for not participating. Some residents proposed hiring neighbors to do their share of the required community work.

<sup>13</sup> Most meetings begin with personal sharing, an opportunity for residents to talk about how their day is going, what they have on their mind, etc. A resident explained that starting a meeting with personal sharing allows other meeting participants to have a sense of what kind of factors might influence their neighbors' composure at the meeting. Not everyone likes personal sharing and some of those residents attend meetings late as a way to deliberately avoid that part of the meeting.

to the meeting), and I conducted background research for various community projects. Occasionally, I substituted for a resident who was unable to do their weekly work-team responsibility. I helped organize the tenth anniversary celebration and served as an occasional community mediator.<sup>14</sup> During the planning and building of the SONG, I attended town board meetings and hearings in the city of Ithaca. As the SONG was beginning to take form, I attended the meetings of the planning, architecture review, alternative energy, Common House design, and finance committees, as well as the meetings of newly-forming Village Association that would serve as an umbrella organization for the FROG and SONG.

#### 4.1.2 Archival data

At the same time that I was participating in community meetings and various neighborhood activities, I attempted to glean information on the history of the project by reading hundreds of pages of archived data. This data was often unorganized and amorphous. I volunteered to archive some of this data including the meeting minutes of the community. Although the recorded history was abundant, it contained holes that proved hard to fill. These holes resulted in more unanswered questions than useful information. Specifically, financial details such as who was paid and where funds originated were difficult to trace. I found it especially difficult to garner information on how the neighborhoods and the non-profit paid specific individuals in the community as

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<sup>14</sup> As a trained mediator at the Community Dispute Resolution Center (CDRC), I occasionally filled in when one of the regular mediation partners was absent.

well as how decisions were made. These questions will, unfortunately, remain unanswered in this dissertation.

#### 4.1.3 Interviews

My efforts to help organize EVI history and my attendance and engagements in a variety of meetings and activities facilitated the interview process that began in June 2001. Through snowball sampling I was referred to various residents and former residents, most of whom were eager to talk to me about their positive and negative experiences. Some participants explicitly wanted to tell me of their disappointments and bitterness towards the project. Many informants wanted to be a “fly on the wall” during my interviews with their neighbors, hoping to get a glimpse of what other community members thought, but did not discuss openly in public, at community meetings for example. Others felt alone in their concern and wanted to know if they were the only ones. Frequently informants wanted to know what I thought of the community. This was surprisingly complicated to answer; by mid-June my comfort level in the community was increasing, I had fallen in love with the place and the people. I could see why it was attractive to families as well as singles. But, at the same time, I was skeptical and questioning. I needed more time, and as I later discovered, distance. I tried to answer these questions as honestly and openly as I could.

I began the interview process with my immediate neighbors, and as other residents saw me interviewing, they asked to be included in my research. The succession of the interviews was random and I made an effort to interview as many community members as were willing to talk with me. Participants were enthusiastic to share their stories as well as curious about what others were saying. Before each interview I asked participants to sign an informed consent form. The interviews were primarily audio-recorded, although some were not, either because the informant preferred not to be recorded, or because I did not have the recorder with me at all times. I asked a variety of open-ended questions about the environment and the community, why they chose to move to EVI, what they saw as the larger mission, and what they found rewarding and challenging. The interviews themselves were opened-ended; they evolved over time and would resume after hours or days of interruptions, or they transpired randomly when an informant had something interesting they wanted to share with me. Open-ended questions also allowed residents to talk about the aspects of the ecovillage project that were important to them. When they did not know what to talk about, I posed my prepared questions. Residents often deviated from these and directed the conversation to what they wanted me to know about the project and about their daily life in the community.

The interviews took place in peoples' homes, in the Common House sitting room, on long morning hikes, while preparing a Common House meal, while relaxing by the pond, or at a restaurant or café in Ithaca. Because most residents were very busy with community and family obligations, the interviews were generally conducted while we did

something else together. They lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to over six hours in some cases, the average being two and a half hours. Informal group interviews occurred when neighbors or friends spontaneously sat together and talked about the community: I would ask if I could record the conversation, take out my recorder, and we would continue the conversation.

Nearly all of the people I interviewed lived in one of the EVI neighborhoods, with the majority living in the FROG. However, I also interviewed four households, or would-be residents, who left the project. I interviewed the two architects, two neighbors to the project, and three local community members. Altogether I gathered over 120 audio recordings on 90-minute cassettes of informal interviews, residents' stories, community meetings, informal discussion sessions, and ritual ceremonies.

I had not intended to focus on consumption and how it relates to environmentalism; these are topics that my participant observation and unstructured interview data revealed.

Residents frequently talked about the importance of being surrounded by nature not because they identified themselves as environmentalists, but because they liked nature.

They also talked about the community in terms of its contradictions and mentioned the difficulty of being a model when their own behavior did not reflect that model.

Participants who left talked about anger and deception while those who lived in the community described their struggle to negotiate and explain their daily practices of consumption in light of apparent contradictions of trying to live simply. In general, residents were happy with their decision to live in EVI and emphasized the positive

experiences of the community, most noticeably that they were living a less wasteful and less isolated lifestyle than they would have otherwise.

#### 4.2 Social and Physical Structure of Ecovillage at Ithaca

I propose that we build a demonstration ecological and cooperative village near Ithaca, N.Y. The Ecovillage will draw from and integrate the vast amount of work already done in the areas of appropriate technology, design, and social ecology while creating an experiment that will open up new ways of thinking and being.

Joan Bokaer, March 1991

Ecovillage at Ithaca is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the way communities are built, advocating that they be constructed in ways that enhance social interaction and protect the natural environment. Joan Bokaer founded the organization in 1991 after her return from what was called “A Global Walk” although Joan and most of the walkers only walked across the United States, from Los Angeles to New York<sup>15</sup>; the goal of the walk was to engage in a national dialogue about creating sustainable neighborhoods that did not result in suburban sprawl, but provided community and preserved the natural environment.

The end of the walk cumulated in finding a place to create an ideal ecological community that would define the way new neighborhoods would be developed. Ithaca was selected as the site for the first multi-neighborhood co-housing community; it would model sustainable agriculture, energy-efficient homes, and a built-in sense of community. The

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<sup>15</sup> I was only aware of one couple at EVI who went on to walk across Europe and Asia.

non-profit EVI was incorporated in January 1992 as part of the Center for Religion, Ethics and Social Policy (CRESP) an affiliate organization of Cornell University in order to facilitate the creation of the community. The mission of EVI, Inc. is to demonstrate sustainability through education, outreach, affordable housing, and the creation of a model village of 500+ residents. This model would illustrate how families can live sustainably and comfortably through integrating clustered co-housing neighborhoods and at the same time preserving most of the land as open space.

The Ecovillage at Ithaca non-profit consists of four separate but interconnected components: first, the EVI Inc., a non-profit organization that purchased 176 acres of former farmland on West Hill in the town of Ithaca, New York and has an educational component to be a learning center; secondly, the non-profit would model sustainable neighborhoods in the form of the Ecovillage Cooperative Community (EVCC) which is nicknamed FROG—First Resident Group—and the Second Neighborhood Group (SONG); and the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Farm that is privately run as a business by an EVI-resident family. The farming family (a full-time farmer, and full-time school teacher) holds a 99-year lease from the non-profit. The Village Association (VA) was created as an umbrella organization for the two EVI neighborhoods (see appendix1?). These components are legally and financially independent, but they overlap by staff, membership,<sup>16</sup> and mission.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, every owner-resident of FROG and SONG is automatically a member of the VA, and every resident of FROG and SONG is automatically charged an annual membership to the EVI, Inc.



#### 4.2.1 EVI, Inc.

One of the first priorities of the non-profit EVI, Inc. is to be an education center with the FROG and SONG as the demonstration sustainable resident neighborhoods. The education center is intended to teach the general public about successful methods of preserving and conserving open space and ways to live in community. The original vision of the ecological village include a village center, an education center, organic farm, various orchards, meadows, and forested land, five separate neighborhoods, and a waste treatment center. An appointed board of directors manages the EVI non-profit. The chair of the board also sits on the board of CRESP. Decisions of the board are made through consensus. According to the EVI, Inc. bylaws, residents of the neighborhood must hold at least one-third of the board positions, but not more than two-thirds. Among other duties, the board currently hires a resident of FROG to direct the EVI Inc. project. Money to support this position is paid through mandatory fees from residents and solicited donations.

The EVI Inc. board and residents groups were and have remained separate legal entities for practical and financial reasons. For example, the non-profit owns the greater part of the land; the FROG owns the only road that leads into the community and the two and-a-half acres the community holds. To guarantee that the land that surrounds the neighborhoods is preserved and protected from development if the non-profit needs to sell it, the FROG encouraged and the non-profit adopted various easements on the land. These easements are one way the FROG influences what happens to the remaining non-

profit land. This separation of public land and privatized homes in the middle, places the EVI project in a complex web of private/public space.

The residents themselves are not always aware of their connection to the larger EVI project and especially the role of the neighborhoods in being a model for sustainable housing. This tension usually expressed itself when a community facility like the Common House is requested for an academic class that is hosted by a community resident. Some residents complained that while the instructor was paid to lead classes through the Common House, these instructors were not required to pay rental fees for the space. Also, other residents were unclear about who was paid to give tours and “how” they had agreed to be a model community. In addition to demonstrating sustainable neighborhoods, the non-profit plans to construct an education center, hostel, and village center to support the educational mission of the organization.

#### 4.2.2 FROG

The FROG is a privately owned community cooperation with a board of directors from among the resident neighbors. Residents of FROG buy shares<sup>17</sup> in exchange for a house and an optional carport; each household, based on its square footage, owns proportional shares of the Common House including the guestroom, recreation rooms, large kitchen,

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<sup>17</sup> Residents purchase shares of the community instead of a house per se because the community collectively owns the physical structure of the house. Residents own the inside but need to consult the community if they want to change any permanent features of the home or do renovations or install major changes such as dishwashers and air conditioners. I was aware of only a hand full of residents who did not consult the community when they made changes to their home.

and children's play areas. Individual community members own the private office spaces within the Common House.

The cooperative collectively owns the Common House, the outside of duplexes, and the 2.5 acres it purchased from the non-profit EVI, Inc. The FROG owns the long road that cuts across the non-profit land and leads into the neighborhood half a mile from the town route 79. The decision to build FROG in the middle, rather than near the road that provided public transportation was disappointing to some participants because it meant that residents would drive to pick up their mail and decide not to take the bus because there was no shelter and it was inconvenient to walk the half a mile in cold weather. Others argued that the space near the road was marshland and not geologically suitable for construction. The current location in the middle of the land also provided views and the sense of being immersed in nature.

In addition to purchasing home shares (a house) in FROG, residents pay a monthly maintenance fee based on the number of shares owned (approximately \$400 to \$600). The monthly fees pay for such things as the EVI, Inc. (miscellaneous costs, director's salary?), a savings account for home repairs<sup>18</sup> and Common House utilities. Because the community owns the outside of the houses, residents need to seek permission from neighbors to install anything that affects the structural integrity of the outside such as TV satellite dishes and solar panels. Although the neighborhood homes and energy centers are designed to accommodate solar panels, they have not been installed. However, when

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<sup>18</sup> Because the EVCC co-op owns the outside of the homes, it is also responsible for upkeep and maintenance.

tours of the neighborhood are conducted, the ability of the houses to accommodate solar panels is touted as an ecological feature. I often felt that explaining the reason there were no solar panels would point out the reality that solar panels are expensive, even for families who believe they are a good source for alternative energy.

The physical design of the homes brings neighbors together. Two adjacent sets of rows face each other, a North side and South facing side. The Northern homes have an additional back room attached to compensate for their limited view of nature and the countryside. According to the architects, there was “a lot of tension around views...and people needing to reconcile conflicting values, their own conflicting values. On one hand saying, we believe in tight spaces and facing each other and being in community, but damn it, I want my view.” Residents also struggled over home sizes: at first, during the planning stage the group preferred a 700 square foot house size, but in the end no one wanted to build the smaller home and the average size became 1300 square feet. Acknowledging that FROG still created a small footprint, one of the architects commented, “at the same time, the average new home in the United States is over 2200 square feet.”

The homes in FROG are oriented vertically; most houses have five separate living levels, with five sets of stairs. Although residents imagined growing old in the neighborhood, and thus contributing to the natural diversity of the new model community, they admit that the stairs that separate five levels per house will make the homes inaccessible to the elderly and people dependent on a wheelchair. The internal spaces are open and simple.

All the interior features of the FROG are the same: the countertops, the cabinets, the convection ovens and the built-in bookshelves. This was done to save money and maintain simplicity. Small changes were made by some residents to create more comfortable living than the simplicity model offered. For example, some households installed dishwashers, private laundry machines, and air conditioners, while others have gas stoves, fire places, and custom flooring and ceilings. Large south-facing windows allow maximum sunlight in the winter while wooden awnings are designed to grow vines that shade the homes in the summer months.

The windows facing into the community are large and the doors are glass; this design allows residents to stay visually connected to each other. Flowerbeds border the pedestrian walkway that runs through the two rows of houses; in two locations the path diverges creating a recreation space in the middle. One half of the neighborhood has a picnic table where adults gather for impromptu conversations and sometimes a light breakfast. The table is adjacent to a large sand box where children frequently gather to bury construction trucks and watch the grapes grow on the natural canopy above them. The other half of the neighborhood has a larger picnic table, a small vegetable garden, and a cherry tree on the island between their houses.

The FROG Common House is designed to be the center of attention. It was meant to bring people together, to be a place to hang out, read, cook, work and play. Most neighbors complain that it is seldom used. Residents prefer to stay in their houses or go downtown for an afternoon outing with friends rather than sit in the Common House. My

early attempts to meet people by sitting in the Common House were unsuccessful. Some of the residents who work from home, such as computer programmers and therapists, own the office spaces in the Common House. The availability of such office space is supposed to reduce the need to drive to work, and allow employees to stay connected to their families. Ironically, a computer programmer who works part-time and telecommutes to California decided to move his office downtown in order to be more connected to other people. Others, like a therapist who uses “Nature” as part of her sessions, is happy that she does not have to drive to town, an “eco-option” for her. Her clients however, have to drive to EVI. She feels good about bringing her clients to the open land. Echoing Lewis Mumford’s sentiment, she told me that part of the therapy is being in nature.

#### 4.2.3 SONG

The Second Neighborhood Group is also arranged as a cooperative co-housing community with its own board of directors from within the neighborhood. Unlike the FROG, the SONG leases for 99 years three and a half acres of land from the EVI, Inc. to build individually designed homes. While the FROG hired an architect team, the SONG hired what some complained were inexperienced designers and project managers. The design and management team was made up of two residents of FROG. As I explore later in this section, a culture of trust in the process prevented members, who otherwise would be critical and at least request résumés and references were they building outside of

ecovillage, from hiring a more qualified team. Although in interviews some residents were concerned about the doubling of housing costs in SONG, informants did not want to appear untrusting of their neighbors, therefore, no one was held accountable for what often put a financial strain on some families. While some families volunteered sweat-equity in the community, and the group paid other residents, this distinction was never clear and few households dared to raise these questions at meetings. Eventually the group hired a builder, and construction began on the homes. I feel it necessary to raise these points because residents raised the questions during our interviews and we engaged in long discussions about why it was hard to raise them in the community.

The physical design of the SONG neighborhood is noticeably dissimilar to the FROG and I suggest that this difference is due to the planning and construction process of the group. The SONG houses represent a diverse set of ideas about community and nature, and express personal taste for comfort and luxury. The homes also reflect more individualism, with less emphasis on the simplicity and community on which the FROG is based. The neighborhood has tall homes on the south-facing side and smaller houses located behind them on the northern side. Houses on the southside are built larger and for the most part, resemble typical suburban homes in that many have basements for recreation space, large kitchens and dining areas, guestrooms and office space, as well as individual laundry spaces. The co-housing model of the FROG takes these extra spaces and designs them into the Common House with the argument that they are used infrequently and therefore can be shared.

The SONG plans to eventually construct a Common House and other shared property, although many families designed their home with amenities normally reserved for the Common House such as a large kitchen, a basement, a guest room, and office spaces. Some families in SONG suggested that they not build a Common House because, outside of the three common meals a week, the large and expensive Common House in the FROG was seldom used, and because cost overruns were making the SONG expensive. During a few neighborhood meetings, some households objected to having a Common House, arguing that they preferred to have smaller shared dinners in individual homes. This opinion was often based on the acknowledgement from FROG residents that the Common House is seldom used. The decision not to prioritize a Common House was in part because the group was rushed to construct home and pay back the land debt. Some informants felt that the development team paid little attention to explaining co-housing (the FROG residents were all required to read McCamant and Durrett's co-housing book before joining), and little effort went into explaining the larger mission of EVI project. This lack of communication and understand was evident at village-wide meetings and in my random conversations with frustrated SONG families.

The planning process for the design and construction of SONG was not as well carried out as in the FROG. While the FROG spent years planning their neighborhood, most residents in SONG had spent less than six months as part of the group. Few new residents understood the co-housing concept or the ecovillage model of small footprints and shared resources. Many homes feature stylish trimmings and state of the art green technology such as composting toilets, solar panels, masonry stoves, and straw-bale



insulation. During the sunny months, some households will be able to sell electricity back to the city. A member of the SONG planning team commented that this neighborhood was a good model in EVI, while another member felt sad that given the choice, most households chose the maximum house size and thus decrease what some felt was an important green option: a small footprint and affordability. This experience supports the argument that improved green technology only increases consumption (Erickson 1997; Fotopoulos 2000).

The space between houses in SONG is designed for pedestrians. The large lawn creates a central location for children to play and adults to gather. The Common House is planned to be in the middle of the neighborhood instead of at the top. Unlike the FROG, who chose to put their playground away from the houses, there is a large playground for children to play in the middle of the neighborhood where parents at home or in the future Common House can keep watch. The houses, also built as duplexes, are not close together, giving families more privacy, in addition, and windows and doors are not collectively open to the community. During a SONG Architectural Review Committee meeting, a resident who was building a southside house argued that having a window that faced north, into the community, did not make ecological sense and that his house was designed to be energy-efficient.

#### 4.2.4 VA

The Village Association (VA) is another legal cooperative that consists of board members from both neighborhoods. It is designed to accommodate the sharing of resources between the two neighborhoods, for example, after the SONG incorporated, the VA assumed joint ownership of the road, the pond, and a small piece of land between the two neighborhoods. The VA functions as an umbrella group to facilitate the sharing and billing of common expenses as well as creating guidelines and bylaws for the two neighborhoods. Some residents of EVI Inc. find the VA to be bureaucratic and represent one more set of meetings to attend, while others argue that the VA will be the glue that holds together the originally envisioned five planned neighborhoods.

#### 4.2.5 CSA

An organic farm on the land is leased from EVI Inc. and is operated by a FROG household. The farm is organized as a community supported agriculture (CSA), where residents and members of the larger Ithaca community can purchase a summer vegetable “share” at the beginning of the season. A share consists of a quantity of fruits and vegetables that are harvested from the farm during share pick-up day. Throughout the summer, shareholders are able to pick up their ration of vegetables from the farm. The advantage of a CSA is that participants share the risks and benefits of farming during the season; if there is a good year participants pick up more vegetables, if the season is less

productive shareholders receive fewer vegetables. Participants are given the opportunity to pay \$300 cash for a share or work a total of 60 hours during the growing season.

The farm grows organic vegetables like kale, spinach, carrots, beets, potatoes, onions, leeks, peppers, eggplants and tomatoes. They grow herbs, flowers, and organic strawberries and raspberries. Towards the end of my research, organic apples were grown at a nearby farm.

The farm also serves as one of the educational components of the non-profit. For many residents the organic farm represents an ecological feature of the ecovillage project; though many families still purchase their groceries at the local chain grocery store. Nonetheless, many households are proud of the farm and the opportunity it presents for residents to feel connected to nature. Although the farm is privately owned, neighbors treat it as their own, and the farmers generously supply the community with occasional bushels of zucchinis and beets. During one of the farm's early summers, excess tomatoes about to be lost to the first winter frost were canned in the Common House by a group of residents. The canned tomatoes supplied the Common House meals with organic tomatoes for the winter. The farmers also rely on volunteer residents to help during busy times of the summer, or when one of the farmers is injured. During a season when deer were ravaging the vegetables, the farm obtained permission to shoot the deer; the meat was distributed to those who wanted it. Afterwards, a fundraiser was organized by a neighbor to raise money for a large fence.

## 4.3 Peoples and Cultures of Ecovillage

### 4.3.1 The People

The community (both FROG and SONG) is primarily white and upper-middle class though many residents refused to reveal their income for this project. I determined that most residents were upper-middle class from an internal survey of residents that was conducted during my stay in the community. Other forms of diversity are prevalent. There are lesbian and gay members; the ages of residents range from 80 years to newborn, Jewish and Christian festivals such as Hanukkah and Easter are celebrated, as well as summer solstice. Some home gardens are adorned with miniature Buddha statues. A variety of professionals live in the neighborhood ranging from lawyers, doctors, university professors, and primary and secondary schoolteachers, as well as full-time parents, writers, and computer programmers. There are also a few retired households, and at least one household where the adult was supported by her family and did not need to work.

Because many of the early participants from the global walk and the first planning stages of EVI envisioned a community that addressed concerns of class, social and environmental injustice, many households left the project when it became clear that affordability would no longer be a priority. These participants thought that the project would be an effort to change the way we think about real democracy, cooperation, power, and material needs. They wanted the project to be multicultural because that would make living there more holistic in the sense that all walks of life would be represented and

included. Having an ideal community where a mixture of ages, races, ethnic backgrounds, and abilities was desirable. This ideal was reflective of the national trend for multicultural programs that sprang up in university departments, business-training programs and in community centers during the early 1990s. Participants did not want Ecovillage to be an upper middle-class white community on a hill overlooking the urban center. Some potential residents were concerned about being perceived as a gated community, a model that also became fashionable in the 1990s in the U.S. and abroad (Caldeira 2000).

The demographics of the community impacted how the community functioned. For example, families where two adults had to work outside the home did not have as much discretionary time to attend meetings and participate in community functions as families where one person worked part-time. At the same time, residents who did not work, either because they were retired or were supported by their parents, were clear that they did not want to be expected to take care of their neighbor's children or do unequal community work just because they stayed home and did not have children. The demographic of work is perhaps the most significant factor to understand how the community functions. The three areas I focused on as spaces where community is created rely on the availability of flexible time, trust, rituals, and leisure. The next section describes how families rely on time to create a sense of community.

#### 4.3.2 The Community

Neighborhood Symbols: a place forming a circle around the central fountain where each neighborhood could contribute a statue, which symbolizes the essence of their presence in the village (for example, the Iroquois used various animals such as the bear and turtle as symbols for the different clans within the tribe). This circle of symbols would provide a garland of mascots, and symbolize the unique unity made from the diversity of each neighborhood (Ecovillage Planning Council).

Apart from the physical features of the neighborhood, a multitude of experiences and concepts were observed that exemplified ways that residents felt a sense of community.

Two prominent concepts include the prevalence of trust among neighbors and the practice of creating rituals.

Trust is a powerful motivation in EVI. In a variety of situations residents trust “the process” and believe in the goodwill of their neighbors and leaders such that few neighbors asked for qualifications, and indeed applications, when agreeing to hire a fellow neighbor for an important paid community job. The open-ended questions I posed during interviews often reflected my curiosity about hired positions and the payment of salaries, to which residents responded that they either had not thought about it or were not concerned with such issues. Often residents in SONG said they did not have time or energy to raise questions, or do the required work that would provide alternatives.

During two separate interviews informants were critical of my curious attitude. For example, I found it intriguing that few residents questioned how certain paid neighbors continued to be employed by the community, or that the community failed to monitor obvious conflicts of interest that often involved large sums of money. Many residents

were unaware of where their monthly fees to the neighborhood were deposited and how the money was used. When I asked about this silence over money management, informants either declined to answer, or felt that those who were paid worked hard and they did not want to criticism them or appear suspicious of their neighbors.

Extensive observation reveals that most residents shied away from doubting and questioning decisions made by the community. A few people I interviewed, however, were willing to share their thoughts, but only unofficially. When sensitive issues that related directly to criticizing or pointing out a neighbor's shortcomings, informants asked me to stop recording. With the recorder turned off and my note book set aside, informants would continue to tell me, in a hushed secretive tone, of things that were left unsaid. When asked why they were hesitant to speak openly about these conflicts and tensions, these informants confessed that there was an unspoken rule against it and that they did not want to either hurt their neighbor's feelings or be ostracized from the community. Ironically, although residents often felt they were alone in this opinion, several of their neighbors shared similar sentiments, but almost always off the record. This observation counters the claim that the community fosters openness and participatory democracy because residents often felt hesitant to voice their opinions or question the status quo.

Another example of the lack of public objection and trusting "the process" occurred during the development process of the SONG. Initially the FROG residents who offered to develop the construction process refused to do so, stating that they did not feel

qualified. Later, however, they came back with a proposal that was readily accepted by the SONG, despite the lack of qualifications and experience to be development managers. At a meeting soon after the proposal was accepted, a pay increase was requested and granted with little resistance. As a group, the community supported their neighbors; yet during interviews individuals voiced concerns that they felt isolated in their discomfort, but admitted that perhaps they needed to have more trust in their neighbors and trust in the ability of the group to make wise decisions. I often heard that the wisdom of the group is greater than that of an individual, or that the sum of the whole is greater than any of its parts. However, a few prospective members dropped out of the group because they did not like the unspoken inability to voice concerns about neighbors.

A second observable pattern in the community that was an integral part of creating a sense of community was the prevalence of rituals. Several events, from birthing to birthday parties, and job transitions to seasonal changes, are celebrated through rituals. A common ritual I observed occurs during community meetings. Each meeting in the community—FROG, SONG, Board, or VA—often begins with some form of personal sharing. The most common and simplest form of personal sharing is by passing a “talking” stick. Hilda, an enthusiastic member of the SONG and an avid supporter of the talking stick, maintains that the talking stick is a Native American tradition that allows the holder of the stick to speak while others in the circle listen.

*The neighborhood meeting is about to start. Two volunteer facilitators, who always seem to volunteer, begin reading the agenda: item one, personal sharing. A standard ritual in*



*FROG and more so in SONG, personal sharing is a chance for residents to talk about “where they are at” in life, in the day, wherever. Wherever more than three are gathered, there is personal sharing. It is a ritual that reinforces the communal effort to get to know each other. During personal sharing we say more than simply make an announcement; it is about sharing a part of our day or life that lets our neighbors know something special about us or something deeper and more private. A variety of topics are raised: confessed bisexuality, exhaustion with cranky children, dissatisfaction with a new job, excitement about the upcoming spring, anxiety about a medical exam, relationship breakups, etc. We nod and show non-verbal signs of understanding, compassion, and solidarity. When a neighbor takes a disproportionate amount of time and sounds whiny, we wait patiently as if our flexibility has been stretched. Awkwardly, but what most of us admit understandably, the openness and generosity of our listening and nodding seems artificial. Some are genuinely concerned and show signs of encouragement to the speaker, the rest of us are becoming impatient. Finally, one of the facilitators, in his position of power, announces the need to watch our time in order to complete the 3-hour meeting—a polite way to silence the speaker and move the talking stick along. The tension in the room is thick; it is hard to know what the community is all about. Should we give more time and really listen to each other’s lives or be satisfied with small sound bites of acceptable daily struggles? What about the meeting agenda? Why is personal sharing so necessary when we meet to talk about neighborhood business? But isn’t it important to know where each of us is “at” before we try to come to a consensus? Isn’t the fact that we care about each other what makes the community rich, special, and different than most neighborhoods?*

In a spontaneous informal interview, Otto, who is retired, tells me that he likes the meetings and the personal sharing; it is a great way to get to know neighbors. Amy, a busy woman who works at home, doesn't like personal sharing and refuses to attend the first part of meetings. She'd prefer to get down to business and not take time away from her already full schedule to listen to someone talk about their "issues." Another resident found the occasional crying and outbursts at meetings irritating: "these meetings should not be psychotherapy, they should just stick to the issues." Half way through my research I discovered that several residents practiced Harvey Jankins Re-evaluative Counseling (or co-counseling), a practice that encourages discharging emotional energy with a partner (Jackins 1983). A few other residents found the decision-making process undemocratic, arguing that consensus is the tyranny of the minority (see Nader).

The third way I observed how residents create a sense of community was through the use of leisure. Much of the data used in the analysis that follows came from my observations and conversations about leisure and personal growth. The emphasis on consumption of leisure is in contrast to the emphasis on the production of the community. That is, many residents are not actively engaged in producing an ecovillage on a daily basis; rather, they create community through consuming the spaces (walking trails, buildings, etc.) and objects (community meals, meetings, work-teams) that create community and connect them to nature. The weekly 5:50 am trip to the CSA I made with a neighbor to harvest vegetables on the farm on Saturday morning is an exception to the disconnection between creating an ecovillage and merely enjoying the built-in structures. An active resident and

I spent our Saturday mornings picking beets and washing spinach, which helped the farmers prepare for market, but also gave us a chance to get to know each other.

Leisure in EVI was described to me in ways that made the concept synonymous with creating community. A middle-aged resident of FROG described the land debt and its impact on the neighborhoods in terms of leisure.

One was the cost of the land debt has been crippling to people's leisure and to their creativity. And that is a big cloud that has drained energy daily, everyday of the project. There isn't a meeting that isn't overshadowed by how driven we are to build neighborhoods to pay off debts and to pay off our mortgages and whatever. I mean people just don't have very much leisure that makes it very hard to build an Ecovillage. So the cost of the land and the fact that it had to be borrowed to do, is devastating to the project (Christopher).

While only occasionally mentioned publicly, several residents admitted that they hire house cleaners to clean their home and gardeners to maintain their small yards. The women, who did not live in the community, drive up the hill to work; they can be glimpsed walking from one house to the next cleaning their usual houses. Occasionally, an email is sent out asking if other neighbors would like their house cleaned so the women can get more work when they come to the village.

According to archived documents, in the summer of 1993 several board members resigned because affordability was removed from the bylaws and it became clear that comfort and leisure would be priorities over affordability. This division represents what Harvey (1996a) describes as the separation between the environmental justice movement

and the “Big Ten” environmental groups such as the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth. In theory some residents want the connection to nature, but a very specific nature that is often manicured and maintained by someone else.

Members of an earlier board of EVI who represented environmental justice activists rejected the idea of working within the status quo to achieve their goal. They envisioned EVI as an attempt to radically change the social and political structure of community and environment. They disagreed with “broadly ‘bourgeois’ attempts at co-optation and absorption into a middle-class and professional-based resistance to that impeccable economic logic of environmental hazards that the circulation of capital defines” (Harvey 1996a:159). For these earlier participants and some current residents who struggle to raise these questions within the confines of the community, the ideas of living a middle-class lifestyle and fighting for the environment are thought of as antithetical. Yet, for others, Ecovillage demonstrates that a middle class lifestyle where the environment was actually enhanced is possible. As it was argued in the initial proposal of the Ecovillage at Ithaca: “even those who know there are solutions to the environmental crises we face tend to think they are going to be enormously costly, unimaginably difficult, and require extreme personal sacrifice” (Ithaca 1991:1).

Informants appreciated that ecovillage made recycling, composting, and sharing in the village easy and convenient. They also expressed gratitude for the surrounding land that the EVI Inc. board gives them exclusive access to use. These were the things that residents felt connected them to each other and to nature. Neighborhood places that

create a sense of community do not necessarily need to be produced by residents, these spaces are created by design. It is not necessary to be involved in the production of the CSA farm by working with the resident farmers; the community is designed to allow residents to consume the fruits of someone else's production, by purchasing a CSA share or simply buying a home in a community that comes with a CSA. I often worked on Saturday mornings on the farm and felt good about watching my food grow and talking to some of the farm workers, most of whom did not live in EVI. The next section describes my position in the research project.

#### 4.3.3 The Anthropologist

“I never thought of us as natives, but I guess we are” (Karin).

I consider myself an environmentalist and try to live a lifestyle that is both simple and politically engaged. I am an avid cyclist and use my bike primarily for transportation. I recycle neurotically, have composted for many years, and furnish my home with used furniture, some of which I picked up from the curb in my Westside Binghamton neighborhood. I find it easy to become overwhelmed with global environmental problems and I often feel, like many residents in EVI, that composting is an insignificant act; yet it is a small contribution and I believe that every little bit counts. I am an “outdoorsy” person and enjoy being in nature for picnics, hikes, and cross-country skiing. I try to consume less, would buy organic food if I could afford it, and prefer to support

small local businesses, although admit that this is not always financially possible. I now live in a city that allows me to walk, bike, and live without a car, although many residents in my community drive frequently. Like residents in EVI, I value community, knowing my neighbors, sharing lawn mowers and sharing meals. I seek a wide range of multinational friendships as part of what makes my life rich.

Although I have spent the last 15 years in the United States, I grew up on what might be described as a small family farm in Zimbabwe, just outside the city of Mutare. Before going to boarding school, my parents drove my siblings and me into town for work or school. I grew up in a modern home surrounded by beautiful tropical flower gardens in which my mother worked tirelessly. We, my mother mainly, grew most of our own food: staples like corn for mealie-meal, sweet potatoes, peanuts, squash and pumpkin, fresh vegetables and herbs. As children, my siblings and I spent many hours plowing with oxen, picking stones from the field, and husking maize. We had many fruit trees and often sold the excess mangos, bananas, papaya, guavas, passion fruit or citrus at a local market. My parents raised chickens, which we slaughtered on Sundays, ducks, and occasionally a few turkeys. On special holidays we slaughtered one of the many goats or sheep. We had two oxen and a cow, and during my childhood, a small calf we named “America” was born. I grew up with a few neighbors half a mile down the road from whom we occasionally borrowed butter, and with whom we carpooled, or shared heavy equipment. I felt safe and had a lot of opportunity to play in nature.

My grandmother and her family have much less. Mbuya lives in a rural village, without electricity, or running water, with a genuine composting toilet, and she works hard to produce the food she needs for survival. I can imagine her disbelief if I were to tell her that families in the U.S. spend up to \$4,000.00 to purchase a toilet that does not flush. After carrying water on my head from a well, I know the value and luxury of running water. I've also experienced the need to compost, not because it is trendy, but because it is necessary to grow food one can't buy at a local chain store. I know that living simply is not always a choice, but in many parts of the world, it is the result of inadequate resources such as decent shelter, food, and medical care.

In some ways, I am an outsider to a community like EVI. I planned to live in the community for only a brief period of time and had no intention of purchasing a home there. Although the developers of the SONG tried to convince me that I could afford to buy a house in the community, as a graduate student, I did not earn enough to afford to buy a home in the neighborhood. Except for an adopted child who moved out soon after I arrived, there were no other African Americans living in EVI. Just before I left, another adopted African American child became part of the SONG. I believe strongly in public access, public transportation, and public education, affordable housing, socialized medicine, and question the sustainability of capitalism. Yet I share the love of nature and have an appreciation for what participants in EVI are trying to create. My experience of, and belief, in combining nature and community are often conflicted and challenged in the same ways that residents of ecovillage are challenged.

I fell in love with EVI when I arrived and continued to enjoy living there. During my 15-month stay in ecovillage, my informants became my friends and I treasure those friendships still. Many residents asked what I felt about the community and if I would consider moving in. Occasionally an informant would tell me how important diversity was to her and that I would make living in EVI more diverse.

My race played a prominent role in my research simply because I offered the community the much desired diversity they sought. Rosalyn, a retired resident expressed her concern for diversity.

I was really happy when [an Asian male] moved here. At least we have a Chinese person. I was delighted when [an Asian female] moved here. But somehow or other we have not been able to attract a Spanish family, an Afro-American family, an Indian family...not Indian from India, but a Native American Indian family. Both of those [Asians] are in interracial marriages. ... So obviously they're saying it's safe. I would imagine that we could attract an Afro-American-white Caucasian couple if we could find one....

Rosalyn felt that non-white families did not move to the community because they felt it was not safe and because these families did not want to be diversity tokens. She felt strongly that the high cost of living was not a limiting factor to non-white families in the neighborhood.

Rosalyn: I can't even say [living in EVI presents] an economic barrier, because there are a lot of Afro-American professionals who can afford (Ecovillage), but they choose not to take it.

Tendai: A lot of people say that the reason we don't have more minorities is because the housing is too expensive.

Rosalyn: That's bullshit. Afro-American people, by and large, are not poor. There are a greater number of people among them that are poor. But



hey! They are my professors. They're my doctors, they're my lawyers, and they're my accountants. They can afford to live here. Easily. And the same goes for the Spanish and the Native American. They're the psychologists. They're the teachers. We have teachers here.

I did not verify that in fact Rosalyn's accountant, professors, and doctor were African American. Aside from adopted children, I met very few African American in EVI throughout my fieldwork. Occasionally in public presentations, my presence represented the African American diversity that many residents felt was missing and perhaps made them feel exclusive. I often resented what felt like tokenism and attempted to either remove myself from those instances (by making it clear that I was a resident researcher) or I made a note to raise the issue in my writing. One informant complained that "the community is not diverse enough, there are virtually no minorities here, except people's adopted children...I think there is plenty of diversity of religions from Jewish to Hindu to Buddhist to Christian, there is plenty of diversity. But not having blacks like you, not having equal access to this financially and in other ways is simply not fair" (Lucy).

Many residents mentored and encouraged me with my fieldwork. Several informants who either had PhDs or considered themselves intellectuals gave me tips and practical advice on which themes would be good topics to write about, how to finish the dissertation quickly, and where to publish articles about the community. At times I felt residents saw my work as a way to advertise the community to a broader audience and occasionally residents were apprehensive about how I would present the community. In other instances informants wanted me to tell their side of the EVI story. I tried to leave out the gossip, rumors, and sensational topics and focus on constructive data, both from

those within and without the project. I attempted to make it very clear at the beginning of each interview that my intention was to write a dissertation and to produce scholarly work from the data they gave me. I gained informed consent and assured each informant that I would do my best to keep their identity confidential. This dissertation represents only a small percentage of the data I collected. I have tried to be informative and critical in areas residents suggested and I felt would help the community realize their goals of ecological and community sustainability.

The majority of informants encouraged me to be critical; after all, they wanted an outsider's view of the neighborhoods and appreciated the extensive time I stayed in the community to try to understand how it really functioned, compared with other scholars who merely presented interview questions or visited only occasionally. They also appreciated the fact that I was giving back to the community through volunteering and working as a regular member.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Who's Green, Who's Not, Who Cares?

*Cecilia leans over the flat tire of her Subaru. Although there are plenty of people who'd be happy to help us mount the spare tire, we decide to do it ourselves. A place like Ecovillage inspires one to do things like crouch in fresh mud and work on your own car. We've decided to get on with the interview out here in the mud, in nature. Although retired from working as a schoolteacher, Cecilia is young, in her mid 50's and very busy. Our interview—lunch at a local café will hardly be enough time to catch up on the week's events and answer my questions. I begin, "So what makes you an environmentalist? I mean, how or what do you do to be 'eco'?"*

*"Ha!" She bursts out in a smile full of laughter.*

*Cecilia pauses, and then hesitates, still smiling. It's an abrupt, direct, and loaded question, one she has heard many times before.*

*"I recycle, there!" She throws back, smiling knowing she has nothing to lose.*

*The tire is mounted and we head across town to a café near the Cornell University campus. We've both had time to think: me about my complex question, and Cecilia about the challenge of responding to it. Cecilia identifies 5 things she does almost daily to be*

*good to the earth. First, she moved to ecovillage; she downsized. She could have easily built or bought a more luxurious home, but she chose to live in ecovillage. Secondly, she does recycle as much as she can; she makes an effort to give away her old clothes. Thirdly, she appreciates nature and tries to get outside and spend time in the environment. Fourth, she composts most of her food scraps. And lastly, she plans to buy a hybrid car when she replaces the Subaru. Feeling defensive, Cecilia changes the subject, she reminds me that she really moved to ecovillage for the “village” and not so much for the “eco.” After her recent divorce, she did not want to live alone without a community around her.*

## 5.0 Introduction

My point of reference in this chapter is environmentalism in the United States and how it has been transformed from the 1960s community activism (of which many ecovillage residents were once a part) to present-day private, green consumption. Specifically, I suggest that the “who cares” focus of conserving nature, and wilderness thinking has turned from being a community supported struggle to a personal journey satisfied with minimal, if effective in their own right, achievements, such as reducing home heating costs and composting. Instead of bringing community members into the streets to rally against large polluters, the current trend is to celebrate “who’s green” and create private communities that enjoy a small haven of land that residents can afford to purchase for their own benefit (although often said in the name of caring for the earth). I focus on the

fact that the current wave of environmentalism relies on consumption (through establishing easements and consuming organic products) as a way to protect and conserve the environment, such as in ecovillages. In this chapter I describe how the environment and nature are constructed, capitalized and consumed.

I analyze how residents who, at some level of consciousness, are concerned about the environment and are attempting to behave in ways that protect, conserve, and improve the viability of the planet. Environmentalism, as experienced by the majority of Ecovillage residents (white, middle class, Western) has occupied a wide spectrum of social and political views, resulting in what some have criticized as a failed movement (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004). New perspectives on how best to care for the environment have criticized this Western form of environmentalism (wilderness thinkers), for failing to address larger political, social, and economic forces outside of nature (Bullard 1994; Shiva 1993b). They reflect what I refer to as casual or part-time environmentalists, people who emphasize changing their personal behavior and lifestyle as a way to be a model of harmonious living with nature and each other through composting, recycling, and purchasing products deemed to be 'green' or good for the environment, essentially by what I will describe in Chapter Seven as consuming a green lifestyle. Thus, the deep and shallow ecology debate is a useful tool in understanding who's green, who's not, and who cares.

The goal of this chapter is to use anthropological fieldwork to try to understand the shift in environmentalist thinking and attempt to understand the broader social forces that are

influencing everyday practices of being green, or being concerned for the environment. Specifically, I attempt to address why despite wanting to live sustainably, casual environmentalists find it difficult to do so. Is it simply easier to buy green than to go without particular luxuries such as an extra guestrooms? Does our concern for the planet only apply to how our own lives are affected and not necessarily how the lives of others might be affected? Does being an environmentalist cost more time and money than we have or are willing to give up? If so, how should we expect to slow our current rate of resource depletion? In this chapter I attempt to demonstrate how consumption becomes a dominant factor for casual environmentalists and by so doing moves environmental activism away from the public spaces and common domain and into personal lives and private homes.

This chapter uses data collected through participant observation, interviews and data gathered from archived documents that were either stored in the EVI community office, or given to me by former and current residents. The chapter is intended to be a window into the complexity of US environmentalism, raise questions of its effectiveness, and perhaps suggest what needs to be done if we are to improve the general environment.

Consideration of global environmentalism has slowly begun to move further into the forefront of anthropology, with the establishment of the American Anthropological Association sections on Anthropology and Environment, and the increased numbers of anthropological courses that relate to environmentalism. Yet, much of this advancement seldom explores U.S. environmentalism. In response to available funding from

government and non-government agencies, universities established programs and departments that specialized on environmental issues (Little 1999). As a growing sub-discipline, environmental anthropology has focused its gaze on the political economy and political ecology of global and local processes that are changing the environment but mainly that are changing the way people and communities have interacted and depended on the environment (Brosius 1999). Nonetheless, ethnography is rarely used to explore the growing environmental or “green” trend that is sweeping across the United States, specifically, in upper-middle class white communities.

Environmentalism in the United States is increasingly defined by what and how much one consumes of products and spaces considered or defined as being green or good for the environment (James 1993). U.S. environmentalism has become fixated on the consumption and consumerism of everything from eco-friendly shampoo to eco-tourism. EVI is no exception; the community is proud of its green features and regularly displays them for national and international media teams. I often felt, as did some informants, that green commodities were status symbols, much like Veblen’s (1931) conspicuous consumption. The assumption these new “eco” products suggest is that by consuming eco-friendly commodities we can effect environmental change, and thus, those who consume green are making choices that actually improve the health of the planet. Yet this new greening of consumption is not without its contradictions and problems. Foster argues that

...an ecological movement that stands for the earth alone and ignores class and other social inequalities will succeed at best in displacing environmental problems, meanwhile, reinforcing the dominant power

relationships in global capitalism...an earth movement of this kind will therefore contribute little to the overall green goal of forming a sustainable relationship between human beings and nature (2002:104-105).

Foster continues that such an effort may have the opposite effect of creating a backlash against environmentalism. This opinion can be seen in the recent release of the essay “The Death of Environmentalism” (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004). One response to the well-circulated essay was a second essay, “The Soul of Environmentalism,” that argued that environmental was indeed alive and well in the environmental and social justice movements (Gelobter 2005). The subsequent debates around environmentalism and its life or death raise the question of the effectiveness of US environmentalism, especially how it relates to social and ecological inequalities, issues some residents feel are important.

### 5.1 Who’s Green?

According to social theorists, goods and practices are used to transmit to others a social identity, people define themselves through the messages they send to each other (Warde 1994). In EVI, the consumption of green commodities helps residents to identify who’s green. There are an increasing number of green commodities that help residents to identify themselves as such. Unlike the escape to the suburbs to establish an individual identity, residents use green objects to create a community identity, one that continues to recreate itself through the individual behaviors of residents. This behavior of residents in EVI echoes Featherstone’s (1991) analysis of the effort of individuals to express



themselves as both bohemian and conventional. This duality is also evident in the EVI project in general, where residents try to balance being an innovative green community, but not “a bunch of hippies” an informant described. I refer however to the role individual residents play in building individualized green identities in order to fulfill the community’s comprehensive green mission. Thus, while not every person in the community is “green”, those who do, help give the community its group green identity. But this fetish of consuming green is not unique to EVI, it rather it reflects broader trends in the U.S.

“Being green” is currently a primary means that identifies a personal and economic commitment to the environment in the United States. Despite evidence that the single most energy saving feature a household could do is insulate their home, it is a green action that is not visible and thus less appealing to someone who’s identity is connected to material objects (Shove and Warde 2002). The late twentieth century witnessed an increase in green products, or the greening of commodities, from oil companies to large mansions, to toilet paper and furniture. Everything has become green, or has come to mean that the objectives are good to the earth; this philosophy appears in mission statements and in advertisements, as organically grown, grass fed, sustainably harvested, fairly traded, or locally produced, to name just a few ways objects can be green (Adams 1990; Athanasiou 1996; James 1993). In common practice, the term “green” has become tantamount to the environment and nature and thus being green is synonymous with being related to nature in a way that is good for the environment. This green discourse is well established in mainstream culture, but also throughout academia. Fueled by political

and especially economic pursuits, being green has emerged as a concept that permeates all sectors of our community. Being green represents a plethora of ideas and interests, it is multifaceted and versatile, but has universally become synonymous with a concern for, or solution to, the destruction of nature and the environment.

In this section I answer the question of who's green by turning to the analysis of how people construct nature, specifically as it relates to how nature has become co-opted by various conflicting and competing actors, including global and local environmental activists, non-profit and for-profit organizations, businesses, politicians, and local community activists. I explore what it means to be green and how being green has failed to be a useful means to effect environmental change. I argue that some residents of Ecovillage give environmental value to green ideology despite being aware of the contradictions such values often have. Like the general public, residents use the green or "eco" discourse to claim that their lifestyle is making positive environmental change and encourage others, through their model, to strive for their lifestyle.

In ecovillage, one way the energy for being green is present has been through ideas of "raising the green bar"—encouraging environmentally friendly technology like solar panels. A resident argued that she did not feel bad about not sharing the community washing machine and purchasing her own, because her personal green washing machine was a very efficient and expensive European model that was more efficient than the ones in the Common House. This contradicted her appreciation for the "shared" commodities

at EVI. While some residents point to specific objects as being green, others point to broader issues such as preserving the open land and space for nature.

Another green effort that is expressed in the community is through the built and un-built environment. The effort to preserve land reveals an important tension: the design of homes that were built in the middle of the land in order to provide spectacular views for the residents. The priority for creating views resulted in locating the homes away from the main road, thus limiting the ability of residents to use public transportation or walk to get their mail on a daily basis. As a result, many informants confessed that they were less likely to consider using public transportation because it was inconvenient; in addition, some residents drove half a mile to the mailboxes (especially during the winter months). This tension between wanting great views at the cost of driving to pick up the mail points not just to a flawed way to create a sustainable community, but demonstrates conflicting objectives of the EVI project.

Being green has been expressed in a very successful marketing campaign, but it is also expressed in the discourse of sustainable development and the new environmentalism of the 1980s. In many ways, neither sustainable development nor being green has challenged the dominant thinking about nature and the environmental crisis, rather, as in the sustainable development case (see Chapter Two), being green has provided a new outlet in which to continue producing structures that were themselves active in creating the environmental problem to begin with (Adams 1990; Fischer and Hajer 1999; Smith 1996). This view is boldly demonstrated in the ecovillage project where the solution to

environmental degradation and community isolation is itself a suburb, requiring a car, with little emphasis on the very things the community attempts to model, for instance the lack of public transportation and the inaccessibility of the community to many local families who cannot afford the price of homes (as noted earlier, many residents moved to Ithaca from more expensive area). But, even more specifically, many residents in fact have little desire and interest in making the sacrifices that are necessary to live in harmony with the environment, further suggesting that the “green” or “eco” is merely a symbolic marker of class status (Baudrillard 1981; Turner 1967).

While being green has been aligned with positive environmental change, it bears little resemblance to environmentalism in the 1980s where the scientific “experts” constructed an environmentalism that needed scientific and economic management to reverse previous destructions. Thus being green has also been claimed for causes that seem to obviously contradict environmental protection, such as oil drilling and nuclear power (Gusterson 1996), in fact, some have argued that in this new environmentalism everyone is green (Athanasίου 1996; Smith 1996). The public acceptance of the greening of everything reflects both commercial interests but also personal desires to feel good about consuming other products and a lifestyle that would otherwise be environmentally questionable. As such, being green has aided in preserving the current and unsustainable capitalist trends such as over-consumption and waste. The mother in a family of two children was proud that she used cloth diapers instead of disposable ones. Jessica worked at home, raising her two children while her husband worked part time. Although she felt good using cloth diapers, which were better than disposable ones, she had the dirty

diapers picked-up, washed, and fresh ones delivered to her ecovillage home each week. This luxury of not having to wash one's own dirty diapers was celebrated as an ecological alternative to disposable ones. In fact, as new babies were born, neighbors got together to purchase the diaper service for other mothers, who also stayed home to raise their new-born child. Little attention was paid, however, to the fact that the diaper service spent considerable energy driving up and down the hill each week in order to pickup dirty diapers and deliver clean ones. One resident said she preferred the laundry service because some community members were not happy about dirty diapers being washed in the community laundry room. Another household used paper plates that were made from 100% recycled paper and argued that there was nothing wrong with using recycled paper, which could then be thrown in the compost. Such rationalizations are what I believe is driving the current new U.S. environmentalism; specifically that by simply changing terms and definitions, it is possible to continue a comfortable lifestyle, without the need to give up the conveniences of over-consumption (Fischer and Hajer 1999).

In ecovillage residents are constantly faced with defining nature and selecting what represents their concern for the environment and what does not. For example, during the spring a request was made over the community listserv that all cats be kept indoors in order to allow baby birds to nest. Some residents protested that their outdoor cats were in fact part of nature and it was just as natural for them to hunt. Others argued that cats had long been domesticated whereas the birds were not, and thus needed extra protection during their vulnerable first weeks. The following summer, however, some of the

residents who insisted on protecting the baby birds were active in discouraging wild Canadian geese from building a nest and laying eggs on the ecovillage pond, arguing that they wanted to enjoy the pond for swimming and that the geese left unpleasant poop on the beach. In this case, only a specific kind of nature was deemed protected. Smith (1996) argues that “designer nature” emphasizes one object as natural and not others is indicative of a concern for personal constructions of nature that are convenient and not so much about what is good for the environment or nature. Being green has in some cases whitewashed or “greenwashed” (Athanasίου 1996), the real concern for the environment. Being green has also clouded our ability to confront the root causes of environmental degradation such as unsustainable economic growth and over consumption.

Ecovillage has created the model of how middle and upper-middle class families in the United States can live a green lifestyle: comfortably sharing resources when it is easy and desirable, and at the same time, conserve resources in the environment (energy, land, etc.). Similar to the co-housing model that ecovillage adopts, Keulartz (1999) describes Danish *nature developments* as a form of cultural politics and argues that while it brings certain social groups together, it also has the effect of sidelining and excluding others. Ecovillage sets itself out as a village with an ecological purpose, thus implicitly bringing together people with similar interests towards community and nature. Yet at the same time it explicitly makes a distinction between a normal village or neighborhood and its separate community.

In the next section I explore who is not green, and how Ecovillage becomes self-absorbed in its own closed community such that it systematically is unable to focus on environmental efforts that address larger socio-political issues (Keulartz 1999). This self-absorption is in many ways unavoidable because of the physical design of the community. Despite one resident expressing disappointment that she did not know her non-EVI neighbors, with all the things there are to do in the neighborhood, she did not have much opportunity to meet other Ithacans. Residents are not exposed to daily concerns of people who do not share their class status, because the village is isolated from the larger public. Many residents are preoccupied with somewhat trivial details such as whether or not the long dirt road should be paved or not (raising the question of what is more “natural” and aesthetic versus convenient for mail delivery and snow plowing).

## 5.2 Who’s Not?

One of [my challenges] has to do with my dogs in the community. Not that people have been difficult for me it is just that I feel a sense of responsibility to the community to have my dogs; and a responsibility to the planets, you know I don't want my dogs out killing things on the land, but I don't know, maybe that's the natural order of things (Carolyn).

The question of what counts and does not count as being part of the environment or nature has been debated in a variety of contexts. Two divergent views have dominated the discussion on nature and the place of humans within it. On one side is a biocentric view, or what Arne Naess coined deep ecology (Naess 1988), that emphasizes the need to

defend nature. On the other side are social ecologists or shallow ecologists who argue for the need to include social and political justice in the environmental movement (Bookchin 1994). Both the deep ecology and social ecology movements can be categorized as radical ecology movements. They both advocate for proactive ecology change; deep ecologists arguing for nature to become the most important focus of human energy, at all costs (see for example Devall and Sessions 1985; Manes 1990), while social ecologists have argued for radical social and political transformation (Bookchin 1994).

Ecovillage oscillates between the deep ecology and social ecology debates, where some residents argue that invasive species should be removed, while others (mainly those who left) felt the community should demonstrate affordable housing. In general, U.S. environmentalism has been criticized for being grounded in deep ecology and thus ignoring social justice, power, and racism as priorities in the analysis of environmental degradation (Guha 1989; Sarkar 1999). Environmental justice groups have emerged as sharp critics of deep ecologists, arguing that efforts to put nature above human needs further disenfranchise those communities that are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards like toxic waste and chemical industries (Bullard 1990).

In Ecovillage, this issue was raised in early debates about the shape the Ecovillage project would take. On one side, some participants in the planning process tried to create an Ecovillage that was a social justice project. A former resident explained her surprise upon returning from the Global Walk across the U.S. that had attracted grassroots activists. The walk organizers claimed it was a search for a livable planet, why then



would the community be limited to upper middle class participants? On the other hand, some planners wanted the community to be a model for middle and upper middle class families whom, some argued, were responsible for creating the most environmental damage because they could afford to own large plots of lands and drive large vehicles. It was this population that needed to be convinced of a lifestyle that was both comfortable and eco-friendly. More recently, however, the Ecovillage debate on who is and is not green has revolved around whether a household should be allowed to burn wood in a masonry stove and if so, would it be more eco-friendly than using a gas furnace, especially when neighbors are impacted by air particles that result from burning wood.

In this section I describe how residents respond to different priorities in U.S. environmentalism, how they construct nature, and then how they try to apply the most appropriate means to conserve resources and improve the environment. I describe some of the ways that residents engage with the natural environment. Most residents openly embrace green technology as the solution to environmental degradation; it is through technology that the founders believed a comfortable lifestyle would be possible while improving the environment. This technocentric view lends strong support to eco-capitalism and green consumption, which section 5.3 describes in more detail. But first, there is a need to define nature, or at least explore how nature is constructed and defended.

### 5.2.1 Defining Nature

When I asked if an informant considered herself or himself to be an environmentalist, I would often receive a brief hesitation before an uneasy answer. Few residents want to identify themselves as environmentalists, some informants said they did not like using labels like environmentalist because they were divisive, but through discussions, these informants revealed that they felt they could not live up to their own expectations of how an environmentalist would behave. Residents in Ecovillage for the most part appreciate the land that Ecovillage is located on. A parent of two children mentioned that he would not have moved from Berkeley, California, to the community if ecovillage were located in the city; the open land was important to his vision of living in harmony with nature.

Most residents want to be surrounded by nature, and not the built environment. But, at the same time, some residents are critical of the tendency to romanticize nature as being pristine and without human influence. Although Naess is credited with deep ecology thinking, Dave Foreman, the founder of Earth First! is credited with bringing deep ecological ideas to the U.S. environmentalist discourse (Manes 1990). Earth First!ers have criticized anthropocentrism and civilization for the destruction of the environment. They argue for the protection of nature/the earth (Gaia) from human intervention. Deep ecologists and Earth First!ers advocate earth-centeredness (eco-centrism) by suggesting that nature needs protecting from a selfish and reckless human species. They further argue that the mainstream environmental movements failed to view nature outside of its utilitarian terms (Manes 1990). According to the 1992 U.N. Rio declaration on

environment and development, humans were placed at the center of sustainable development concerns and were the focus of agreement that they too are entitled to live in healthful environments (Tsing 2001).

Critics of deep ecology have been quick to point out writings by deep ecologists that belittle humans and exalt non-human nature (Bookchin 1994; Guha 1989). These critics suggest that the argument used by some radical environmentalists, that exploding global population is the cause of civil wars, poverty, disease, and general ecological degradation, is flawed (and racist) because it fails to consider the larger global history of Western domination and oppression (see for example Ehrlich 1968; Ellis 1996; Guha 2000).

Decisions in EVI about what is nature and what is not, reveal the tension between anthropocentric and ecocentric nature. As demonstrated in the cat and goose experience, only certain types of plants and animals are treated as natural in Ecovillage. In general, residents define objects that are not human-made as belonging to a category of “nature.” Specifically, while some residents are concerned about preserving and protecting one type of nature that is “wild” such as deer, open space with vegetation, and birds, other residents were actively trying to prevent undesirable “tame” forms of nature such as geese from laying eggs on the pond’s island, or passing guidelines that prevent house pets from being outside where they could potentially hunt and kill baby birds. A possible question is whether the cats and dogs should be allowed to eat the goslings (which might solve both problems)?

A self-identified deep ecologist explained why it was necessary to remove a non-native plant species from the ecovillage land, which he likened to an illegal immigrant that threatened to take over the land. Although he did notice that he, too, was not native to the land, he felt that humans had already colonized the land and thus needed to prevent its further degradation. This resident defined his environmental vision as “being re-inhabitants of the land as native peoples are all over the world. Living in a very active co-creative relationship with the land, not as guilt-filled intruders, but as skillful collaborators” (Christopher).

Gaiaism, the celebration and spirituality of nature, is another way nature is defined and constructed as a luxury that is void of dangers or disease. In this case, nature is defined and expressed through walking on the land, commemorating Earth Day, and creating rituals that acknowledge the bounty of Mother Nature. Some residents argue that they did not move to ecovillage because they had strong ecological convictions, but rather because they liked nature and the access to hiking trails and panoramic views. They were aware of the larger social concerns around polluted environments but choose to ignore those perspectives. A tension exists because of the different beliefs of what counts as nature. Despite the disconnection between the everyday experiences of residents working to compost correctly and the reality that some communities outside EVI are experiencing the effects of environmental racism, many residents are personally conflicted about what to do about social justice. The environmentalism of white, middle class U.S. America is often perceived as excluding social justice, yet my experience with residents in EVI is

that they are aware of the issues, but unable to find solutions and therefore, many choose to focus on manageable concerns such as sharing rides to town or mediating in the woods.

But not all residents of ecovillage are uninterested in social justice, or ignore this tension. One family works hard to raise social concerns on the listserv and through announcements of political meetings and events in the larger community. Others have tried to bring topics of importance to the table but have failed to garner enough support to make noticeable change. As I demonstrate later, efforts to create a carshare in the community were not fruitful during my research period, but several households decided to purchase the new Toyota Prius Hybrid and the SONG was determined to raise the green bar and install more solar panels and demonstrate more green technology.

### 5.2.2 Technocentrism: Solutions to the Ecological Crisis?

Gaianism lends itself to New Age mysticism, including paganism, and to the ecocentric bioethic, which calls for respect and reverence for nature's demands 'living lightly on the earth', and a deep sense of community involving people and non-human nature (Pepper 1993:37).

Pepper (1993) argues that eco-centrists such as deep ecologists and bio-regionalists, simply engage in misanthropy, that "although they claim that...they want social justice, they emphasize 'nature's interests—or the interests of indigenous peoples that they regard as closest to nature'" (246). Bioregionalism is a form of environmental activism that supports and pursues the sustainability of a bioregion usually defined by a watershed.

A bioregion can include plants, animals and people that are native and non-native to the region. Bioregionalists argue that these spaces are most sustainable when non-native, invasive plant and animal species are removed. An informant admitted that as a European descendant, he did not belong in the EVI bioregion, a Native American did. As a way to feel more connected to the land, some residents celebrate what they believe are Native American rituals. When explaining what EVI was creating, an informant proclaimed, “we are becoming native!” Another informant described the project as recreating the tribe. These connections to tribes and native peoples suggested a simpler way of life that included fewer commodities, less dependence on technological resources, and subsequently a truer, happier existence (It did not include any of the challenges and oppressions these communities experience). Residents strive to live a simple lifestyle, the way they perceive “native” and “tribal” communities to have lived, they mainly focus their efforts on recreating rituals, or describe walking on the land and eating food that was grown on the land. Residents also try to produce a minimal amount of waste by recycling several objects between them: from used clothing, books and magazines, to pieces of furniture and extra cars. They engage in discussions about their resource use and alternatives to chemical pollutants and non-renewable resources.

Yet, at the same time, some residents embrace technology as a means to create a comfortable village and thus as a practical solution to what Rebecca felt was the imminent environmental crisis. This attitude that alternative technology offers solutions to current and future environmental problems was expressed in a variety of settings: in monthly meetings, in small green-design committee meetings, and in random

conversations amongst neighbors. As part of the EVI mission to demonstrate harmonious and *comfortable living* with nature, the founders and early planners of the community emphasized that EVI would showcase appropriate and cutting-edge technology such as wind power, solar energy, and wastewater recycling.

Technology is commonly viewed as a realistic way of overcoming environmental degradation. Concurrently, the establishment of innovative technology to change the course of environmental and social change has spread to all sectors of our society; local energy companies offer rebates for solar panels and in some regions like California and New York individual households are able to sell their excess energy to power companies. In the FROG, green technology is primarily incorporated in the construction of well insulated homes and in the Common House. The tightly sealed buildings were designed to conserve energy, emit very few volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and leave a small footprint on the land. Most residents use energy-efficient appliances such as convection ovens and small refrigerators. The community itself makes use of innovative technology by designing spaces that provide optimal communication and interaction amongst neighbors. An informal email announcement system helps residents carpool.

The distribution and individualized nature of green technology in ecovillage suggests that “technocentrics envisage no radical alteration of social, economic, or political structure” (Pepper 1993:34), but rather, see the use of technology as a way of supporting alternative energy sources. One resident commented that “it feels good to know we use fewer resources than the average [U.S.] American.” Although over-consumption and the need

to simplify our lifestyle was often raised during community meetings the practice of reducing the number of commodities used is less exciting than the purchase and modeling of new innovative green products. For example, the purchase of a new hybrid in the neighborhood was often announced with enthusiasm as a sign of the community becoming greener. Concurrently, however, efforts to reduce commodities by sharing resources is challenging as demonstrated by the fact that one resident either drove her laundry to a local Laundromat downtown.

### 5.2.3 Eco-socialism?

For me the model that I'm interested in us being, I do not know that we are there yet, but we might be in the process, has to do with what I consider the cutting edge of human evolution. It has to do with learning. I think that on this planet with population the way it is, we are going to have to learn how to live more closely together without fighting, without killing each other. I think we have to change our chemistry. I think this [the ecovillage project] is a movement in that direction. I think there could be quite big ecological disasters that require us to rely on each other more and live closely together. Maybe some places will be uninhabitable and so it is going to happen in some way or another, so we have to change how we relate to each other... and that is how we are being a model, in our own little fledging way (Marianna).

Ecovillage presents itself as a model of how U.S. American communities can reshape themselves to be more in balance with the natural environment. At the same time, there is tension between what the mission espouses and how residents themselves carry out the goal of creating community in harmony with the environment. Where some residents see the community as simply a different way to live a comfortable lifestyle that has less impact on the environment, others see ecovillage as a proactive environmentalism. An



alternative to typical suburbia, the neighborhoods at ecovillage attempt to create spaces that engage residents in their community and at the same time are a supportive environment for families. In this effort, ecovillage has been successful. Overwhelmingly residents commented on how the community was a positive change from the one they had left.

As a project that would model sustainability and be replicated, the community has been less successful. Many residents have moved out of EVI because the tensions and contradictions were overbearing. Those for whom the experiment would be a model for city planners and environmental justice groups left out of frustration that it was becoming an upper middle-class white community. Thus the question of who cares about the environment and nature is answered by what that “environment” and “nature” are *and* are not. Recycling, composting, encouraging native plant and animal species, and growing healthy food are positive ways to improve the environment. However, the incorporation of the environment with community as supported by the market economy in the United States where being green can be described as a commodity fails to acknowledge the destructive and conflicted nature of a market economy that requires continuous growth to be sustainable. The Market thus provides the opportunity for casual environmentalists to create a perceived “sustainable” identity and believe that the green commodities they are purchasing are better than non-green options, thus creating a direction in which people can funnel their efforts to improve the environment. This idea is not non-trivial. Many residents (myself included) struggle to know the best way to make ecological and socially sustainable choices. What the market fails (intentionally) to do is point out the

environmental costs of over consumption. The next section explores how green commodities are marketed as solutions to environmental and social degradation.

### 5.3 Who Cares? Green Consumptions and Green Marketing

It's easy being green – Whole Food Market, 2005

Green consumption has become a popular means to express environmentalism in the United States. Many of the academic programs described earlier contain a focus on sustainable development and environmental health; in addition, a growing number of MBA and marketing programs are now offering sustainability studies. City fairs, conferences, and a handful of non-profit organizations are focusing on green marketing, green consumption and green building.

A growing alternative market has portrayed green consumption as the best way to achieve environmental change (Smith 1998b). The consumption of green products rightfully represents a healthier alternative to consuming pesticides and products laced with toxic chemicals. However, one of the major threats to the world's environment is the vast amount of material goods that are produced (often in non-Western countries) for the United States and European countries, whether they are organic or conventional (Shove and Warde 2002). The August 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa, was another opportunity for *overdeveloped* and

developing countries to assess their impact on the global environmental crisis, specifically, their use of resources through escalating consumption habits and the efforts to eradicate poverty. Those who are inflicting the most ecological, social, and political damage are ignoring global efforts to make rich countries consume fewer resources. Instead, businesses like The Nature Company sell “commodities [that] promise urban middle-class consumers a recuperative re-immersion in ‘nature’” (Smith 1996). These new efforts that emphasize green consumerism in market niches (and in academia) are the most recent elucidation of how to fix the already damaged environment. Rather than confronting the root causes of environmental and social degradation, according to Ross, “capitalism and its liberal political institutions appear to have achieved a leveraged buyout of environmentalism” (quoted in Smith 1996:43). Consumption of green commodities distracts from the core causes of degradation and thus makes finding a viable solution move further from the consciousness of U.S. society, including groups and communities that claim to work hard to improve the environment.

Prominent environmental groups such as the Sierra Club advocate that businesses need to become green by producing products that are good for the environment and thus encourage the consumption of more environmentally friendly products. Less emphasis is placed on the need to reduce our general consumption of goods, whether they are green or not. Consumers are encouraged through campaigns to buy products they feel good about, from companies that reflect their environmental values. By the late 1990s businesses responded to this growing market for ‘green’ commodities. The United States Department of Agriculture created standards for classifying fruits and vegetables as

organic, while other forms of business simply labeled their products as ‘green’ or ‘eco-friendly.’ Consumers reacted to these marketing techniques by accepting the validity of the proclamations. In EVI, residents felt that by simply purchasing products that are labeled as green, they are supporting less polluting businesses. The EVI project in general encourages the consumption of greener products; the homes in FROG and more so in SONG were built with energy conservation in mind. But residents also encourage each other to purchase green commodities. During my time in the community, announcements would be made over email informing the community about a new greener product on the market. At the same time, other residents work hard to remain critical of misguided environmental efforts and confront the inherent contradictions of capitalism and ecologism.

A note needs to be made about the EVI project and its various ways of expressing environmentalism. First, the non-profit (EVI Inc.) is a legally separate entity from the resident groups (see Chapter Four). As such, although the non-profit makes public statements about the nature of environmental conservation, the residents who make up the living model component of the project do not necessarily follow that mission. The FROG and SONG are separate legal entities that have their own guidelines. I did not find a guideline in either neighborhood that outlined the expectations of resident behavior towards the environment (although there are community guidelines that state expectations for Common House usage, etc.). The reason this point is critical is because often the behavior and ideas of a handful of resident do not reflect the general mission of the EVI Inc. project. As I have demonstrated throughout the research, not everyone recycles, uses

the Common House, or conserves energy, simply because they did not move to the community with of strong environmental values, or any environmental values in some cases.

During the summer of 2001 a resident sent a nationally circulating email to the community; the email suggested that U.S. Americans send a strong message to oil companies and the government that individuals would not tolerate exorbitant gasoline prices, and in an act of protest, drivers should not buy gas on a particular day.

Immediately three residents responded to their neighbor's email:

IMHO (In my humble opinion) the only real response to higher gas prices is to DRIVE LESS. Take the bus. Carpool. Bike. All these little things like not buying gas from specific companies and not buying on specific days just demonstrate how dependent we are on fossil fuels. As long as people aren't willing to actually reduce their consumption, such protests will only serve as a form of amusement to the "oligarchy." On the subject of driving less, I have been thinking that it would be great to take one week this summer and see how far we can reduce our car use. We could run a shuttle to the #14 bus every half-hour, and maybe all the way to town, set up carpools, etc<sup>19</sup>. What do people think? (Ron 19 Jun 2001)

I completely agree with Ron. There are much bigger issues at stake here and this 'solution' actually makes the problem worse. By getting gas prices lower, we stimulate driving and consumption of more fossil fuel. Reducing consumption with the objective of making it easier to switch to renewable energy sources makes sense to me. (Lenny 19 Jun 2001).

Seems to me that \$1.97/gallon IS cheap. Have you priced bottled WATER recently!! Part of the reason it's so cheap is that the production costs don't take into account the real costs, like cleaning up the mess caused by the

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<sup>19</sup> To my knowledge, no one responded in favor of Ron's suggestion that the community set up a shuttle and carpool for one week. During my stay in the community, only informal and individual carpooling was active. For example, several school children carpooled instead of taking the school bus.

actual usage... In Europe, where it's much more expensive, hardly anyone drives an SUV or other big cars. It's almost all small cars & bikes. So maybe a higher gas price is just what we need. Unfortunately, it will impact the poor who have cars, but live far from places of work where housing is cheap (Jonathan, 19 Jun 2001).

Although the call for a boycott generated some interest in reduced driving, the structure of the community (time restraints, location away from city and uphill, and commitments of residents) meant that neighbors still continued to drive in their usual patterns.

The marketing of green products is an effective way to make capitalism green, but it has not served to prevent further degradation or improve our communities. As residents realized in the email on how to use consumer-buying power, the U.S. still has many challenges to reducing its consumption of commodities. In the next section the challenges and outcomes of marketing and consuming of green products is discussed.

### 5.3.1 Green Consumption: Shopping to Save the Environment

At the Nature Company, I am an anti-consumer. The company itself... designs its store to encourage its patrons with anti-consumer fears to relax. You can put a quarter in the Rainforest Meter and send your money off to a good cause. You can buy a book about tropical deforestation. The company makes serious, extensive efforts to be a place where one can consume responsibly and well (Di Chiro 1996:198).

Green consumerism is too tied to present rates of depletion, production, consumption and waste to constitute the new set of habits and practices that Greens say we need (Dobson 1992:116 ).

*Sheila invites me to dinner. We walk home from the organic Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm located on the ecovillage land. Our short walk across the growing meadow allows us to catch up on each other's week. Before we get home, Sheila asks if I have dinner plans. With all these freshly picked organic vegetables, she'd like to make a warm pasta salad with bread and roast tofu. Having access to fresh vegetables is a connection to nature almost everyone values in ecovillage. The weekly share came with red lettuce, sweet peas, arugula, the last of winter's carrots and radishes; unfortunately the tomatoes are not ready yet, despite the fact that they were started months before in the new greenhouses. I ask what I can bring, Sheila needs tomatoes and I offer to drive down the hill to the local cooperative. Sheila insists on paying for them, I'm her guest and she won't take no for an answer—she, like other informants, is excited and generous, enthusiastic about having dinner guests, after all, it is for these kinds of random "ecovillage moments" that many neighbors moved here in the first place. This is the sense of community they did not have in their previous neighborhoods. Almost forgetting, I quickly turn around and ask if I should get organic or non-organic. Sheila is quiet and solemn. Her eyes begin to water and I'm confused. Waiting for a simple response on whether she buys organic or not, I realize the magnitude of my question when a tear runs down her face. She is sorry, embarrassed and sees me now as the researcher. Softly she confesses: "I cannot afford to buy organic food." My reassurance that most of us cannot afford organic food is not enough to convince her of the stark irony we are both forced to silently confront. What does it mean to live in ecovillage?*

Alison James (1996) points out that although organic food consumption has a central role

in how we currently think about food and how it represents nature and the natural, its construction has been framed through marketing. She concludes that it “cannot be taken as a sign of the integration of environmentalist principles into contemporary ...culture” (James 1993:206). In ecovillage, when asked what makes the community eco-friendly, many residents responded that they consume organic food. The consumption of organic food is used to help define the community and the residents within its borders as being closer to nature or as representing a natural way to live. This is true despite the fact that not all participants consume organic food, but also because the consumption of organic food is only one part of the larger community that consists of other factors that affect the environment, primarily, the use of the automobile to travel on a daily basis. Scholars are beginning to question whether material affluence is sustainable or desirable when confronting environmental degradation (Dobson 1992; O'Connor 1994; Princen, et al. 2002). Dobson rightfully points out that for political ecology to successfully curb economic growth, consumption needs to be challenged because it contributes to depletion, thereby increases production and ultimately creates more waste. For environmentalists to make significant progress to slow down our destruction of the environment we need to seriously consider the compatibility of environmentalism and capitalism. According to Smith “the same corporate and state institutions that created the ‘ecological crisis’ in the first place have captured the ideological soul of mainstream environmentalism” (1996:43). To endorse green consumption is to miss an opportunity to endorse reduced consumption. Such efforts would merely result in green washing products and a lifestyle that we know to be unsustainable.



A prominent feature of U.S. environmentalism that has been promoted by the market is the ability to live comfortably and still protect the environment. This consumer-as-environmentalist attitude has been adopted by U.S. environmentalists who believe that owning a hybrid car is a positive environmental change, despite owning two or three other cars, and at the same time putting less emphasis on alternative transport like biking and public transportation.

The consumption of products that are believed to be good for the environment can not be understood outside of the cultural context in which they occur (Applebaum 1998; Baudrillard 1998; Shove and Warde 2002). Residents of ecovillage who consume green products usually do so as a choice between the lesser of two evils. I observed that while informants want to make their buying habits reflect their environmental ethics, they are confronted with difficult choices of short-term comforts, such as freedom to drive at will, in exchange for long-term environmental sustainability. The goal of green marketing, however, is to sell a product within the capitalist framework of continuous economic growth, an idea that seems an oxymoron to ecological sustainability (O'Connor 1994). In defense of marketing, Applebaum argues that “marketing is an instrument of popular interpretive schemes and even wishes; marketers are less drug pushers than community guides, leaders, and...bellwethers of popular culture” (Applebaum 1998:324). While residents subscribe to magazines and journals that help them identify green and sustainable products, they also engage in conversations about minimizing their negative impact on the environment. Smith raises the issue that consumerism and especially excessive consumerism is hard to judge. She asks “who is to determine the point at

which one's fair share becomes excessive" (Smith 1998b:113). Thus residents feel that the purchase of a hybrid car is one answer to environmental degradation, and it technically could be especially when the amount of gas consumed is compared with that of a typical sport utility vehicle. Surprisingly, few residents used public transportation, in part because it was not easily accessible and, indirectly, the community did not want it to be.

Green consumption points to a critical junction that reveals an ethical difference "between those who believe we can reform our way [of life] to a sustainable future and those who believe that only radical and wholesale restructuring of beliefs and human behavior can save the planet" (Smith 1998b:67). In other words, while the premise of Ecovillage is to recreate the human habitat, its emphasis on consumption of material goods, such as the land, new energy-efficient homes, and hybrid cars, seems antithetical to long-term environmental sustainability, for the simple fact that there is not enough open land for everyone to re-create communities, or that the people who are most often directly impacted by environmental degradation can not afford to live in the community. The model of ecovillage to create win-win solutions to both ecological and social degradation by providing comfortable homes with simple technology that reduce energy consumption, is only effective in greening the lifestyle of families for those who can afford it.

### 5.3.2 Green Marketing: Selling Out, Selling Green

One of the advantages of green consumerism, from a company's standpoint, is that people are willing to pay a premium for goods they regard as better for the environment (Cairncross 1995:182).

Green marketing works in ecovillage because solutions to environmental problems have been framed within a deep ecology framework. Deep ecology has informed the idea that delineates the human and non-human worlds, thus proposing the possibility of personal and individual ways of responding to the environmental crisis, specifically, through the use of technology that does not challenge our lifestyle, but rather, makes our lifestyle possible within the acknowledge of limited resources. Naess (1988) emphasizes the importance of creating a strong spiritual bond with nature, that is, a wilderness and nature without humans. "Deep greens want us to listen to [our] inner voice and act according to its knowledge" (Smith 1998b:85). This construction of nature as a personal transcendental experience leads, I argue, to personal solutions, for which green consumption is conveniently situated. However, Smith and others argue that individual buying habits have an impact on environmental degradation because they continue to support an unsustainable growth of production. Smith identifies two opposing views that address the role of consumption in improving the environment. First, some people believe that it is through the market transformation that realistic and viable environmental change is possible. This is a common view in ecovillage. Another perspective suggests that fundamental change in consumption patterns is needed to slow down or stop our current rate of ecological destruction.

Many of the residents I interviewed believed in a multifaceted approach to green consumption and marketing. Most residents believed that because they were not hardcore environmentalists, green marketing offered a way of caring for the environment because it is widely available and simple to do. The local cooperative in Ithaca offers valuable information on the benefits of buying green products. Residents at Ecovillage struggle to make the best decisions they can, balancing the comforts they can realistically live with and doing what they can for the environment. Because many residents did not move to the community for ecological reasons, most residents felt satisfied with their consumption of green products as a positive environmental effort. Other residents had a difficult time deciding what was truly better for the environment; for example, some residents discussed the pros and cons of washing dishes by hand or using an energy-efficient dishwasher.

Early in the community design process, it was decided that the neighborhood homes would not have dishwashers as a way of accumulating less material goods and in the name of simplicity. Some residents however received the required community approval for installing a dishwasher, while others simply installed one without asking the community. During an informal meeting about dishwashers and hand washing dishes, a resident described how he washed his dishes and measured the amount of water used. Others in the group brought statistical data on the amount of energy their machine used as supplied by the marketers and consumer reports guides on their machine. This discussion raised valuable points about how much a dishwasher costs when the production costs and disposal costs are added, or how much time a family can save by having the machine

wash the dishes. It also raised concerns about families who cannot afford to spend 20 minutes in front of the sink doing dishes because they work, or would rather spend time with their children. Another resident pointed out that family time could be spent in front of the automatic dishwasher. Such discussions engaged residents in an active process of consciously thinking about their use and need for material commodities.

A prominent debate has emerged in environment and consumption thinking in the U.S., specifically that conservation and preservation can be good not only for the environment, but also highly profitable. Development scholars as well as economists are arguing that we can continue consuming without the “need for belt tightening or hair-shirting sacrifices” (Myers 1997:54) while decreasing our environmental impact by using greener technology or developing green technology. These ideas emphasize a win-win solution. Vincent and Panayotou (1997:53) argue that, “the problem is not consumption levels, but rather consumption patterns” and that a global cap on consumption is not necessary to reduce unsustainable consumption patterns (*ibid* 53).

Those who care about the environment have been convinced by proponents of eco-capital that we can consume our way out of the current environmental crisis. The market has been portrayed as the best solution through which environmental change can occur. The argument, even among some environmental groups, is that business will become green when “the market” forces companies to product green products. Frances Caincross, in his advice to business in *Green, Inc.*, argues that the only way to lessen our impact on the environment is to change people’s behavior or change the technology they use, and since

behavior change takes too long “changing technology is far easier, and may allow large and rapid reduction in the throughput of environmental resources” (Cairncross 1995:177). Certainly there has been a strong market for green commodities amongst consumers. For example some grassroots organizations successfully lobbied hospitals to purchase green carpets that do not produce off-gassing of toxic chemicals (the smell of new plastic). This resulted in a market shift<sup>20</sup> in the carpeting industry where more companies began producing ‘green’ carpeting to compete for the business of large consumers such as hospitals and office buildings. Athanasiou (1996) cautions environmentalisms’ cooperation (as oppose to confrontational) interactions with industry and what he calls *corporate environmentalisms* pointing out that “the key to greenwashing is manufactured optimism” (page) in such forms as efficient technology—regardless of whether such technology is necessary. Like sustainable development (Fischer and Hajer 1999), green marketing offers a new opportunity to continue production, consumption, and waste at previous unsustainable levels.

Despite the positive gains by encouraging businesses to produce green commodities and services, consumers are not solely to blame for wanting green commodities instead of going without. Green marketing and green labeling fall short of describing the total cost of production and disposal—the life-cycle analysis. For example, although hybrid cars are more gas efficient, the cost of manufacturing a new car, the disposal of the previous non-hybrid car that may or may not be usable, and the eventual disposal of the hybrid

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the Center for Environmental Health ([www.cehca.org](http://www.cehca.org)) and Healthcare Without Harm ([www.noharm.org](http://www.noharm.org)).

when it has worn out its usefulness are often not factored into the decision of whether it makes ecological sense to buy a hybrid vehicle to begin with.

Caincross (1995) describes a study that showed that it would take 1800 times of reuse for a china cup to be more environmentally sound than a polystyrene cup because of a variety of factors such as the number of uses, water consumption, and general manufacturing and eventual disposal. Using similar logic, one resident explained that she used paper plates and plastic forks because it required less water to clean, and it was not clear that washing utensils was better than using disposable ones. The resident who opted to use cloth diapers through a diaper service used a slight variation of the same logic. She felt that the cost of the diaper service was cheaper and more “eco” than disposable ones. Residents who work at ecovillage celebrate the ability to work close to home and reduce their need to drive, yet clients who have to drive onto the land do not have convenient public transportation options and still consume gasoline in the process of providing or receiving a service at EVI. Ironically, few residents saw their efforts to be sustainable by making others drive to them as problematic. It is an example of a personal and individually focused environmentalism that claims to make environmental gains by only affect those who directly benefit from them.

Such confusing language and information make a clear and unified understanding of environmental costs difficult. I argue that instead of becoming enthralled in consumer products, environmentally conscious people, especially a community like Ecovillage, have the potential to be leaders in this effort and should use their “buying” power by not

buying unnecessary material goods. Instead, as ecovillage has done with other commodities like washing machines and kitchen supplies, share and reuse already produced objects. Instead of putting in solar panels, learn to turn off lights; instead of buying a hybrid, work for better public transportation that would benefit all social classes, the environment, and provide opportunities to create a sense of community amongst riders from in and outside the community. These alternatives are not necessarily easy or widely marketed, but certainly obtainable; with over 200 people living in Ecovillage, residents have the capability to lobby the city for appropriate alternative transportation in the larger community.

Finally, green marketing has been successful in ecovillage because it is in line with the general philosophy of the community: that it is possible to live comfortably while protecting the environment. This suggests that nothing needs to be sacrificed, only gained by being part of the community, and that technology and thoughtful design can be used to meet our current and future needs. There are those in the ecological movement who support green shopping as a legitimate and positive step in raising awareness and reducing our impact on the planet. At the same time, other environmentalists argue that green consumption is “a substitute for action; it is only more empty bourgeois individualism” (Smith 1998b:104). Murray Bookchin argues explicitly that capitalism, and other social forces such as discrimination, poverty and exploitation have created the current ecological crisis through excessive resource use in production and the dumping of production wastes disproportionately in low-income minority neighborhoods (1994). He



further argues that using a capitalist model to solve the problems capitalism creates is counterproductive.

In the marketing of green commodities the social element of the environment is taken for granted. Communities of color are often forced to drive to grocery stores that are inconvenient, or they forgo access to fresh fruits and vegetables. This creates the problem of poor health. By promoting purely eco-centric views and products, marketers do not worry about how their products ultimately affect people and the environment. Green marketers cater to people who can afford to purchase their products and are willing to pay top dollars for them. Marketers emphasize a change in product that will change a lifestyle and not necessarily a change in lifestyle (one that encouraging public dialogue about resource depletion) that requires fewer products and thus fewer demands on production and waste.

### 5.3.3 Green Distraction: Why We Should Care About Social Justice

People in poor countries [and poor communities in the U.S.] pay the price for our affluent, relatively clean lifestyles, and green consumerism is yet another of our luxuries that the poor of the world pay for. Thus, while it may have its place, 'Green consumerism leaves totally unanswered the basic questions about global equality and the chronic poverty and suffering of millions of people in the Third World' (Smith 1998b:105).

One of the best predictors of the location of toxic waste dumps in the United States is a geographic concentration of people of low-income and color (Harvey 1996a:368).

Ecovillage, like Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities, has successfully created a space where residents feel connected to each other and nature. It has successfully encouraged its residents to question their green consumption and their waste; it offers residents an opportunity to continuously engage in a discussion of how to consume less, share more, and ultimately reduce waste. Yet their environment is not isolated, rather it is part of a larger social, political, and economic landscape. The way in which nature is constructed and defined by a community affects how it is protected. Thus, the concern of authors who strongly critique deep ecologists and other naturalist groups is that by focusing on pristine nature and the protection of nature, such groups exclude humans and the social and environmental impacts suffered by communities exposed to toxic chemicals. I argue that green marketing and green consumption in general should not necessarily be discouraged, but it should not be a distraction from confronting the sources of environmental and social degradation/injustice: polluting industries, waste incinerators, dilapidated schools, inequality in housing and job market, and especially exclusion from the environmentalist discourse.

Co-housing communities like ecovillage have encouraged solutions to environmental and community degradation through the construction of new communities that embody utopian ideas for their residents. While these same communities provide opportunities for their residents to engage in ecological and social sustainability, they exclude other communities that are directly affected by the production process through wastes and chemical emissions. Other, mainly poor, non-white communities are working on fighting environmental degradation in places that need protection the most. Bullard's seminal

work on environmental racism documents the systematic use of communities of color as dumping grounds for industrial waste (1990; 1994). The current environmentalism (or way of expressing environmentalism) emphasizes personal and to some extent market driven solutions. This focus is clearly different from earlier attempts to protect the environment through solutions at the community level, including mobilizing community groups to fight incinerators in poor neighborhoods and working to create nuclear free zones, healthy schools, and establishing federal regulations that force industries to protect people, their communities, and the environment from toxic contamination. As I attempted to demonstrate earlier, the most significant and influential factor in this transition has been the market and the marketing of environmentalism. Environmental consciousness has become a marketing niche for everything from shampoos to exotic eco-vacations.

I suggest that co-opting green consumption, as a way to improve the environment is a slippery slope. Like ecovillages, other social niches are becoming activated under the auspices of environmentalism, for example ecotourism suggests a way to incorporate environmentalism through vacationing, but doing so comfortably, including visiting exotic countries while conserving the environment and contributing to capitalist market economy. Yet these tours often hide the reality of the communities they rely on, such as inadequate health care, effects of cheap labor on their communities, and general impoverishment that the citizens experience.

What is fundamentally missing from the Ecovillage equation is a more inclusive community—a social justice component where the environment is not limited to green space or baby birds, and solved through green consumption. Imagine if Ecovillage was located in one of the poorer neighborhoods in the larger community. What if residents removed parking spaces and planted small organic vegetable gardens and planted fruit trees? What if residents invited their new neighbors to potluck dinners, creating volunteer teams to clean the sidewalks, and paint each other's home? What if fences were torn down and backyards joined by shared green space, trees, and flowers? Imagine if the children were encouraged to attend public schools that we all work hard to insure have adequate resources for all children. What if parents who worked at home formed walking school buses that took neighborhood children to school on foot and brought them home again? And imagine if the ecovillage businesses were accessible to the public by bus, bike, and on foot. Would this be a replicable model of living harmoniously with nature and each other? These are the desires of some residents who moved to ecovillage (and some who moved out). How can ecovillages in general and EVI in particular realize their full potential?

Current debates on sustainable cities are focusing on the city, not the country, as the most sustainable environment for people to live. Organizations that advocate for greening cities use the same arguments EVI implores—that densely clustered house, shared resources and less dependence on cars is the most ecological way to live together. Eco-city supporters are promoting car sharing, creating urban gardens, improved public transportation, restoration of creeks and streams, and they support the mobilization of

neighborhood groups to demand the clean up of toxic chemicals in their communities. Although cities were once considered the quintessence of environmental degradation and the cause of pollution, cities around the U.S. are now emerging as the model of combining the built environment with nature. Populous cities such as San Francisco and Vancouver are making efforts to green their cities by installing parks, creating or maintaining a strong public transportation system, promoting recycling and other waste management programs, as well as constructing “green” buildings, installing solar panels, and encouraging civic engagement through conferences and public education outreach.

## CHAPTER SIX: Making Community Green

### 6.0 Introduction

It is extremely important for me and my family not to feel isolated up here in this little weird enclave. The towns that surround us are pretty low-income for the most part. We have a lot of rural neighbors that are farmers and house trailer park folks, it can be easy to not have your family mix with people like that (Sandra).

[I appreciate] the fact that the kids could just run out and play. We lived in Manhattan so I knew people who could not go out to play by themselves until they were teenagers practically because it just wasn't a safe environment to send kids out unsupervised (Kevin).

Communities are spaces that symbolize our expressions of social relationships. They are places where we feel comfortable—"at home"—or spaces we go back to or are exiled from. In that sense, community embodies the spaces, through idealized or physical boundaries that represent how our lives are enmeshed within larger social processes. This complex and contested community has been a focus of debate within the social sciences and continues to be the site of social and political struggle (Gregory 1998; Low 2000; Redfield 1962). Although the concept of community has been pervasive, new forms of community are raising old questions as well as new ones. As local and global

expansion continues to produce new challenges that affect where we live and how we gain access to resources, spaces that once formed the framework for political action and social interaction are being reconfigured, recognized as problematic and, in the case of ecological cohousing communities, re-envisioned as ideal locations to address larger questions of social cohesion and environmental sustainability.

The late twentieth century has produced a plethora of discussion about community and environmental sustainability in the United States. Various social transformations have resulted in a resurgence of a search for “community” (Brown 2001b) and have produced a multiplicity of new forms of rural and urban planning and architecture. These social and ecological transformations of the importance of place have, in part, grown out of the changing landscape of the political atmosphere in the United States. More specifically, as the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s produced a heightened awareness, and suspicion of government and its role in protecting people from social and environmental injustice, the resultant civil rights, environmental, and feminist movements gave rise to conscientious leaders who worked to change the way the conservative government functioned. This process produced new meaning for spaces of public protest (Low 2000) new communities, new neighborhoods, new federal laws and regulations, and illuminated the reality of diminishing natural resources. It is within this context that today’s ecovillages are emerging in large numbers across the United States. These communities are searching for a kind of modern utopia that is envisioned as a harmonious place for people and nature. Its reality as played out in the everyday lives of residents reveals some of the same tensions and contradictions of earlier communal experiments (Brown

2001b). However, the success of the Ecovillage at Ithaca (EVI) makes evident that many people in the U.S. are still looking for a way to create what Howard and Mumford envisioned as meaningful social relations while being conscientious about the environment.

The history of studying communities in anthropology embodies the rhetoric that many residents of EVI utilize in their daily interactions, concepts such as: “the tribe”, “kinship”, and Margaret Mead’s “it takes a village” all represent symbols of efforts to “re-create” an imagined community that is idealized as living in harmony with the environment. Unique to these ideas is the reliance on “primitive society” as embodying idealized social harmony, sustainability, and being close to nature, if not being nature itself or nostalgia for utopia. EVI is well suited for an anthropological study because it connects the ideas of early ethnography of “primitive” society with Western reactions to the problems of modernity, producing a new kind of social, political, and ecological transformation that attempts to redesign the way we represent our interaction with each other and with nature.

Ecovillage at Ithaca, just west of the city of Ithaca seems at first glance to be a ideal location to practice social and ecological sustainability. The abundance of land that is allowed to grow fallow, the care residents have taken to minimize the distance between their built environment and nature is revealed in the details of the everyday life of residents. Residents appreciate the location of the community because it is placed within what Soper (1996) describes as a culturally constructed nature that represents an



imagined nature without human intervention or domestication. The open fields that are dotted with daisies, the hiking or cross-country skiing trails that cross through young forest, the organic farm with edible and ornamental sunflowers and organic raspberries, and the panoramic views that stretch across the valley, all help to create the sense that residents are living within nature. Yet, residents revealed contradictory sentiment about the importance of conserving and preserving the environment, creating a sense of community amongst neighbors, and the importance of the place where Ecovillage is located.

There is no consensus amongst residents on what it means to connect to the environment, but residents generally respond by describing their collective efforts to reducing their use of non-renewable energy sources like fossil fuels for heating and driving, as well as their ability to preserve the majority of the EVI land from development. At the same time, their appearance of community and their desire to create common unity around each other and nature often mask the diversity that is part of any community. Thus, there is no agreement on the relevance of “place” to the Ecovillage project; instead, agents construct personal narratives to explain their relationship to the land. In addition, upon close examination, important rituals such as the use of consensus reveal a deeper complexity that express internal class and power struggles.

This chapter explores how EVI merges the goals of creating a sense of community and environmentalism through the choice, design and designation of particular places and spaces for specific community or environmental functions. It discusses how EVI

attempts to create intentional spaces and places that foster community and that protect the environment through the consumption of green commodities as discussed in Chapter Five, but also by the consumption of “place,” specifically through the necessity to purchase specially designed homes that provide access to nature and construct a sense of community. The chapter questions whether the centrality of consumption of place is necessary for the possibility of being a model of sustainable living. Although multiple agents (the board of directors of the non-profit, residents of the neighborhoods, and the larger Ithaca community) view sustainability differently, the fact that the purchase a home in the community is the entry point for the building of a sustainable community is non-trivial.

## 6.1 The Place for Nature and the Nature of Place

Buying a house in EVI is more than simply purchasing a few shares (the actual exchanged good in the cooperative), rather it includes the acquisition, although temporary and not necessarily wholly, of a place in nature. This place in nature is constructed outside of human engagement with it, that is, the construction of nature in EVI emphasizes the human (share holders) place within an imagined passive nature, one that needs to be manicured with wildflower mixes and protected from invasive species that threaten to take over from plants that “belong” to the region. Further, this passive nature is enhanced with amenities that meet human needs and desires such as a pond and

vegetable gardens. The effort of residents to balance the “natural” and “built” environment has created contradictory ideas and practices within the community.

Constructing and defining “nature” as void of human engagement is arguably a contradiction as humans have interacted with their environment for millennia, thus to imagine a nature without humans, a wilderness, is a cultural construction that has had political and economic motivations (Escobar 1996; Soper 1996). Many residents moved to Ecovillage because it was situated in nature, surrounded by beautiful land that allowed them to feel connected to nature. The place for nature is imagined as within a social and physical boundary of human needs. Nature in EVI is at once imaged as wilderness, through the new growth forests and the occasional uncultivated front yard, and “manufactured” nature through the carefully manicured flower gardens, or constructing a ‘natural’ dirt road.

When describing the importance of living in Ecovillage and expressing their desire to live close to nature, residents give value to “pure nature” and a construction of nature that is biologically centered (Dobson 1992; Guha 1989). Although no one I spoke with talked about “pure nature” explicitly, many residents felt there existed nature that was uncorrupted by human intervention, at the same time, this purer nature (such as the open field adjacent to the houses) needed to be maintained, protected and conserved by people who cared about the environment. It was for this purpose, of conserving nature, and to some extent “saving” nature, that some residents moved into Ecovillage. The land where EVI is situated is symbolized as “Nature”, and “The Environment”, where this

environment and nature is expanded to incorporate more than just the small community in Ithaca, but it is incorporated as part of a larger global environmental effort to preserve natural resources<sup>21</sup>.

At the same time, the intentional physical design of the community with closely clustered houses, inwardly facing windows to see neighbors (but also outwardly facing ones to see nature), and landscaped gardens are features that draw families into the community. One adult resident who moved with his family from the West Coast to EVI explained the significance of the location of the neighborhood:

If [EVI] was in the middle of town, I would feel it was more politically correct, but it would have appealed to me less, because I like the open space. I like the fact that it is pretty substantially interconnected to the region, and to the city, but that it has the open space (Christopher).

Residents on one hand want to preserve the open “imagined” wilderness and at the same time, occupy houses in a central location on that wilderness as a way of demonstrating sustainable co-existence of people with nature. Despite the central premise that EVI is an alternative to sprawl and the claim by some residents that it is not itself sprawl, but instead represents a model of “anti-sprawl”, other participants felt that there was an inherent contradiction in the location of Ecovillage as a community that was constructed by cutting down trees and developing new houses in open space on the outskirts of the city. A significant reminder of this contradiction was described by one of the early participants of the project. Andreas, a self-employed resident of Ithaca in his late 40s,

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<sup>21</sup> The global ecovillage network is an example of the extrapolation of EVI from the local to global environmental discourse ([www.gen.org](http://www.gen.org)).

dropped out of the EVI project when it became clear to him that the goals of the leaders were contrary to modeling sustainable housing. He explained that the high cost of building the FROG (and later, the SONG) was primarily due to the refusal of the city of Ithaca to provide city infrastructure—water, sewer, and gas lines. The city of Ithaca was committed to reducing sprawl and therefore required developers outside the city limits to pay for their own city water and sewer infrastructure. Because Ecovillage is located outside the city limits, it was required to add infrastructure to the cost of the homes, and thereby make the price of individual houses more expensive.

In this section I argue that residents in Ecovillage use the location of the neighborhood on the land and the presence of nature surrounding the homes both to create a comfortable lifestyle for themselves and to demonstrate the benefits of living within nature. Like city planners and architects of the early Nineteenth century (see for example Howard 1902; Mumford 1938), the founders of EVI recognized the beauty of green communities and designing neighborhoods that are accessible to local businesses, and other basic community amenities. Instead of the much-critiqued one house surrounded by one acre, EVI tries to create garden cities by placing the houses together and surrounding them with open land. Since the establishment of Ecovillage at Ithaca, co-housing communities in the United States have increased significantly. While some ecovillage communities are urban such as the Los Angeles Ecovillage, many communities like EVI are created as new suburban developments. I argue that creating and locating ecovillages on the edge of town could be called suburban sprawl. Moreover, I will attempt to demonstrate that Ecovillage is part of a new kind of city, not unlike Howard's garden city. I then explore

the construction of these new emerging ecological intentional communities and themed spaces such as Disney's Celebration Florida (Ross 1999; Sorkin 1992b).

### 6.1.1 Green Sprawl

The non-profit Ecovillage at Ithaca, Incorporated (EVI, Inc.), based out of Cornell University's Center for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy (CRESP), enabled a group of donors to purchase the 176-acre land. Concurrently, in 1992, a small group of households began to meet to discuss the human component to the project, which in many ways was the centerpiece of the planned community. The households would represent the non-profit's model of a sustainable lifestyle with energy-efficient appliances, shared resources, and intentional opportunities for neighbors to get to know each other. Soon after the First Resident Group<sup>22</sup> (FROG) was large enough to begin building homes, the board of directors of the EVI non-profit sold the group a three and a half acre plot of land as well as the necessary acres of the road and community gardens. This purchase legally separated the EVI, Inc. non-profit from the FROG resident group. The mission of the FROG to build energy-efficient homes as part of a demonstration community fit appropriately with the mission of the non-profit. In fact, they were very similar since many residents were active in creating the non-profit umbrella group. Control over the remaining land would stay in the non-profit and be leased to individuals who would support the EVI mission, such as the organic farmers. Through easements and

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<sup>22</sup> The First Resident Group is officially recorded as the EcoVillage Cooperative Corporation, although it is commonly referred to as the FROG. The SONG is also structured legally as a cooperative corporation.

cooperation between the resident group and the non-profit, most of the land is designated for agricultural use, including the organic community-supported agriculture farm and a U-pick berry farm. The non-profit board of directors that includes several members of the FROG, works closely with the resident group. Thus the residents agree, in spirit, to carry out the mission of the non-profit that emphasizes education and modeling sustainable living.

For an explanation of why members of EVI purchased land outside the city, it is necessary to understand that the place of EVI was imagined, and sold to new residents, as a place within nature. A resident who had tried to create an ecovillage in this former community explained that the place where EVI was located was an important factor in his deciding to buy a home in the community.

A small group of us wanted to make co-housing work in a [Southern California city] ...but what we couldn't really do there was buy any quantity of land because land was so scarce...for building on. We were talking about putting 15 units on one acre or one-and-a-half acres...[but] there was no land around us and it did not feel like the kind of spaciousness that I thought a community should have access to (Lukas).

Despite being offered free land ten miles outside of Ithaca, buying the Ecovillage land had two primary goals. First, according to one of the founders, the project was conceived out of a concern for how open space was being developed. Thus, the land would serve as a model for future developers and therefore starting from scratch was essential to demonstrate that new suburban development can be done in a way that does not require much sacrifice, but to the contrary, can be very attractive and comfortable. Secondly, the

proximity to nature and the city would encourage residents to use fewer fossil fuels. The two mile distance to the center of Ithaca was imaged as an easy bike ride, long walk, or accessible by public transportation. At the same time, being surrounded by hiking trails, water and woods provided space for residents to demonstrate the benefits of preserving “nature.”

The residents in FROG and the second neighborhood group (SONG) fulfill this mission by demonstrating reuse, sharing, and social cohesiveness. I argue that the reasons EVI built the project at its current location was influenced by the beauty of the land as well as the desire to demonstrate the luxury of living a simpler “green” lifestyle without any considerable sacrifice of comfort.

Except for the few residents who moved into Ecovillage to be close to their family, or to escape the loneliness of their previous community, most residents I spoke with value the place where Ecovillage is located and moved there because they were attracted to the land. The design of the houses positions windows to face outwards, towards beautiful meadows and rolling hillsides; easements that prevent future developers from blocking the view<sup>23</sup> ensure access to this beauty will be preserved. The views are luxuries that make up for the smaller-sized houses that range in size from 1100 to 1600 square feet. For the most part, participants are optimistic and confident in the proactive approach to knowing and interaction with their neighbors in a planned community that Ecovillage

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<sup>23</sup> During a discussion of alternative energy, it was found that the best location for windmills would be in the open field that would ostensibly change the view from residents with south facing views. Objectors made reference to the easements and that the value of their homes would be negatively affected. Such were some of the contradictions residents and former residents expressed about the project.



affords them. Residents are proud that their house is a lot smaller than the one they used to live in, or at least smaller than one they could afford to buy. In addition, they know their neighbors and enjoy feeling connected to their small community.

One of the founders of the EVI project explained the process that the initial resident group went through when deciding which land to buy.

In September of 1991 we held our first village meeting and we... looked at various pieces of land... There was land that was offered for free out in Brooktondale by somebody...we also looked at the possibility of buying an old factory. One reason we did not [want this] is because we were worried about toxins, even though they had not uncovered anything... we thought, an old gun factory was not a real great environment for kids... People grouped themselves where they would most prefer to live... virtually everybody was right around 2-3 miles outside of the city. I think one person was downtown and one person was rural (Gina).

Why had only one person imagined a downtown setting to be ecological, especially considering the proximity to work, grocery stores, and easy access to an already well-established public transportation system? Some residents are proud that the community—in their opinion—is not contributing to sprawl because it has been built close to the city, only 2 miles away. Other residents felt that the location of EVI was a great improvement to where they had previously lived, specifically the access to open space, beautiful views, and close proximity to the city. This comparison of EVI to former neighborhoods or arguing that their family could have afforded to build a bigger house, but chose not to, provided a safety-net from criticism that EVI was some variation of sprawl, and that expands the boundaries of the city even further out into open space. A car is necessary

on almost a daily basis to go to work, school, visit a library, or shop for groceries, the same challenges presented by other forms of suburban sprawl.

### 6.1.2 Garden Cities, Techno-Cities, Edge Cities

Little boxes on the hillside,  
Little boxes made of ticky-tacky,  
Little boxes on the hillside,  
Little boxes all the same.

Malvina Reynolds

The EVI housing model bares a strong resemblance to Ebenezer Howard's "garden cities," and like the criticism of Howard's city, EVI is also open to the same critiques. The garden cities were based on the premise that people functioned best when surrounded by nature, have access to fertile agriculture and are able to develop meaningful social relations (Howard 1902). Howard, like other liberal city planners at the time, felt that the city was growing out of control and represented a destructive force for people and the environment. In response, the garden cities would be small and sustainable communities surrounded by nature, and a short distance from other such garden cities. The cities would be replaced with smaller versions that enable people to easily move between town and country as well as create distinctions between home and work. Lloyd Rodwin (1945) emerged as a major critic of Howard arguing that the Garden Cities "overlooked some of the essential tasks of the metropolis and the necessary functional and administrative interrelationships" (Rodwin 1945:270). He argued that the garden cities failed to consider "the problems confronting existing communities" (270). Like Ecovillage, the

garden cities would be built as new developments outside of the city, and like EVI, the garden city did not consider the impact that abandoning city centers would have on the environment. Mumford, in Howard's defense argued that the Garden Cities would simply be an improved post-war suburb to the ones that were already being created. That is, planners were already building on virgin soil, and thus the garden city, like ecovillages, would demonstrate a more sustainable model of development (Mumford 1946). Both scholars were concerned with the rapid development of land outside of the city and how that development would create what we have today.

Since the turn of the century, city planners and environmental groups have been concerned with the rapid development of suburbia. The post-world War II decades ushered in a period of urban decentralization, what Fishman (1987) calls *the age of the great suburb*; new single-family track homes were built outside of cities. Unlike the "little" boxes on the hillside, today's suburban developments are dotted with large houses that are often built to the owners' specifications. These communities could be described as the first exodus from the city (Davis 1992). In an analysis of Los Angeles, Davis (1992) demonstrates how the construction of the "fortress city" results in the creation of exclusionary public spaces, which prevent minorities (or other excluded populations) from participating in the political process (Davis 1992; Low 1996). The suburbs of the 1950s were neighborhoods that were intimately connected to the city through regional railroad lines and other forms of mass transit that brought commuters to and from work or shopping centers—an "expanded metropolis" (Fishman 1987:183). The second exodus in the 1960s and 1970s saw further emigration from the city and white flight

(Gregory 1998) that left urban communities void of vibrant life. Soon after people moved out, businesses followed. The 1980s saw a new kind of sprawl, what Garreau (1991) calls “edge cities” and Fishman (1987) refers to as techno(logy) cities. These edge cities are established small commercial spaces outside the city centers that included shopping malls and office buildings (Garreau 1991). These new cities differ from earlier suburbs because they tend to offer housing, industry, and office jobs and are thus no longer dependent on the urban center, “a decentralized environment that nevertheless possesses all the economic and technological dynamism we associate with the city” (Fishman 1987:184). Residents in Ecovillage spoke of their disappointment in the continuous development of the U.S. landscape into suburbs that drains life out of the city and forms generic shopping strips with the usual fast food chains and hotels that have begun to define U.S. highways and cities, what Ritzer (1993) calls McDonaldization.

At the same time, Ecovillage has a mission to create a more sustainable community—a Garden City—with clustered homes and surrounded by nature. The similarities between Ecovillage at Ithaca and an edge city are not immediately obvious or intentional, but nonetheless akin. The original plan for the five neighborhoods was to establish an education center—part of the basis for creating the non-profit—a village center, and small businesses. Such amenities would allow families to live close to work and thus require less automobile use; a significant factor that one resident said would be more ecological.

Elena: I drive my car a lot and I wish I did not drive it, but I am a commuter and that is how I get to work

When asked about carpooling, a new tension emerged:

Elena: I suppose I could car pool, but then I would have to be subject to someone else's schedule. I think that to be really a true friend of the environment you have to give up a lot of your individualism, and I have not been willing to do that...it is so much easier to just get inside my car and go when I feel like.

The early planners of the community envisioned employment opportunities for residents in the education or village center, which would avoid not only the need to commute long distances to work, but also avoid the discomfort of sacrificing individual need for flexibility in mobility. This community would take the good aspects of suburbia—individualism, access to the city but not its pollution, and open space—and merge it with good ecological practices like driving less. Ironically, anyone from the larger community who wants to visit EVI must have their own reliable means of transportation to go to Ecovillage. This problem can be compounded by the lack of regular public transportation that would bring the public close to the EVI community. Although working at EVI is a positive ecological option for residents, by saving the energy resources they would use to drive to a centralized downtown office, it requires anyone serviced by EVI or clients of residents to use energy to drive into the community. While working at EVI reduces the environmental impact of residents, it does not solve the problem; rather it simply deflects the resource use from residents to clients. This paradox also reflects the inwardly focused nature of the project: the environment that needs to be preserved is the one in

Ecovillage, the community that needs to be connected is also within the boundaries of the EVI project, and the eco-feature of working at home, applies to residents, and does not consider the resources used when several clients are required to drive into the community.

What residents also object to in suburban sprawl is the isolation it caused to those who lived there, and the wasteful nature of dividing land into small plots instead of clustering homes, then preserving more open space for its own sake and for recreation. A commonly held belief amongst informants was that a former purchaser of the land was a developer who (apparently went bankrupt) had planned to build 150 homes on one-acre lots across the 176-acre former farmland. During public presentations, community meetings, and in interviews, it was often stated that this developer would have created the typical suburban community that now blankets the U.S. landscape; therefore it was essential that EVI buy the land and save it from this “unsustainable” development plan. I was never able to verify that these plans were a real possibility. A non-resident informant insisted that the 150-houses-on-one-acre-lots was a rumor and that the city of Ithaca had rejected the idea. Further, Bern commented that the developer changed his mind when it became clear that to discourage development outside the city limits, the city would not provide any infrastructure. According to Bern, an early member of the EVI board, the effect of the city’s tough development requirements encouraged the original developer to drop the project. Frustrated by what he felt was misinformation about the efforts of the city to slow the growth of sprawl, Bern commented that she found:

it very offensive that for many years [the founders and organizers of EVI] would show these designs and say 'see, if he built, this is what we would have and we are so much greater'. [These] designs never made it to the city planning process...the town immediately said 'you can't do this' (Bern).

It was based on this belief that early planners decided to demonstrate the ability to construct the same number of houses on significantly less land. Clearly the EVI model, with five clustered neighborhoods, would be an impressive alternative to the one-acre per household design. The model of community would be self-supporting with a small farm, recycled waste, and have employment opportunities of various kinds. Although this vision has not yet been realized, it has not been entirely abandoned. During some interviews, residents expressed reservations to fulfilling the original vision because they felt more than two neighborhoods would be overwhelming. Two households felt the second neighborhood was already too many people to be able to enjoy the land and create a strong sense of community. On the other hand, one household felt that creating a large village in EVI would widen the social distance between the larger community and Ecovillage.

Some residents I interviewed questioned whether Ecovillage was not itself a variation of sprawl, green sprawl. An informant was concerned that the local Ithaca residents referred to EVI as a green-gated community, while other members of the EVI project publicly raised the concern that the larger community refers to EVI as yuppie-ville. The way EVI was perceived outside of the neighborhood boundaries was of concern for one resident, who had frequent interactions with the larger Ithaca community, because it demonstrated

a failure of EVI to be integrated into the city of Ithaca, and instead was perceived as a group of outsiders trying to show the local Ithaca residents how to build neighborhoods. Individual households were so busy building and paying for their homes and creating the new model village, that little time was spent working to integrate EVI into the city of Ithaca. Instead, planners and residents worked hard to create what they felt were green models of neighborhoods. A couple from Ithaca pointed out that many of the participants in EVI were not familiar with the Ithaca community and had an arrogant way of describing their project.

A lot of people moved here from very far away and don't know Ithaca... [a man who later moved out of FROG] gave this talk about what 'a good gift [EVI] was giving to Ithaca.' No knowledge that Ithaca planning... has been a major issue for as long as I've been here. And people who are just not grounded in the history... a lot of people considered them fairly outrageous statements about 'we've arrived, we're gonna show you how it's done'... people would come and say 'this is the greatest thing, I moved here from California to be part of it.' [Ecovillagers] really see their neighborhood as an island and not as a continuous piece of this place [Ithaca]' (Jessie).

The lack of integration with the larger city of Ithaca meant that some of EVI's neighbors were unsupportive of the project. For example, the building of the second neighborhood which at first was touted as demonstrating affordable housing was completed with house cost costing more than double the price of the average home in Ithaca. Some residents in FROG, and other EVI neighbors, felt that building a second neighborhood further in the middle of the open land obstructed their views of "nature." At a town hall meeting, one neighbor argued that building in the middle of the field (her view-shed) seemed counter to preserving open land. This contradiction exposed one of the tensions of the EVI



project: that the emphasis on conserving land and preserving open space, has more to do with creating a specific green themed space than building in a way that truly decreasing environmental degradation.

The next section explores the ways Ecovillage encompasses some of the features of Sorkin's (1992b) themed spaces and how consumption of the land and the ideas of sustainable living in nature helps to create a green themed community .

## 6.2 Creating a Community for the Environment

One of the nice things [about living up here] is to wake up and not having any traffic noises, you have a beautiful view so we see the sun coming up, we see the wide variety of wildlife just out of your bedroom window. And if it's snowing you can go from your front door step cross-country skiing into the woods and back. If you want to go running, you run out of your house. If you want to go on a bike ride, you ride right in front of your house to wherever you want to go. So... you can be here for days at a time without feeling the need to go anywhere else. It's like a retreat. I have lots of friends visiting me here, and they take it sort of as a retreat, being away from it all, and having all these wonderful nature resources (Sean).

Understanding the context in which EVI is designed, and the needs it is responding to, is a useful tool to explore how our communities can become more sustainable places to live, both for humans and non-humans. The planners and future residents of Ecovillage embarked on a project to “redefine the human habitat” by creating a themed space for the land that would be preserved (nurtured, and cared for) by the residents while the land would in turn provide resources for the community. The idea of a sustainability theme

was a natural choice and would be one that anyone could agree on (who would be against sustainability?). This model would include intentionally designed spaces that would be set apart from the larger community, provide places that would be protected from strangers, crime, and other ills of the city. At the same time, the land and the inhabitants would bring families closer together socially through the medium of the surrounding land. These characteristics help to identify the community as an ecovillage, but also, as I argue, contain many of the features that relate to a growing trend of creating themed spaces (Gottdiener 2001; Sorkin 1992a). EVI is not unique in its effort to create a community that emphasizes a particular social need. Other communities such as Celebration, Florida are designed to invoke a nostalgia for an imagined and idealized bygone era of ideal neighborhoods and a regained “sense of community” amongst neighbors, but also within a particular defined space (Putnam 2000; Ross 1999; Sorkin 1992b).

I draw on three distinct characteristics that are imbedded in EVI to create a themed community. EVI incorporates three means of distinguishing its space from that of the larger surrounding community. First, according to Sorkin, an *ageographic* place is one that is not attached to any particular city and can be “inserted equally in an open field or in the heart of the town” (xiii); the use of both technological and physical surveillance as a way of maintaining distinction; and the creating of themed spaces through architecture. Sorkin argues that this “elaborate apparatus is at pains to assert its ties to the kind of city life it is in the process of obliterating” (xiv). The tension of creating an ecovillage that is at once separating itself from the larger community through building in open space, and

as a way to re-create a sense of community that preserves open space, is one of the challenges residents of Ecovillage at Ithaca confront.

In this section I examine the ways in which Ecovillage meets Sorkin's definition of a themed community by identifying three parallel characteristics that are at once essential to the EVI project and at the same time contradictory. I explore how theming in Ecovillage is both resisted and employed by residents as a way to create a sense of community and sustainability within the context of theming efforts in the United States (Gottdiener 2001).

### 6.2.1 Ageography

Residents moved from around the country to live on the land and in the community that was being envisioned. Many families moved from cities on the West Coast such as Los Angeles, Santa Cruz, San Francisco, and Berkeley, which were becoming increasingly expensive. According to one of the planners, the choice of Ithaca as the location for the model sustainable community grew out of the Global Walk for a Livable Planet (see Chapter Four). The year-long walk across the United States led up to the search for a place to create the "livable" community. According to documents from early planning meetings, the community would serve to demonstrate how communities can be self-supporting by reusing resources through recycling and limiting the amount of energy required to live comfortably. This community would be replicable and according to the

founder, its location in Ithaca was more a coincidence than a requirement. This flexibility in location is what Sorkin (1992b) refers to as *ageographic*. The community could be anywhere, as its locality has little to do with the surrounding community; the ageographic place is, as Ecovillage, a place of its own.

According to Lisa, a retired resident, “the location of Ecovillage is like being on a giant estate without the servants” (Lisa). Other residents value a connection to the land by walking barefoot or working in one of the many flower or vegetable gardens that surround the homes. The abundance of nature—manicured garden, wild flowers, and young forest—is important to the community, not only because the homes are located just outside of Ithaca, thus providing easy access to the city, but for beauty and the access to open land, the animals that live within it, and the sense of living within nature. In random conversations, residents would describe imagined and nostalgic ideas of communities in regions beyond the United States, specifically in European cities or third-world countries (often, though rarely said explicitly, they were referring to rural areas of third world countries and not the rapidly expanding urban ones). These idealized “African villages” or “European hamlets” were imaged as being more in harmony with nature by having fewer resources. In the case of a generic African village, Paul, a new father, somewhat jokingly explained: “I would live in a grass hut if it was just me...all of the baby supplies and equipment would take up two huts!” and in the case of Europe, more car-friendly cities, referring to the Fussgängerzone—pedestrian-only downtown spaces.

Ecovillage creates its own community, preferring to create human connections outside the city and within the boundaries of its own privatized space (Sorkin 1992b). But some residents have mixed feelings about where the community is located and specifically, that it is not attached to the city:

In a sort of abstract way, I think it is nice to have all this land... to experiment on...but on the other hand it makes it really hard to live lightly...maybe when the SONG is here we can have shared vans or cooperative taxi vans...all these environmentally-conscious people and not biking, [biking] is never going to be a number one solution here, it seems like a drag (Paul).

The irony of living lightly on the earth in FROG, but requiring a car to access the city made some residents uncomfortable. It is clear to some participants that such contradictions meant that the main thrust of the project was not always to create ecological and social sustainability. “There was a sense that [the planners] need to place [the homes] in a place that’s going to make [the lenders] think that their investment was worthwhile, that it has a very beautiful view” (Sam).

The next section explores how surveillance is used as a positive way to create a sense of community through getting to know neighbors in deeper ways, a characteristic idealized in other non-Western communities.

## 6.2.2 Surveillance

*Susi loves the location of her home. It is right in front of the main path from the visitors' parking lot and the resident carports. More important however, it is very close to the Common House; she enjoys being close to where the action is, front row seats to the heart of the community. From her kitchen window she can see who is coming and going—visitors, family members of neighbors, and people going for a walk. She can predict when to do her laundry as she counts the number of laundry-basket-carrying residents making their way to the common laundry room. She definitely feels more connected to her neighbors, just because she sees them on a regular basis. Although some residents hire a gardener to plant and maintain their small front yards, Susi enjoys the work herself. Most passersby stop to ask about her day when they see her planting and weeding. They often compliment her on the beautiful perennial flower garden that envelops her front door. It is especially rewarding to her when neighbors ask her for horticultural advice. She knows her neighbors and they know her, they take care of each other; this, she tells me, is what creates community, this is why she moved to Ecovillage.*

The FROG and SONG neighborhoods create their own sense of community by physically designing the houses to produce opportunities for families to congregate and engage in spontaneous social interaction, support the reliance on shared resources as a way to create the idealized safe community within their neighborhoods. The idealized community is fashioned by the use of specially designed features that allow residents to be in physical

and virtual contact with each other. This enables neighbors to see who is home, and thus increase the opportunity to engage in conversations and visits. The closeness of the homes also serves as a surveillance mechanism that allows residents to keep an eye on neighbor's homes when they go on vacation.

While surveillance, according to Sorkin (1992a), is a tool used to control security and enforce distinction in theme parks for the middle class, in EVI's first neighborhood surveillance is one way residents feel connected to each other and create a sense of community. Indirectly and inconspicuously, surveillance by neighbors is used to ensure security within the community. Neighbors surveyed the community by questioning (in a friendly inquisitive manner) unfamiliar persons walking on the land as well as by asking each other about unfamiliar cars that are parked in the various parking lots. At the same time, residents announce to the community when they will bring an unfamiliar person to the village, for example, when a group of students from one of the local campuses comes to a workshop, or when a household has a relative or friend visit them. Many residents make an effort to let the community know who is staying in their home and ask that neighbors make their guests feel welcome. Surveillance is such an integral (natural?) part of the community that one household described feeling the need to protect their privacy by controlling who had visual access to the inside of their house—they kept their window blinds closed and invited neighbors for dinner infrequently. This is this case, the built-in surveillance of their home became a restrictive feature making them feel constantly exposed to their neighbors inquisitive gaze. The emphasis on creating opportunities to get to know their neighbors resulted in their need to prevent their neighbors from

encroaching on their personal space. Other residents echoed this concern when I would be invited to dinner and asked not to tell anyone (or a specific neighbor) that I would be eating at their home. This occurred not because my dinner host disliked any resident, or wanted to gossip about them, my host simply did not want to include other people in the dinner she was preparing for her family and me.

Almost all residents I interviewed felt a sense of community in EVI simply because they ran into neighbors on a regular basis. Meeting neighbors in the many private-public<sup>24</sup> spaces such as in front of their houses, on one of the many trails, or sitting by the pond makes most residents feel less isolated and lonely. Not being isolated but instead surrounded by neighbors gave residents a sense of security. One resident told me that she felt safe<sup>25</sup> because her neighbors were attentive to suspicious behavior in the community. Surveillance to her was an attractive feature of EVI, she felt it was an integral part of sharing her life with her neighbors, and one of the reasons she moved there. She wanted people to check-in on her by visiting her frequently and spontaneously, and be concerned about her well-being. From observations, parents also felt that having other adults who would passively monitor their children or someone whom their child could trust was especially helpful when they needed to do small tasks like collect their laundry from the Common House or make an important phone call.

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<sup>24</sup> I use *private-public* space to describe spaces that belong to the community or non-profit, but are not accessible to the larger public in Ithaca. These spaces are outside of one's home, but inside the borders of the EVI Inc. land (route 79, Coy Glen, etc.). These spaces include the pond and hiking trails.

<sup>25</sup> The meaning of safety was broadly and fluidly used by my residents to describe a wide variety of feelings and experiences. Some residents felt safe from crime or physical harm, others felt emotionally safe to talk with someone if they had a problem, or safe from feeling isolated and uncared for.



The physical design of the FROG (and SONG) neighborhoods, which will be discussed in more detail below, makes being a newcomer or visitor to the community obvious. There are no spaces that are open to the general public in EVI, although neighbors living on West Hill often walked freely on the wooded paths that criss-crossed the EVI land. People who came to EVI during my stay fell into two general categories; they were either would-be residents or visitors who were usually meeting with a specific family, or were visitors accompanied by a representative from the EVI board of directors or office staff. Unlike public parks in the greater Ithaca community, people unknown to anyone in the community were rarely seen visiting the pond or hiking on trails without being accompanied by a particular household. At a community meeting where public transportation was being considered, a resident objected to bring the local bus closer to the center of the community for fear that it would enable strangers to be dropped in the middle of the community. Parents of young children who appreciated being able to allow their children to play outside without fear echoed this concern. The structure of the non-profit and neighborhoods gives residents the sense that the non-profit land (the acres that are not owned by either the FROG or SONG) is also accessible to residents, thus the residents steward the land as if it were their own backyard, careful to make sure no one is abusive to it, such as by driving recklessly on the dirt road. Because the physical design of the community is densely clustered, residents who are sitting in their homes or working in their gardens are often displayed as community personified. Stephanie, a resident who works at home raising her family, complained about unannounced tours that would catch her weeding her garden in clothes she would rather not be seen wearing by

tourists and visitors to the neighborhood. Being in the neighborhood added a level of pressure she felt would not exist in a suburb:

There are things that I feel like I'd better do today, because it impacts the community or what people will think of the community...silly things like...I'd better pick up all the toys in the front walkway, cause visitors will think we're slob! Sometimes I feel like there's a list of 'shoulds' that I need to do just because I live here and we're on display (Stephanie).

The many tours that the community conducts makes Stephanie constantly vigilant of how her home is presented and what it says about the community. Often residents will be asked (with advanced notice) if a tour group could walk through their home; this made Susi, a part-time employee in Ithaca, proud to be able to show off the features of her home she so much appreciated: the large windows, the open space that connected the downstairs, and the small footprint it occupied. At the same time, she was certain to make sure her house was always clean and presentable for a tour. This implicit self-surveillance by being on display contributes to a degree of artificialness in the construction of community.

Many of the residents I interviewed appreciated knowing that their neighbors would keep an eye on their home while they were away. Neighbors often announced that they would be away on the community listserv as a way of inviting surveillance of their comings and goings in the community. Generously, neighbors offered their unoccupied house to potential visitors or to couples who needed a few days apart.

Residents in FROG and SONG use email both to stay updated on the events in the neighborhood and to inform each other of their whereabouts. Often a family will post their vacation schedule with flight details and emergency phone numbers should one of their neighbors need to contact them. Or they announce special houseguests in emails: “Hope everyone who knows [my sister] ... will welcome her along the path and at Common House meals when you see her.” Personal information is also announced on the community listserve such as when Gina wanted to share her recently diagnosed illness with the community: “I am writing this e-mail to let everyone know what is going on with me.” Such personal and somewhat private conversations allow residents to engage in self-surveillance via email. Some residents found email irritating and disliked the posting of personal information, they purposefully avoided checking their mail. One resident admitted that she felt more peaceful when she avoids reading email everyday because there is “always some controversial thing” that makes her apprehensive. The Geek team, one of the five recognized work teams that each adult member of the community is required to participate in, set up several different listserves in response to residents who were irritated by the massive amount of email that the community generated.

Another element of surveillance that is appreciated by residents is the physical and practical design of the homes that allowed neighbors to see who is coming and going. After a few years, some residents decided to put up curtains. “When we first moved in here, nobody had curtains on the windows. Now almost everybody has curtains on the windows just because it feels more comfortable that way” (Lukas).

The architecture of the houses, another characteristic of themed spaces, was designed to allow frequent contact with neighbors including large inward facing windows that served as a gateway into the community, but also a way for the community to conduct surveillance of the inside of others' homes. The next section discusses how EVI's architecture helps to create the theme of community and a feeling of being close to nature.

### 6.2.3 Architecture

The architecture of the EVI and the FROG is designed to create a sense of community. As one approaches the community from Route 79, one is immediately connected to nature through sights and sounds. Residents find that the long dirt road serves as a meditative entryway, away from the rest of world, and into a peaceful, natural place. The traffic slows down (usually only one other car is making its way in or out of the community depending on the time of day) and the calmness of nature takes over. The road is intentionally left unpaved and despite complaints about dust and its respiratory effects on the pedestrians walking nearby, most residents liked the "look" of the dirt road as a way to introduce Ecovillage to the casual visitor. Many community meetings were dedicated to finding a solution to the natural raising of dust that occurred whenever a car drove along the half-mile stretch of unpaved road.

Upon arriving at the neighborhood, the parking spaces for residents and visitors are set aside from the community so that cars are not immediately seen in daily activities. One resident complained that “there are a lot of things ...in the city, even a small city like Ithaca, that seem too out of control...[like] the predominance of cars...” (Eric). Eric appreciated the lack of cars directly in the neighborhood, while other residents felt it was easy for children to run between homes and visit friends without negotiating fast cars.

The houses that make up the FROG neighborhood are variations of four architectural designs of differing sizes. Although the houses are similar in design they vary in size from 900 to just over 1600 square feet. The community is made up of two rows of houses that focus inward, into the pedestrian path. Large windows face into the pedestrian walkway and allow residents to see who is home, an element of surveillance discussed in the previous section. The windows are part of creating opportunities for residents to get to know each other. The first floor of each FROG home consists of one large room that locates the kitchen towards the neighborhood; only a few small steps divide the dining area and living space. This open design of the home allows the cook to stay connected to family and friends sitting in the living area—another opportunity to feel connected to the community. One can leave the house either into the vast meadow of golden rod and wild berries, and the pond, or in the case of the North facing homes, a small back yard that abuts the carports. It is very easy to spontaneously meet a neighbor as one walks from the house to the carports, to a neighbor’s house, to walk on the land, or to the Common House.

The Common House, comparable to a town hall, represents the heart of the community where important decisions are made in neighborhood, village, and board meetings. The Common House is architecturally designed to be at the top of the community, looking down the pedestrian pathway at the homes standing on the sidelines. Each house was designed to give its occupants the ability to see what was going on, and therefore be able to participate in whatever community event was taking place. Inside the Common House families can gather in the large dining room, which opens to the community kitchen where meals are prepared three nights a week for anyone in the neighborhood to partake. One resident enjoyed just being present at the meals and observing the community sitting together to eat, “I like going to Common House meals. Somehow just the ambience of people being together kind of makes me happy” (Eric).

Not all residents believe that the Common House is essential to creating a sense of community nor did all residents find the common meals enjoyable. The partner of Eric felt just the opposite: the Common House meals were noisy, and sometimes crowded and disorganized. She felt she was too busy focusing on her children and found it impossible to talk to neighbors over the noise of clanking plates, children’s cries, and other people’s conversations. Another resident, a woman who moved to Ecovillage because she felt a strong desire to live close to nature and experiment with developing deep relationships with people, was concerned that “people get caught up in the architecture of co-housing [that] the problems of their lives are going to be solved if they get their windows in the right place” (Carolyn).

Other constructed features of the project such as the pond were imagined to create a sense of community and harmony with nature. Lenny, who has a passion for nature both professionally and personally, imagined teaching the young children in the community how to fish, as he had experienced growing up. But unlike a natural pond in a small villages and communities elsewhere, a vegan neighbor responded to the man-made pond that Lenny unwittingly filled with fish with discontent and offense. This disappointment was exacerbated by the fact that Lenny had not sought the community's consensus before stocking the pond. The pond is primarily used for swimming and boating, its aesthetic beauty, and as a habitat for desirable wildlife. In the end, fishing was not encouraged except during a supervised Harvest Festival when the community creates a ritual of acknowledging the multiple uses of the pond and appreciating the fish for the nourishment they provide for the body of those who eat them.

The use of architecture to create a sense of community is a characteristic of other themed spaces (Di Chiro 1996; Hannigan 1998; Sorkin 1992b) that is easy to observe, especially in Ecovillage. The placement of the farm and lightly mowed trails that border the land, bring residents who walk on the land in close contact with the wild flowers, forest, streams, the organic farm, and blackberries, all, as one resident described, symbols of a community that integrates nature with people. Residents commented that it was easy to connect with neighbors because the houses helped to facilitate spontaneous interactions. Because the homes were built in the middle of the land, residents are automatically surrounded—and thus reminded—of their connection to nature. The architecture of the community creates effortless opportunities to socialize.

In this sense, EVI represents a growing trend in the United States of what Gottdiener calls *the theming of America*, and specifically, themed environments that are designed to be spaces for commodified human experiences (Gottdiener 2001). These themed environments are creating intentional spaces that at once include some people, but also exclude others. From shopping malls to museums, casual dining like Red Lobster, to corporate sponsored towns like Celebration, Florida, these new communities offer residents, through carefully designed architecture, a commodity to be consumed: a safari experience, a cultural dining experience, nostalgic community. Celebration Florida, for example, a Disney-sponsored community, advertises itself as an ideal community that re-creates neighborhoods of yesteryears complete with porches, sidewalks, and shared community resources in the community center. It is also marketed as an ideal, idyllic, safe neighborhood within easy commute to the Disneyland theme park (Ross 1999). A kind of theme park, Celebration's guidelines include the permissible height of grass and the allowable color of curtains. Increasingly, developers and home associations are assuming the role of city planners and municipal facilities, planning once-public facilities on private land. Sorkin cautions that these new communities, built to exclude public spaces which historically have had an essential function to be locations for social and political activism (such as sidewalks, plazas, etc.), changes the nature of communities (Low 2000; Sorkin 1992b).

Residents of EVI produce *and* consume a sense of community as a private community, public only for the residents who live there. These new private-public spaces, such as the



common house, give the impression of a true public space; however, because they explicitly limit that public to those who can afford to live in the community, or visitors of household members, they create a class specific public space. Some residents at Ecovillage are keenly aware of this segregation and struggle to ignore, excuse, justify, or come to accept this uncomfortable reality. One resident lamented that she felt it is selfish to have all of this space and community to themselves, but doesn't know how to deal with it, and felt alone in her concern (Sandra).

The landscape architectural features that make EVI desirable, including the pond and the open land with hiking trails, are not easily accessible nor is there a strong desire to make them publicly accessible to non-Ecovillage residents, despite much of the land belonging to the non-profit. Like other theme parks, Ecovillage attracts captive participants by marketing to specific audiences: those who long for a connection to fellow neighbors, but want to do so in a somewhat controlled and intentional way. Ecovillage also attracts those searching to reconcile their consumption-driven lifestyle with the environment. And like most theme parks and themed communities, EVI attracts upper middle-class educated whites (Sandra).

The theme of being green (sustainability) that functions as one of the central unifying ideas in EVI is not unlike the use of themes to create parks, shopping malls. Disney's founder, Walt Disney, created his theme park in response to his disappointment with the post World War II urban sprawl that was taking over California. The theme park that is today Disney World would recapture a bygone day of friendly, safe streets void of the

urban ills, and present the nostalgia of the happy family (Ross 1999). These themed spaces thus incorporated deliberate planning and design to foster a specific experience. Ironically, the popularity of the Park attracted an edge city of hotels and fast food restaurant development in the surrounding communities.

Certain features of the EVI project, like those in Celebration (Ross 1999) create exclusionary spaces such as the lack of paved surfaces that would allow someone in a wheelchair easy access to the community. According to a former resident, when it was revealed that the common house would have to be handicap accessible because it was considered a “public” building for the community, many residents resisted the requirement to install elevators. But perhaps more revealing of the exclusion of persons with disabilities from EVI is the vertical design of the homes that makes climbing five sets of stairs impossible for someone in wheelchair or an elderly participant. The vertical duplexes were designed to minimize the footprint and provide views of the surrounding nature. The two houses in the FROG neighborhood that are considered by most residents to be handicap accessible, merely allow the occupant to live on the first floor (leaving the question of what use the second floor would have).

My role as an anthropologist also contributed to reinforce the theme of Ecovillage as a village—after all, anthropologists study villages, and social relationships within villages. The fact that I am a Zimbabwean<sup>26</sup> and an anthropologist, studying a western “village”

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<sup>26</sup> I often made an effort to identify myself as a Zimbabwean instead of a generic African, the same way a French national might identify themselves with France and not with Europe, and, like in other sectors of

contributed to crystallize some resident's definition of a village. A resident pointed out that it was exotic to have an African anthropologist studying a Western village, and that this reversal of roles was a positive product of modernity. The anthropologist also contributes to the architecture of the community as it is imagined in non-Western villages. I was often affectionately introduced as the village anthropologist.

#### 6.2.4 The Theme of Green Living

“Coming home almost feels like a vacation” (Sean).

Indeed, living in EVI is like being on vacation. Similar to other vacation destinations, EVI provides the family an opportunity to experience the mission of the community. That is, the attractions of the community include running into friendly<sup>27</sup> neighbors and having access to the natural land, are what residents appreciated about their unique community. Is Ecovillage a green themed community? And if so, what is the significance of the green theme that EVI is formulating? Will Ecovillages signify new exclusionary communities that protect the middle-class from confronting social and ecological degradation in the larger community they are connected to? How will Ecovillages improve our environments or model sustainable living if they exclude such

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U.S. society, I found it difficult for people to conceptualize the unique culture each citizen of an African country brings from their respective home.

<sup>27</sup> On only one occasion during my fieldwork I meet a neighbor who was visibly upset and angry. In general, although residents often disagree and become upset with each other, very little was expressed in public, or in my presence. I observed the community to be a respectful, positive, nurturing, and caring place. I was told of residents who would yell and become angry during community meeting, but these residents had apparently moved out by the time I arrived in the community.

cultural realities as poverty, inequality, and racism, especially because these realities are often related? Or does Ecovillage have the potential to build an inclusive sustainable community?

I suggest that in many ways ecovillages in general, and EVI in particular, embody similar methods and techniques to attract families to themed spaces, such as the opportunity to escape from the perplexing intricacies of everyday life through creatively constructing an idealized place. EVI invokes a nostalgia for an imagined past and tries to recreate one. A resident felt attracted to Ecovillage because “it’s sort of a replication of old-fashion neighborhood where people knew each other... We don’t have that in suburbs anymore, not even on cul de sacs or sub-divisions and small towns, people don’t interact with each other” (Stephanie).

I also contend that through its green ideology EVI sits within a larger U.S. culture of consumption through the idea of a theme. The goal of theming is the merchandizing and consumption of a specific commodity; and households in EVI create, market, and consume the theme/idea of sustainable community. In the U.S. in general, and EVI in particular as demonstrated in Chapter Five, theming is increasingly defining everything from clothing styles, restaurants, to recreation spaces, and, as I argue here, communities. Although EVI is a community, it is not an isolated unit, but explicitly part of the larger U.S. culture in which theming has come to dominate where we go on vacation, the places we stay while on vacation, and where we choose to eat or buy groceries.

In this section I describe how residents struggle to negotiate how they feel and act around their neighbors and in nature; residents make choices, some of them very difficult, on what they do and say around their neighbors. For example, some informants told me that they either felt guilty about taking their car to run a minor errand, or they were convinced that they were already doing a lot to reduce global energy depletion and did not need to feel bad about driving. I illustrate how these negotiations are occurring within the context of U.S. consumer culture (Lury 1996). I describe some examples where residents work hard to negotiate personal and communal contradictions: work, time, money and social capital, and conservation and consumption.

#### 6.2.5 Tensions and Negotiations

“Nature may turn out to look a lot like an organic Disneyland, except it will be harder to park” (White 1996:185).

Inherent to the Ecovillage project is a tension between the idea of creating a model of sustainable living and the reality that Ecovillage is inaccessible to many people, physically and financially, and that not everyone living in EVI adheres to its ecological and social guiding principles. From extensive observations and in interviews with former participants, ideas about exclusion and idealism demonstrate a tension that is seldom addressed publicly, but nonetheless contemplated privately. A former participant of the second neighborhood attempted to explain this tension.

We lived in a suburb in [a medium sized Midwest city]. And so we were living in probably the most standard [U.S.] American dream type

situation...we had a typical house in the suburbs, right by the elementary school, typical – it was just a two story house and everybody drove their cars into their garages, nobody talked to each other... We were looking for some other way of raising of our family, some other way of living, than what is normally expected on the [road] society sort of takes you down. ... We got married and we just sort of [thought] ‘I guess we’re supposed to buy a house out in the suburbs’.... But we sort of stopped and opened our minds a little bit and said we don’t really have to do it this way. That’s what drew us to co-housing. And I think ... a big part of it was that in co-housing, you’re meeting people that are sort of like-minded. I think that was the nice part about Ecovillage is that the people who are drawn to it have similar interests and beliefs about the environment and so, you have a lot more ... control about who your neighbors are. Rather than sort of tolerating the neighbors... the idea was that you'd be making good friends with people that thought like you did (Tamara).

Tamara was supportive of living in an ethnically and socially diverse community, she felt that EVI was too isolated from the larger society and often failed to integrate itself into the wider community.

Tamara: It’s beautiful up there, but part of what happens when I go up there is I feel sort of like...it’s elitist or something. I just feel as though it’s more elitist here [but] I am sort of wanting to be part of the movement to make...little sacrifices so we’re not living in these huge houses and feeling like, as [U.S.] Americans that we need so much and so big, and so much of everything. And yet, when I go to move to Ecovillage, this is part of my feeling. I go up there and it is like ...we’re on this beautiful piece of land, and people are talking about the views, and how important, how beautiful they want everything to be, which I can see, but on the other hand...I think it’s ...it’s so hard for me sometimes, because I can see why people want to live up here, but I think the wiser decision would have been to build it closer to the road, or to try to find a site that was closer in town so people could walk. All those things are part of the disappointments... and I also...know learning about people in the greater Ithaca community I think ... a lot of people have a sense of all those houses are really expensive up there ...I heard somebody – this was a couple of years ago – I heard the term ego-village.

Tendai: Can you name one [of the things you found troubling]? ...

Tamara: You come, you go into this nice little [neighborhood], up at eco village, and you're with all these great people and then you go home. And you don't get any other view about what other people think about it, or what were some of the mistakes that were made, or what people think are mistakes.

Tamara's conflicted feelings about the EVI project reflect the tensions and negotiations of being isolated and physically separated from the larger society. Other residents felt embarrassed that on one hand the community was trying to demonstrate ways to model sustainable community living, but in reality EVI was only affordable to middle and upper middle-class households. One of the tensions that became apparent was in the relationship to work. Through both observation and by talking with various residents in both FROG and SONG, it is evident that to participate in EVI, households need a lot of flexible 'free' time such as on weekends, evening, and occasionally during the day. Several important meetings during the design and construction phase of the SONG took place in the middle of the morning or afternoon. Anyone holding a full-time job (and possibly part-time) would need to take time off in order to participate. One family was disappointed that fewer adults in SONG worked full-time, making her husband, a hard worker who did not make a lot of money, appear uninterested in the community. Most of the members who can afford to participate in community meeting and perform volunteer activities are retired, work at home, run their own businesses that allows them to plan their own

work hours or are hired by the community so their meeting hours are part of their paid employment<sup>28</sup>, or wealthy enough to take significant time off.

White raises the contradictions of work and environmentalism arguing that productive work in nature such as logging is often equated with the destruction of the environment. According to White, “environmentalists so often seem self-righteous, privileged, and arrogant because they so readily consent to identifying nature with play and making it by definition a place where leisured humans come only to visit and not to work, stay or live” (1996:173). EVI has successfully enabled its residents live in nature, while many residents have also been successfully hired by the project or bring their work to the community, thus connecting nature with their work.

Being able to transfer one’s occupation to EVI requires access to specific social and economic privilege, such as having an advanced degree, having resources to start a business, or having access to inherited wealth. I was often surprised that this reality was overlooked. After explaining to a prominent community member that my household could not afford to buy a home, let alone pay the monthly community fees, I asked how she was able to buy a house and live in the community. She was a lifelong political and community activist and often told me that she was short of money. She responded that it was possible for me to live in Ecovillage despite my lack of financial resources; after all, she considered herself to be low-income and based on the salary she brought into her

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<sup>28</sup> This observation came after a short conversation I had with a paid resident who commented that he was fortunate to be paid for what he already enjoyed. Unfortunately, I did not collect specific data on who was paid, how much, and what part of their “participation” in the community was paid or volunteer.



household, it is probably true that she literally earns a low income, compared with the classical sense of *being* low income (having limited resources, no access to medical care, lack of decent housing and education, etc.). Yet she had bought a house, paid monthly dues to the cooperative, owned a car, and took vacations. I pushed again, how was she able to buy a home when her income was unpredictable and sometimes non-existent? She finally confessed, as if I had compelled her to reveal a secret; her uncle had passed away and left her a large inheritance that she used for the down payment. Our conversation ended when I told her that I did not have such an uncle. Interestingly, during a separate conversation, another informant said that he was waiting for “a major inheritance before [his family] could build a home in the SONG” (Christopher).

Access to wealth or income is essential for living in Ecovillage, although few people would readily admit to having significant financial resources. Most participants were unwilling to reveal how much money their household made. I was puzzled when some informants talked about affordable housing and being a model. From conversations, it appeared that residents were reluctant to identify the community as exclusive to wealthy families. Despite this tension of needing significant financial resources to live in EVI, few residents actively discussed the class distinction and how to change the community to make it more open and affordable.

I argue that this indifference to challenge the status quo is related to why residents confronted with the reality of living a middle-class lifestyle in the U.S. are not willing or able to reduce consumption, but instead redirect resources towards

purchasing green commodities. This juxtaposition is intertwined with the impossibility of negotiating capitalism and environmentalism. Class distinction is what makes it possible to live in Ecovillage and while some residents told me they wanted to make the community more affordable, a stay-at-home mother explained her frustration with the suggestion that low-income families could live in EVI:

Rich people can afford organic food and hybrid electric cars and there are certain things about the neighborhoods that cost money, like stone patios. There would just be a lot of challenges around commonly owned things and food, and anything that we held in common [if a low-income family moved in]. There always would have to be. That would always be the main focus: can everybody afford it? And that [would] put those kinds of people that really were in a tight spot, on the spot, all the time. Which would always set those people apart. It is challenging enough to live in a community where you are kind of all the same, or are really close to being the same [social class?] but with that [lower class?] added factor I think it would be really hard (Natasha).

The concern that low-income families would be a challenge to living in Ecovillage related to deeper assumptions about class and exposed a central conflict in the general project. As mentioned earlier, Ecovillage was never designed to be a low-income or affordable housing community. Its mission to be a model for middle and upper middle-class households was the result of a conflict between early planners who wanted to model social and ecological justice and affordable housing, and those who desired an alternative for the middle classes (Walker 2005:56-57). The latter won, resulting in the resignation of half of the EVI board of directors. This tension regarding affordability can be thus attributed to a lack of understanding of the history and mission of the community on the part of some participants; it also reflects the

desires of some participants to change the fundamental ways our society creates separate housing models for different social classes. According to some participants, little effort was made to openly discuss the history, mission, and goals of the community, especially as disgruntled families leave and new members join. According to an active community member, this kind of conversation would provide the desired openness about affordability.

To avoid the association as an exclusive community, similar to other new communities where white flight resulted in further degraded environments as wealthy white families left urban spaces and moved into the open space on the outskirts of the city (Gregory 1998), an effort was made to create a more affordable second neighborhood through subsidy units in the SONG<sup>29</sup>. A successful grant application resulted in several units offered for low-income households; in reality, \$20,000 was offered off the price of the home. Other residents and former residents mentioned that this was not enough to offset the \$180,000 price tag of a home in the SONG, and that subsidies would not necessarily make the community affordable. Sandra was further concerned that those who advocated for subsidies did not think of the complexity it would involve:

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<sup>29</sup> At several orientation meetings I attended, including during my first visits to Ecovillage, the future resident-developers illustrated that homes in the SONG would be small, and more affordable than in the FROG by allowing residents to design their own home and contribute significant sweat-equity to their home. This prediction backfired when wealthier residents, attracted by the idea of designing their dream-green house, built larger more luxurious homes than the FROG. This resulted in a 50-70% increase in costs of the original estimated.

I am worried about the subsidy units, because I feel like while affordability was prime in the minds of [participants in] previous incarnation of the SONG group, and maybe in Ecovillage as whole, people really aren't thinking about what those implications are, especially for the people that need affordable housing. They [low-income families] are already set apart by society. I am not saying that all the people that need money are involved in you know, government programs or anything like that, but take for example [a single mother who was interested in living in FROG]. She is on section 8 housing, and I don't know if she has food stamps, but she's made several references to depending on a food pantry for their food, I mean that's just not the type of person that lives here.

At the same time, Sandra acknowledges that a community like Ecovillage can enable someone to gain the support necessary to get out of poverty. Because residents at Ecovillage are busy creating the complex project, little time is allocated to work on addressing concerns that many other residents had regarding affordability and accessibility.

It seems to me that when [low-income] people want to make a change what they don't have is a support system to help them make [that] change. The future of this planet and maybe this society ...depends on—not periodic programs that run out of money, ...like government programs [that] maybe last for three year. That is not long enough for somebody to change their life that they might have been living for 40 years. It is not enough to change the direction of poverty.

Sandra doesn't know the solution, but is frustrated that other residents don't seem to want to talk about larger issues of affordable housing.

Residents of EVI are religiously, professionally, and politically diverse; there were also several lesbian and gay households. However, Lucy, who moved from a large city, felt awkward living in a privileged community because it lacked racial and ethnic diversity.

[The neighborhood] is not diverse enough; there are virtually no minorities here, except people's adopted children. You have to be pretty well off to move in and everyone here would agree that they would like it to be more diverse, and they would like to be more equitable but nothing ever happens to make it possible for anybody to live here: the handicapped person or a poor person or you know, let alone a welfare mother (Lucy).

She lamented that she left an ethnically diverse neighborhood and community to join a predominantly white community.

Some residents in EVI have felt overwhelmed trying to process larger issues of social justice and have retreated inwards. Lukas feels that he is "...just taking care of this corner of the world." They are making an effort within their social and economic means, even if it means owning a 1/6 of the washing machine instead of the very real option of owning their own machine privately. When I confronted a resident who was using paper and plastic plates and cutlery, she responded that she does not like to do dishes and after all had not moved to the neighborhood because of a strong concern for the environment.

One resident felt confident that his participating in EVI was a positive model of sustainable living and was happy with the way the community modeled sustainable living: "one of the things which makes me feel really good about living here is telling other people about it, and enlighten them" (Sean). Some residents are uncomfortable with the tension between being a model, being a prototype of environmentalism, and the reality of class stratification. As if ashamed of their class and wealth, some residents justify their place in Ecovillage by pointing to their use of money to purchase green

commodities, which will lead to an increase in demand, thus an increase in production and potentially affordable prices of green commodities for the poor. Another resident questioned whether Ecovillage is just a privileged community located up on a hill, with great views and access to organic food.

...I know people who are living in [Ithaca and] who have a great deal of community, who are living ecologically, who are doing a lot of the same things that Ecovillage now says they are doing. One friend of mine was kind of joking about Ecovillage and she said 'yeah right, they say we are creating a neighborhood, but well hey guys look around you there are neighborhoods everywhere, you did not invent this you know'. There is this attitude that maybe it is a bunch of people who are really full of themselves and think they're doing something so brilliant and they are sort of [saying] sure you can do that if you have got \$100,000 and \$150,000 to spend on nice house in a nice field up on the hill (Anne).

Others neighbors see no contradictions between living in an expensive, exclusive, eco-themed community and the values they hold of social and ecological justice. Rather, these residents point out that the choice was between living in a typical suburb where everyone keeps to themselves and living in a co-housing community that had energy-efficient homes that automatically make their lifestyle more eco-friendly. Some residents rightfully mentioned that they could have easily afforded a much larger home, with more private space. They were being very good stewards to the land by demonstrating to other wealthy families that it is possible to live a comfortable lifestyle, without sacrificing a lot, and at the same time, do good things for the environment. This, I argue, is the attraction of the theme community: EVI has a compost-team to make composting easier for neighbors, and a cook-team to make socializing with neighbors over dinner ordinary. Thus it is the deliberate and mechanical ways to experience living in the ecovillage.

Another significant factor related to affordability is access to spare time. The energy and resources required to create a community in harmony with the environment requires vast amounts of time for meetings, work-team duties, informal gatherings, and family. Households where two adults worked outside of the home often mentioned that community activities, especially the meetings, were stressful because they were lengthy and during times when participants could otherwise spend time with their families. Two women on separate occasions voiced the concern that their families were torn between being with the community and being with their family. For Stephanie, it was hard to “carve out a day or two or a whole weekend when you’re not doing something for the community.” Time is essential because making decisions by consensus requires residents to be physically present at meetings for discussions and decision-making. Some families with small children and two full-time jobs found this commitment burdensome. During one particular month there were many meetings that lasted an average of three hours each. Some families with more than one adult were able to divide the attendance at meetings, while it was not uncommon to send someone from the meeting (usually I volunteered) to walk door-to-door looking for neighbors to establish the two-thirds of households as the required quorum. At times, these quorum residents would only stay until their usefulness in consensus was over and then return to their homes, making the goals of consensus appear more procedural than legitimate. The time costs to families and the financial expenditure of initially purchasing a home, but also paying monthly community fees, make the community unaffordable to most families where both adults are working. When both adults in a household were working full-time outside of the

home, they were too tired to participate lengthy meetings; yet, participation in meetings is essential for the community to function effectively, which posed a dilemma to households that needed to work.

While most informants I spoke with expressed satisfaction with the community, others were concerned about contradictions they experienced in their daily life. Specifically, one resident felt trapped in a larger social structure that, despite his best efforts to live simply, he was unable to find a way out of what he recognized as a consumer culture. “I think I am a victim of our own cultural norms and expectations” (Eric).

### 6.3 Constructing Place Through Rituals and Celebrations

There is no single unifying concept of community or environmentalism that this research found to exist in EVI. Most of the residents had a unique way of framing their attraction to the Ecovillage project and their level of commitment to either the community or the environment. For the most part, it was the construction of the place of Ecovillage that ultimately brought households into the neighborhood. One significant way neighbors felt connected was through the construction of social rituals that brought neighbors together in shared new traditions. Guys baking pies and women goin’ swimmin’ is the kind of event that epitomizes the opportunity EVI gives residents to be close to nature and become close to each other through rituals. The story below is an example of some of the many rituals that bring people closer to nature in Ecovillage.



*Early one afternoon, the men went “hunting.” They roamed through the open fields of the hills overlooking the city below. The tall grass hid most of the hunters but their bright hats and sunglasses were visible to the women and children left behind in the village. By afternoon they had gathered more than 10 pounds of berries to be baked into pies. The single woman allowed in this annual ritual was Claire. She was known in the village as one of the best cooks, and she would assist the men in their ‘guys baking pies’ ritual.*

*The men gathered in the community kitchen hovering over the large island as Claire instructed them on how to gently mix the chilled butter into the flour. An hour later, the young boys and their male mentors were forming pie shapes and filling them with juicy berries, licking the spoons and their fingers as they worked. Shirtless, some of the men posed for pictures, proud to show their artwork that would be shared with the women.*

*The community bell rang and the women who had stayed home poured into the Common House laughing and joking about this ritual and lightheartedly irritated by the gendered nature of the event. A Marxist in the group complained but no one listened; she always complains and it is just for fun anyway, what does it matter? The ceremony was elaborate. The men had cleaned the kitchen island and decorated it with their various pies, ice and whipped cream. Before being served we, the women, listened to poems, songs, and stories about the bounty of the earth on this beautiful land, the sweetness of the berries, the community, and the efforts of the young boys who worked hard. The sole*

woman on the team was recognized and thanked for her supervision. As the men passed out pies, and neighbors chatted about the day's events and politics, an announcement of the women's event was made. "Women goin' swimmin' will take place at the fire pit at 9 o'clock pm."

Few women participated in women' goin' swimmin' event and I find out why as we gathered around the fire pit. It was a nude event and as a good anthropologist, I stripped down. Naked and desperate to warm ourselves by the fire, we huddled close together. The leader described the history of the event. It was a way to counter the guy's baking pies. One thing that had troubled the leader as a young adult was the negative self-image she had of her body; others nodded in agreement. We took turns talking about our experience growing up with negative feelings about our bodies and share how we tried to overcome them. I was distracted thinking of the men who might be sitting nearby listening to us. Unhappiness with weight, buttock, breast size and sex gave way to loving support and supportive laughter. We were connecting with each other as women and, to what many of the women felt is the essence of nature, our nakedness. After our gathering we jumped into the pond, a symbolic rebirthing, and enjoyed an evening of skinny-dipping, staring at falling stars, and had good conversation.

Those who celebrate rituals at EVI treasure the opportunity to connect with each other and with nature. It is often through these interactive rituals that residents meet friends and members of the larger Ithaca community. What makes these rituals possible is the time and resources members of EVI put into creating ways to directly interact with nature

through gathering fruit or enjoying the pond. White's (1996) analysis of nature as a leisure resource helps to explain the tension between working with nature and playing in nature. Through the purchase of the land, EVI is able to construct a community that merges working in nature (the farm) and playing and celebrate in nature (rituals). At the same time that residents are celebrating the land and the bounty it provides, consumerism is rampant in U.S. culture (Lury 1996) and green consumerism is quickly becoming a fast growing industry. As franchises like The Nature Company define what it means to protect and support nature (Price 1996; Smith 1996), natural/green/eco- capitalism gain widespread support among people committed to environmental and social change (Hawken, et al. 1999). In the process of constructing the community, individuals are careful to find a compromise between radical environmentalism and acceptable middle-class living standards. Residents overwhelmingly feel that the community is dramatically different than their previous home, it is like living in a park, living on an estate, and like being on a vacation, except it is home and a private home. EVI contains features of what Goldberger (1996) calls "urbanoid environments." These places are "private environments purporting to be public spaces" (Goldberger 1996; Hannigan 1998). At the same time, in its efforts to create a village, EVI relies on images of non-Western communities and creates a space where the disorganized fruition of authentic neighborhoods and communities is replaced with deliberately constructed spaces and places. These constructed spaces are designed to give all the beauty, diversity, and cultural opportunity of an authentic non-Western village or city, without the adverse reality of poverty and inequality that plague the authentic community. Hannigan (1998) argues that the fantasy city, like Ecovillages, are ways middle and upper middle-class

U.S. Americans try to negotiate the tension between wanting to experience the imagined simple lifestyle, but not wanting to endure the risks that help create such a lifestyle. This tension is expressed through some neighbors actively resisting vegetarianism. In one instance, early in my residency, a resident asked me if I was a vegetarian. I truthfully, though somewhat embarrassingly said I was not, but that I was really trying. She quickly and forgivingly invited me to join her and another neighbor for steaks after a vegetarian community meal. During a separate incident a resident told me she felt that meat eaters were discriminated against because there was rarely a special meat option at the Common House meal. Few residents I interviewed were pure vegetarians; some, for example, ate meat when they went to restaurants. At Thanksgiving, few residents ate any of the tofurky (tofu turkey) that was served. Residents are thus able to negotiate the conflicts between their own consumption and their practice of environmentalism and community through ritual constructions and celebrations. Residents in EVI are creating a green lifestyle, one that enables the green sustainable theme park to become an acceptable and desirable way of everyday life.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: Emerging Green Lifestyles**

Only at the risk of jeopardizing a vital environmental movement do we forget that access to nature, and cultural constructions of nature, are centrally questions of class and race as well as gender and other dimensions of social difference (Smith 1996:43).

### 7.0 Introduction

While the Ecovillage at Ithaca project strives to be a model of environmental and social sustainability, the community is a model of an emerging green lifestyle. As a project with a national and international audience, the attempt of EVI to showcase housing designs through the use of environmentally safe building materials or sustainable land-use practices has an impact on how new housing developments are constructed as ecological. The EVI project has the potential to positively influence city planning and design. At the same time, the current EVI project speaks to a very specific audience in its efforts to address what is commonly believed to be critical environmental threats, such as global warming, consumption, and the disappearance of a sense of community.

There is a multiplicity of ways individuals, organizations, and governments can tackle the social and ecological degradation in the United States. Ecovillage takes an approach that to many residents feels holistic and, at the same time, realistic. That is, there is an attempt on the part of project planners and leaders to actively integrate daily community life with environmental preservation. The project creates “natural” spaces where homes are oriented towards nature and designed to create a connection to nature, while the community simultaneously tries to create practical and easy opportunities for neighbors to interact with each other within those spaces. That is, Ecovillage attempts to merge both where we live and how we live together by designing homes and creating ways residents can recycle and share resources.

Ecovillagers, for the most part, share the assumption that their current style of living closer to neighbors and actively working to protect the open space that surrounds them is better for the environment than the way they lived before moving into the community. At the same time, some current and former residents are critical of the obvious omission of important environmental issues, such as social justice and environmental racism in the Ecovillage mission statement and objective. For example, as discussed in Chapter Two, some residents actively worked to discourage economic diversity in the community, arguing that such diversity would make it difficult to create a model of green living.

This chapter explores how the lifestyles of residents in Ecovillage attempt to respond to local (and global) social and ecological degradation. I consider consumption to be a significant factor to understand the culture of U.S. environmentalism. Furthermore, I describe the various ways residents negotiate between choosing a lifestyle that is comfortable for them and trying to improve the environment in general. Finally, I consider the consequences of using the construction of ecovillages as personal lifestyle choices; specifically, I'm concerned about the use of environmentalism as a vehicle to create class distinction. I build on the ideas from previous chapters that a green lifestyle is constructed through a themed community, creating a culture of being green, and consuming products marketed as green and thus good for the environment. Therefore the theme community becomes the framework for the construction and consumption of a green lifestyle, where consumption is a means to express environmentalism and, at the same time, consumption becomes the way to create the demonstration community that models what Walker (2005) calls a sustainable culture.

## 7.1 Constructing a Green Lifestyle.

Understanding culture is an essential part of understanding environmental problems because human cultures guide their members both when they accelerate environmental destruction and when they slow it down (Kempton, et al. 1996:1).

For residents, living at Ecovillage in the spring and summer is like living in a national park; hiking trails that wind in and out of young forest resemble paths in a national park. The open fields that accentuate views of rolling hills and prestigious universities are awesome; they are what attracted residents from around the state and country to the community. According to Ronald, a father and world traveler in his mid-thirties, Ecovillage is a place where city dwellers escape to on their vacations. It is quiet, peaceful, clean, and beautiful—even after a rainstorm. The views from within and without Ecovillage are stunning. On any given day one can see children running barefoot, adults engaged in active conversation, and occasionally, a deer prancing across the meadow, fearing only one of the neighborhood dogs defying community guidelines by not being on a leash at all times. Ecovillage provides the opportunity for its residents to collectively experience community, family, leisure, and union with nature, a lifestyle that would otherwise be too expensive for any one family to afford. According to a resident who left a typical suburban neighborhood, if we assume that the former lifestyle of residents was unsustainable and lacked a sense of community, Ecovillage offers its residents an opportunity to create a lifestyle that reverses both.

I agree that lifestyle changes are essential to reversing the current trend in environmental degradation; yet, the transition between accepting the need to change our lifestyle and creating models of what a new lifestyle might look has been challenging. According to Myers (1997), populations in rich countries



realize that changes in lifestyle and reducing consumption are essential if we are to overcome ecological and social problems. He likens this lifestyle shift to the 1980s when noticeable numbers of U.S. Americans began to quit smoking. Through public policy and education, U.S. Americans have come to accept smoking bans in most public places including restaurants, bars, and, in some cases, city parks and college campuses<sup>30</sup>. Kempton et. al. (1996) found that participants in their study of U.S. environmentalists believed that “reducing our consumption can be done without reducing our ‘standard of living’ for the most part.” Participants in their study believed that, while lifestyle changes were necessary, drastic changes were unrealistic and unlikely to happen; instead, they argued for changes in technology as the only solution to environmental problems. This opinion was influenced by the belief that U.S. Americans were too spoiled to change their lifestyle, individuals would not change to meet the challenge of reducing consumption, but would support green technology over their inefficient appliances (Kempton, et al. 1996:132).

Similar to the views expressed by participants in Kempton’s study, residents in Ecovillage are confident that green technology and green marketing, as described in the popular discourse of natural capitalism, will help to solve current environmental problems. One resident, a mother who worked at home, felt that EVI was countering the stereotype that in order to be environmentally conscious one had to sacrifice comfort. But other residents struggle to be both

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<sup>30</sup> San Francisco State University is a smoke-free campus (<http://www.sfsu.edu/~puboff/smokefree/>).

technologically innovative and reduce their material goods, believing that a lower consuming society would be a better way to live (Nader and Beckerman 1978).

Kempton, et al, also found evidence that some U.S. Americans “view environmentally conscious, lower-consumption lifestyles as being more satisfying” (Kempton, et al. 1996). Residents in EVI teeter on the balance between identifying consumption as a barrier to a satisfying lifestyle (expressed through emphasis on living simply) and the appeal of green technology as a fulfilling way to help the environment without sacrificing lifestyle choices.

From observations of daily life, it is evident that a green lifestyle created at EVI aims to build holistic living with nature and the community. The concept of a green lifestyle embodies specific tastes and a distinctive style of living with neighbors and nature (Katz-Gerro and Shavit 1998:370). Like many other co-housing communities, the goal of Ecovillage is to create a lifestyle that is good for the environment and the people who live in it. The lifestyle sought by many residents is to live in a way that is mutually beneficial: the environment is preserved and protected by residents, and residents benefit from the natural surroundings. “I do feel more connected to humanity than I did living on my own in New York City or in New Haven...in that you learn about all the different things that are happening to people, what they are experiencing” (Claire). The “humanity” that Claire refers to is a limited one that includes her fellow neighbors whom she has gotten to know well through being on work teams and sharing laundry facilities.

Another effort to create a green lifestyle in Ecovillage is by creating a culture of resource sharing. Through sharing washing machines, lawn mowers, vacuum cleaners, and community meals, many residents try to simplify their life. The green lifestyle attempts to raise awareness of wasteful practices and encourages sharing, composting, consuming green products, and thereby becoming closer to nature. Families are able, in essence, to purchase a green lifestyle that automatically put them physically closer to nature and engages them in an environment that fosters making good choices for the environment. The green lifestyle created by residents of Ecovillage also means excluding families who cannot afford to buy a house in the community, live away from public transportation, and pay monthly dues to support the shared facilities such as the Common House and the common road. While there are no obvious physical gates and walls, the community restricts who is allowed in the village by rejecting public transportation and creating an economic barrier through high costs.

Thus the green lifestyle in Ecovillage can be achieved only through the consumption of particular goods and services that are identified as green or being good for the environment. Bourdieu (1984) argues that consumption helps to identify and create class relations through habituated behavior. Ecovillage also reinforces an environmentalism that ignores the interconnections between the political, economic, and ecological factors at play. I've argued that many proponents of green consumption are taking cues from the market through

advertisements and strategic marketing. The result of well-placed marketing of hybrids is an emphasis away from support for public transportation, affordable housing, and improved cities that encourage walking and alternative modes of transportation. I have tried to point out that the green lifestyle has resulted in the creation and consumption of green sprawl.

For only a handful of residents, a deep concern for the earth and a strong commitment to pro-actively improving the way new homes and communities are built was the principal justification for creating an ecological co-housing community. As I discussed in Chapter Six, for some residents “raising the green bar” and being a model of innovative technology was the driving force behind moving to the community. This distinction between living harmoniously in nature and being a model of innovative green technology is well pronounced in the SONG where many individual homes are impressively designed with straw bale insulation, solar panels, composting toilets, and in one home, several of the large structural solid wooden beams were cut and erected manually without the use of electric drills. During an afternoon of sweat equity, a future resident of the SONG told me how important it was that her house be biodegradable when she no longer needs it. Some of the efforts to raise the green bar included importing builders from out of state to give workshops on innovative technology.

The physical design of the homes was not the only means of creating a green lifestyle. According to early planners, the Ecovillage “green” lifestyle was intended to impose minimal sacrifice of the comforts of suburban homes. For many residents, creating and

living in an ecovillage was reminiscent of living in a college dorm. “Co-housing is almost like living on a campus. I remember the first night we stayed here, it seemed a whole lot like living in the dorms again [laughing]. There are a lot of very well educated people and maybe we have selected this lifestyle because it is like when we were going to school” (Jeff). Yet, according to Jeff, the project is also about defining the community as protectors of the environment in a way that feels right. A father of two, Jeff acknowledged that living a green lifestyle was challenging on many fronts: “You don’t know if your lifestyle is really sustainable...or if there is any point in doing that when everybody else in the society around us is doing something else.” Jeff’s struggle to explain what other residents had tired of, or resigned to ignore, was the looming question of how to change cultural habits, such as consumption, that result in degraded environments and communities, while being immersed in that culture. We discussed U.S. consumption and non-renewable energy sources.

Tendai: You’d be short on a lot of gas if you boycotted all the oil companies that had disasters like the Exxon Valdez accident, because I think every major oil company is doing some horrible things around the world.

Jeff: Yeah. And Shell and BP are probably just as bad as everybody else, but they also talk about developing renewable energy in the future. So they are sort of green-washing. So should you use Shell and BP in preference to the other ones? Or does it really matter at all? In here (Ecovillage) we try to live more lightly on the land, but I think I feel like we are still using a lot more resources than people outside of the United States, even though we use less than the average [U.S.] American...so are we really doing enough here, or is it just sort of a thing that is making us all feel more comfortable because we are better than other people in the United States?

In fact, many of the residents who did not move to Ecovillage for the environmental component experienced a heightened concern for the environment upon moving into one

of the neighborhoods. They became more aware of their immediate surrounding and developed a strong desire to preserve the obvious “natural” beauty that encircled them. The opportunity to live in EVI is made possible only by the willingness of the wealthy donors and neighbors who bought the land for the non-profit, and that the non-profit allows the residents to freely use the land. Many residents’ concern for the environment and community is limited to the environment and community at EVI. Some residents were more interested in being connected to other immediate EVI neighbors or concerned about their own personal spiritual health than in the desire to be part of a pioneering movement. Other residents were active members of the Global Ecovillage Network, or stayed in touch with residents in other ecovillages around the country.

Despite the numerous times some residents described a strong commitment to composting and recycling, many residents confessed to engaging in behavior that they believed was counter to the environmental mission. One resident confessed to not recycling when I observed her throwing recyclables in a large black plastic garbage bag with food wastes and other trash. She did not move to Ecovillage for the environmental conservation mission, she moved there for the opportunity to socialize at the pond, watch television programs with neighbors, and make friends through the community work-teams. Sadly, when this resident moved out of the neighborhood, no one threw her the traditional good-bye party; a sign, I observed, that she was not a well-regarded member, or rather, that she lacked the “cultural capital” to participate in the culture of the community. I discuss the concept of cultural capital later in this chapter. The green lifestyle is not well suited for everyone, and those for whom it is not are often indirectly

pressured to leave. One of the founding members expressed this sentiment: “I love the... quietness of the community, nobody ever said go. But they were not welcome...It is our tradition whenever someone goes away to have a beautiful party for them...when Bob left, nobody said a word, not even goodbye. And nobody had anything for him, not even a tea, and when [another family] left... nothing. So I think the community communicated, ‘you’re out of sync with us, this is not a good place for you, and we would be happy if you left’”(Ruth).

The subtle practice of rejecting residents is not publicly addressed. According to an early member of the EVI planning group, she was asked directly to leave the project and told that her participation was “toxic” and detrimental to the organization. According to this informant, she had wanted to create a more democratic and transparent process in the decision making of the project leaders. Often quietly, but deliberately, some of the individuals who left the community felt that they were explicitly asked to leave, or implicitly pressured to leave on their own; this was most often experienced through being ignored or alienated. When I asked if, and how, neighbors were chosen, one of the founders told me that the community is self-selecting. She appreciated this approach because it removed the community from explicit deciding who should be part of the community. Yet, based on the experiences of those who left, the community does select who is welcome and who is not<sup>31</sup> (Mansbridge 1980).

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<sup>31</sup> The work of Jane Mansbridge on adversary democracy is useful to understand the patterns of suppression and exclusion within a community. She also challenges the idea of consensus by pointing to the power struggles that exist under the guise of consensus.

I argue that the residents in Ecovillage subscribed in theory to the ideas in the mission statement of Ecovillage, yet acted differently in their personal environmental and social practices. Many residents openly desire to live at the comfort level they can afford, including owning many of the amenities they had before moving to Ecovillage, and the use of their cars whenever they choose. After all, one of the goals was to create a community that would be attractive to middle class families, thus it needed to cater to their demands (Erickson 1997). As a result, living in Ecovillage allows residents to identify themselves and their lifestyle as being better for the environment, despite the fact that some residents continued to do things they considered unsustainable like not recycling or driving unnecessarily.

Living a green lifestyle is not solely about environmental conservation and creating a sense of community, but also about living a good life: eating healthy food, feeling safe from undesirable strangers, and having access to the city. In essence, Ecovillage provides a safe haven from the ills of modern society and does so through the inspiration of being green. The mission of environmentalism is only one aspect of the larger Ecovillage concept that residents can either chose to embrace or not. I suggest that Ecovillage is less about environment and community but more about the lifestyle created by merging the two ideas, along with other efforts, like being a model, having a “sister” city in Senegal, and being of interest to journalists, students, and visitors from around the world.

Many features of the Ecovillage project point towards the creation of a green lifestyle rather than establishing practices that decrease environmental degradation. For example,



while most residents would readily argue that mass transit is one of the most ecological concepts, the community's design away from the road seems to point to different priorities, specifically, better views that contribute to a more satisfying lifestyle. Another example of the tension between green lifestyle choices and environmental efforts is the sauna project, where the sauna represented a lifestyle choice and improved public transportation was an ecological choice. Efforts to build a sauna that fit into the natural landscape of the surrounding environment was enthusiastically taken on by two residents, while, ironically, the work needed to design a bus shelter was primarily pursued by student volunteers as part of a class project.

Only a limited number of buses run along the main road adjacent to the entrance of the Ecovillage community. Requests by some residents to provide bus access closer to the neighborhood were rejected, because it would do a number of things some families wanted to avoid such as give the city certain rights over the long dirt road, or result in the likelihood that the dirt road would have to be paved and maintained by the city, something some residents felt would be less "natural." Other neighbors expressed the concern that public buses would bring strangers into the community and make the neighborhoods less safe, especially for children. The community remained resistant to allowing city buses in the neighborhood despite the general agreement that more accessible public transportation would lead to reduced automobile use (Fishman 1987).

This rejection of public transportation aligns the EVI with the processes that exclude the public from other constructed public/private spaces such as in shopping malls. Shopping

malls, as well as theme parks, have used public accessibility as a means of excluding certain visitors (Goss 1993). Thus free parking and limited public transportation at large private shopping malls and theme parks are designed into the plans to be exclusionary. No effort was made during my research to persuade the city of Ithaca to increase bus service to the community, instead residents focused on creating internal car sharing. As mentioned earlier, the dangers of these public/private spaces of the shopping mall (which are now designed to resemble old fashioned Main Street, with arboretums lined with trees, park benches, fountains, and ice-cream stands) is their emphasis on enclosure, protection and control (Jackson 1996). Like EVI, these spaces protect users from litter, the homeless, panhandlers, suspicious characters, and protestors. Despite the fact that many residents are politically active, free speech in EVI is limited to those who own shares in the community, and those who do protest within the community risk social isolation as was experienced by a family who moved out. These tensions and contradictions are only a few of the challenges that characterize the green lifestyle.

#### 7.1.1 Characteristics of a Green Lifestyle

Ecovillages are communities of people who strive to lead a sustainable lifestyle in harmony with each other, other living beings and the Earth. Their purpose is to combine a supportive social –cultural environment with a low-impact lifestyle (Svensson 2002:10).

Several characteristics are an integral part of making a green lifestyle possible in Ecovillage. One of the stipulations for creating a green lifestyle is to make everyday

‘green’ practices happen naturally, such that residents are able to engage in sustainable practices simply by living in the community. Some practices involved no conscious effort such as building on as little land as possible and living in homes that saved energy. Ecovillage successfully created a user-friendly community for residents to become good stewards of the environment by establishing such structures as work teams that would monitor and maintain the shared resources such as the hiking trails.

Another characteristic of a green lifestyle is that the objects and places that are constructed as being green and part of “nature” are easily accessible. Residents felt that they were protecting and preserving the environment by simply living in Ecovillage. A young working mother—Eleanor—argued that ecovillage was doing a wonderful thing by preserving the land that otherwise would have been developed into a typical suburban development<sup>32</sup>. Eleanor felt strongly about her responsibility to protect the land around her, despite the fact that the green space that was preserved only benefits a small group of privileged families. Her argument for the privatization of nature as a way to preserve it reflects debates around the question of who speaks for nature and who benefits from privatizing nature (see for example: Di Chiro 1996; Goldman 1998; Hardins 1968).

Believing that by privatizing the land she was enabling it to be preserved was important because it allowed her to justify her privileged opportunity to live on beautiful land that is owned by the non-profit she supports. Other residents believed that the EVI project was

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<sup>32</sup> There were a number of stories about what the farmland that is now Ecovillage would have become, had the residents not purchased the land. One of these theories is that the developer planned to construct 150 homes on 1-acre lots. My efforts to find evidence of this were not successful. A neighbor commented that the developer abandoned his plan to build the suburb when it became clear to him that he would have to build the necessary infrastructure to connect sewage lines to the city and pump city water up the hill, an expensive endeavor. According to a long-time resident of Ithaca, the city was trying to discourage sprawl and thus refused to support development outside the city limits.

an imperative to prevent unsustainable growth of the land as sprawl. It did not, however, occur to Eleanor that perhaps Ecovillage was also contributing to sprawl. Ecovillage offers a model its residents believe can be used to build sustainable new suburban communities that are physically attractive, practically useful, and make positive impacts on the environment while accepting the reality that such kinds of communities will exclude certain populations. This is a tradeoff Eleanor said was for the greater good of saving the environment.

As I discussed in Chapter Five, the consumption of products that were considered to be green was an important part of being environmentally conscious for some residents. When asked what they do to be good to the environment, a majority of the residents interviewed said they consumed post-consumer products and tried to buy organic food. Christina, a woman in her mid 40s felt that turning up her thermostat was not in harmony with nature, but preferred to chop wood. “Even though there is some pollution aspects to wood stoves, there is still something spiritually connected to me about that process.” Christina also felt that living in harmony was not about economics:

I don't think it is economic. I think it has to do with courage, it has to do with ...habits of ways of living, and so the courage to move beyond ways of living, things we think we need and don't need...I think that it is cheaper and simpler ultimately to live in harmony with the environment.

In terms of consumptions, one resident said that she did not feel “great about my reliance on a car, but I live in the world as it exists at this point and so I'm not in a major guilt trip about it” (Constance). Constance also occasionally shopped at used clothing stores: “I

tend to either shop at thrift stores or buy from really good catalogs that use organic cotton...so I have some expensive things.” I argue that in many cases, green consumerism results in redirected consumerism that still fails to consider the places where food and commodities originate, the living and working conditions of the people involved in their production, and the waste that is generated when those products are replaced or no longer needed.

Finally, Ecovillage provides a venue to discuss current environmental problems and how one might go about solving them through changes in daily practice. Residents in Ecovillage were constantly engaged in questioning how to improve their environment. Interested residents established small committees and working groups to investigate alternative energies and resource-saving technologies. Community meetings and smaller discussion groups met to discuss such topics as the need to reduce what the community consumed, U.S. dependence on cars, and the wasteful consumption of material goods. Ecovillage has created a culture of dialogue about new green technology as well as ways to decrease consumption in general. Neighbors were nonetheless reluctant to point out each other’s obvious wasteful practices. One resident was afraid to judge the wasteful practices of her neighbor for fear that she would be judged, too. This unspoken rule of not criticizing each other was an “elephant” in the rooms during many community meetings I observed and in the neighborhood in general. The response to individuals and behaviors that were anti-social or un-ecological was to post an email to the entire community announcing that “someone” had thrown recyclables in the garbage dumpster or an email reminder that all adults needed to do community work.

Creating a green lifestyle posed challenges many residents were forced to either ignore or negotiate. According to informants, Ecovillage is a realistic alternative and simpler lifestyle for families, who otherwise could afford to build on their own land on a hill. These families, for the most part, have found a way to pull their resources together and create a joint communal environmental project. Regardless of whether the community or their ecological goals are actually achieved, the lifestyle has created the opportunity for residents to feel they are making both a social and ecological difference in their lives and in the life of the planet.

## 7.2 Class and a Green Lifestyle

“I never owned a car until I moved up here” (Kevin).

While Veblen (1931) focuses on material goods to establish class and social distinction, Bourdieu places emphasis on symbolic features such as the ability for individuals to participate culturally in a distinct social class through what he calls *cultural capital*. Ecovillage embodies both symbolic (cultural capital) and material goods (organic products, open land) in creating a distinct green lifestyle. While material possessions, such as owning a home in one of the neighborhoods, are essential to being part of Ecovillage, being surrounded by open undeveloped land and having an opportunity to engage in the discourse of being green (the cultural capital of community and environment) is also important. Residents share a common appreciation for the beauty

and luxury of connecting with nature, but would not consider themselves of a special “green class.”<sup>33</sup> In Ecovillage, green needs, such as hybrid cars and organic shampoos, are marketed to a specific social class as social indicators of being concerned for the environment. For example, owning a composting toilet is one way one resident identified herself as belonging to a class of people who are concerned about protecting the environment. This fits into what Bourdieu describes as lifestyles in creating the “status of a symbolic system whose key organizing principle is distinction” (Applebaum 1998:335). Bourdieu’s concept of lifestyle is a useful tool to understand residents in Ecovillage who are trying to create a sustainable culture. The project is creating a lifestyle based on distinctive practices of the consumption of specific green commodities such as land and homes.

Debates about consumption suggests that the emphasis on class distinction is being replaced by “consumption as a status and lifestyle generator” (Featherstone 1991; Katz-Gerro and Shavit 1998:370). An emphasis on green consumption and lifestyle affects the residents at Ecovillage. Many residents are keenly aware of the class distinction that living in Ecovillage gives them, though few would describe themselves as being anything other than middle class. During one of the early summers of the project, some residents taught a gardening workshop for low-income children, many of whom were African American, many years later, this event was touted as a sign that the community is closer to a public charity than a private neighborhood. One resident downplayed her access to

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<sup>33</sup> I refer to the ability of certain class of people to spend excess income on green products and green purchases such as organic food, earth friendly products, and green vacations such as eco-tourism, and belonging to a green class. This class is also one of the driving forces behind the influx of green commodities into the economic market.

wealth by explaining that she and her partner had worked hard as young adults and thus earned their access to wealth. Some families try to be actively inclusive of other social classes, while others accept their privilege and try to make the best of it, often by being a model of how other middle and upper class families can spend their money in ways that are better for the community and the environment through consuming a green lifestyle. Rikki felt sad that the neighborhood was not more financially diverse and described her effort to encourage subsidized housing. Another resident had just the opposite opinion, she insisted “I feel very strongly...that everyone should pay their own way...even though I’m one of the perhaps thirty percent who are very comfortable financially, I won’t pay a buck for somebody else. Because I don’t want to... I’m not going to subsidize you, even though you can’t afford it and I can.” Clearly there is a strong tension around class at EVI where some residents feel guilty and try to hide their class status, while others do not.

The narratives from residents about their efforts to live more sustainably than they did in their previous community were often humorous, but sometimes sad and difficult.

Residents were aware of the contradictions of their lifestyle and sometimes felt it was hard to admit that they lived in Ecovillage.

“...There is no reason why town house communities can’t share a washing machine. In fact it happens all the time. We don’t call it co-housing, we call it a Laundromat or coin operated system, but they are doing it. People ask me all the time, what makes EVI different from a condo community and...well sometimes not much. And so I think we actually have a lot to learn from the outside world. Honestly...we’re acting like it is so special and that it can only happen in this special way. I think it really hurts us



and hurts our cause, if our cause is to help others live more sustainably, or help sustainable living become part of the [U.S.] American norm. Other nations have bike share programs, other cities I've heard in [the United States] even that have car share programs...or are built more pedestrian friendly" (Wendy).

Wendy became frustrated by what she felt was disingenuous. "...it is sort of off-putting to people when I say I'm moving to Ecovillage within Ithaca and I really want to help kind of change that perception."

Ecovillage represents more complex issues than simply being a place to live with the environment and to get to know neighbors. It can be described as a commodity (Davis 1992), a themed space where one can escape from polluted, crowded, and lonely environments of the city and retreat into nature, fresh air, organic tomatoes, and friendly neighbors who stop in for tea. In the themed space of nature, residents are still isolated from a larger community, but they are isolated together. Residents are able to purchase a pre-packaged way of life that included houses designed to encouraging visual connections with neighbors, and a pedestrian walkway to supply social interactions. With little effort but significant income, residents are able to purchase a sense of community and stewardship to the environment. Campbell (1995) suggests that consumer goods "commonly serve to communicate social distinctions or reinforce relationships of superiority and inferiority between individual groups" (Campbell 1995:111). In this case, Ecovillage is a commodity.

It is appropriate to discuss one of the layers of complexity that is embedded in the EVI project—the practical distinction between the EVI, Inc. non-profit (501(c)(3)) and the residents who help to fulfill part of the non-profit status of the EVI project. There is a pronounced difference between what the founders and planners of the Ecovillage at Ithaca project envisioned and what the residents see as their role of living in the community. The planners envisioned the community to have a national, and global impact<sup>34</sup>, while residents were concerned about extremely local concerns such as how much the SONG families should pay for their use of the FROG common house. Another sign of the tension between the vision of the non-profit and that of the residents was a concern about fulfilling the original vision of building a village of 500 people, while individual households expressed concern that three neighborhoods was crowding the land. Heated discussions would ensue during community meetings where the boundaries between what the non-profit was aiming to achieve and what residents wanted. For example, some residents were upset that tour groups were constantly being shown around the neighborhood, yet, as part of the non-profit status of the EVI, Inc. the tours were an educational opportunity. Finally, while the non-profit describes composting and recycling as some of the “green” features of the neighborhood, some residents do not participate in that vision.

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<sup>34</sup> The adoption of a sister city in Yoff, Senegal was an exciting project for the EVI, Inc. The connection to an “African village” would demonstrate that the non-profit was creating more than just a suburban neighborhood, but reaching out to a wider public. Ironically, few residents knew the details of the Yoff partnership and how their neighborhoods were related. Some residents felt EVI should create partnerships with poorer communities in the United States before going abroad.

Perhaps the most significant disconnection between the non-profit and resident group relates to affordability. A few of the early community planners were divided on whether the project would be focused on affordability, yet decisions made, such as which land would be chosen and what kind of homes would be built, meant that the ability to afford an expensive home would dominate the project for many years to come. Emphasis was placed on being an educational model first, as part of the public non-profit mission with the understanding that the community needed to demonstrate the ability to live comfortably, but distinctly improving the environment and creating community.

Ecovillage allows its residents to choose their identity by the consumption of tangible and non-tangible commodities. Every year an announcement is made about the Angel Heart Sale, an expensive linen clothing boutique that has an annual discount sale. Residents who are interested go shopping together. Campbell (1995) argues that material goods such as clothing are codes for social class. In Ecovillage, both material (organic food) and non-tangible items (views, open space, nature) place residents in a particular social class. I believe that the land debt meant that the community was forced to accept decisions that did not necessarily meet the environmental spirit of the mission statement, but provided financial stability to repay the loan. The need for the non-profit to pay for the land (in which FROG is nestled) through the lenders is primarily what drove the construction of the second neighborhood. A resident from SONG, Melanie, felt that “in some ways SONGs are just dollar signs to a lot of FROGs...and a FROG member (Said) ‘well the SONGs are coming, our lives should get cheaper here’ ... That exact quote has been said to me... the whole idea of people saying we want SONG to get built because

that reduces the land debt.” But this choice of land also meant that the group was selecting class distinction over other criteria like environmental commitment and economic diversity. This decision has impacted the community in many ways, from creating a rift between early planners to portraying the community as elitist. A resident of the Ithaca community, Garth, had the impression that EVI was “a group of wealthy individuals who had a lot of time, but were lonely and needy.” Most of the residents I spoke with felt saddened by this reality, but no one felt an alternative existed. A family left because they felt the priorities of the community moved away from core values of environmental and social sustainability to superficial concerns like the geese dropping and the sauna.

An example of the intimate connection between class and lifestyle in Ecovillage was especially pronounced during the construction of the second neighborhood. The second neighborhood (SONG) was built quickly in order to repay the lenders (some of whom were residents in the FROG)<sup>35</sup>. An informant explained the effort to find wealthier potential residents who would not quarrel about costs and build their homes quickly so as to contribute to the remaining balance on the debt. Some of those residents later expressed disappointment with the size of their house and the unnecessary features they felt pressure to include. The homes reflect personal taste and lifestyle preferences, like having a wood burning hearth and custom wood trimming.

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<sup>35</sup> As indicated in Chapter Five, the land debt belonged to the non-profit. The non-profit is a separate entity to FROG, which then purchased 3.5 acres from the non-profit. The land included the houses, pond, and the long road that leads into the community.

Another challenge that illustrated strong ties between class and green lifestyle relates to the design of the homes in SONG. The construction of the second neighborhood homes emphasized the environmental vision more so than the community. This decision was mainly invoked because of pressure from the developers to pay back the land debt. Specifically, an informant described that many SONG households were attracted to the project because they did not have restrictions on the kind of housing designs they could use. The residents of SONG spent little time contemplating the communal design of the neighborhood while individuals struggled to make their homes personal and green. Other new members struggled to create an affordable<sup>36</sup> home while their neighbors continued to add features that would result in a very costly community. Because the SONG was in a hurry to begin the construction of their homes, some families felt they were rushed into joining by developers who were anxious to sell homes. Few families in the SONG were aware of the larger Ecovillage vision that their homes were somehow connected to a larger land debt, and their role in being an educational model for sustainability. Some families were later forced to drop out as it became clear that construction costs of the homes would continue to rise. The SONG orientations in the spring of 2000 advertised small energy-efficient homes ranging from \$50,000 to \$70,000; the average home price by the end of construction in 2003 was \$150,000 - \$200,000. In addition to increasing costs, the emphasis on individual home designs and not on community design meant that the homes were built larger, with conflicting neighborhood designs. For example, the Southside homes were much taller than the Northside homes; this distinction separated

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<sup>36</sup> The Thomas family eventually had to leave the community as it became obvious that the initially affordability goals of the SONG would no longer be a priority and families continued to build houses to the maximum specifications, resulting in homes that were \$100,000 more than initially proposed.

expensive homes from cheaper ones. Compared with the FROG design process, fewer design guidelines were discussed and agreed upon in the group.

Unlike the SONG, the FROG reached consensus on five standard home designs with similar interior and exterior decorations; contrary to this model, potential households in SONG were allowed to design their own home based on sample plans. Instead of using local resources, some households hired expert out-of-state architects and green builders. The developers of the SONG community believed that their ability to recruit members for the SONG was heavily influenced by potential residents' options to design their own home. This option of choosing and personalizing the house design was meant to allow for cheaper construction, more sweat equity<sup>37</sup> and especially more innovative energy efficiency such as solar panels, sustainably harvested local lumber, and composting toilets. Households in SONG were given a rough guideline of 32-36 feet in length and 24 feet in width for the house sizes (a small number compared with new development in the rest of the country); as a result of the less rigid guidelines, many families chose to build the largest possible home they could afford to build and consequently, the houses were larger, and required more energy to heat and cool. On the surface, many residents of SONG argued that their homes had more innovative designs such as radiant floors, solar panels, and composting toilets, characteristics the FROG was unable to build because the community limited the number of house designs to five models. Green technology was an important feature that families building SONG were excited about demonstrating, they

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<sup>37</sup> Sweat equity was marketed to allow residents the opportunity to reduce the cost of their house by contributing their labor. In reality, many families who did sweat equity did not see their home price significantly reduced.

were less critical of consumption because their advanced, energy-efficient technology would not only balance the environmental impact of their larger homes, but surpass their energy consumption by having solar panels that sold energy back to their electric company. Internally, the SONG houses included many luxuries that the FROG home were denied, such as wood burning mason stoves, large custom kitchens, unique carpentry work, basements, office spaces, and guestrooms.

Class, taste and lifestyle became more pronounced in SONG through the emphasis on view-shed. Some residents in the village strongly valued a natural view-shed<sup>38</sup> and installed large bay windows to bring their home and nature closer together. Interestingly, a resident of FROG commented to me that windmills should not be put in the open field because they would block the view-shed of south facing houses, obviously choosing lifestyle options over environmental needs. While informants told me of the importance of their view-shed, I had the impression that the view, house design, location, and community encompass characteristics of a green lifestyle that is in harmony with nature. However, microcosmic issues of class were still evident within the community. Another informant building on the Southside of SONG half joked (with concern) that one corner of the neighborhood would be the “eco-ghetto” because it was to be designated for subsidy units, abutted a parking lot, and had very little view-shed. In fact, all residents of the SONG who moved from FROG had joined the FROG late in the project and were “stuck” with the north-side houses. Subsequently, three of the four families who moved out of the FROG neighborhood and into the SONG left north-side homes and built larger

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<sup>38</sup> The quality of the view one has from looking out from one’s home.

homes with south-facing views. During a village-wide meeting a debate rose about views. A Southside SONG household (who used to live on the Northside of FROG) argued, “view is not as important as keeping up with our mission.” In response, a Southside FROG resident responded that she agreed with “ecology over views...[but] likes living on a hill with views.”

The green lifestyle of Ecovillage allows residents to identify themselves as part of a larger effort to fight social and environmental degradation. It is this connection to doing the right social and ecological thing, or at least trying, that residents find attractive and successful in the Ecovillage project. Section 7.3 focuses on the significance of this identity with a green lifestyle, and the consequences of a green lifestyle on U.S. environmentalism.

### 7.3 Significance of a Green Lifestyle

One of the things which makes me feel really good about living here is telling other people about it and enlightening them about it ...(Sean).

I think we have to be very careful not to act like we have so much to teach the rest of the world and oh couldn't they learn so much from us, cause it puts us on a pedestal even within Ithaca...we are already up on that hill, it's bad enough, but I just think we need to keep our egos kind of in check with reality in terms of what we have to teach (Lela).



The significance of creating and supporting green lifestyles in general, and ecovillages in particular, is that they represent a growing trend not only in Western countries but also increasingly in non-Western countries (Fotopoulos 2000). As such, the influence of ecovillages in U.S. environmental and community efforts can be considerable.

Ecovillages have the potential to influence the development of communities in non-Western countries. In this section I argue that as individuals and whole communities focus their environmental efforts on personal lifestyle choices, they actively ignore or displace local and global environmental concerns. Thus, the EVI project is an opportunity for individuals alone, and individuals as part of a larger community, to create an identity of environmental sustainability: living in a way that is good for the environment, but also a lifestyle that is comfortable, pioneering, and to some degree, desirable.

The desire to live in EVI is evident by the informants I interviewed who lamented the fact that many early members dropped out because they could not afford to live in the community. Thus another significance of the green lifestyle is its exclusionary nature. The EVI project excludes the larger community and creates its own community within the larger city of Ithaca. Some residents are perturbed by this and want it to be more integrated: “We really wanted to be part of a larger community outside of just the co-housing. That was really important to us; that it not be this insular group of people that never related to the outside world” (Lela). While ecovillages are not universally physically separate from the larger community that surrounds them, EVI chose its location because of the land, and the identity of being an ecovillage with access to land.

Finally in this section I explore the significance of green lifestyles on U.S. environmentalism by discussing the current trend both in EVI, but also in the environmental movement in general. I build on arguments I made in the preceding two Chapters that the lens of environmental commitment has been focused inward and on changing personal behavior and celebrating personal benefits, to the detriment of larger environmental and social problems.

### 7.3.1 Green Lifestyle and Green Identity

Ecovillage [brings me] closer to my idea of what I want to be, and Ecovillage is definitely getting me closer to that haven...that is how it should be. Everybody should look at me and say, 'this is how I want to live'. ...I think what I do is better for the environment and the world, so if everybody would do it, it would be great (Ronald).

Almost all the residents I interviewed were happy living at Ecovillage. They celebrated the warmth of their neighbors and abundance of open land around them. The common meals three nights a week, the opportunities to swim, and garden with neighbors were favorite reasons why residents were satisfied with the community and felt the project enriched their lives. But many residents also expressed how the community had helped them become more socially or ecologically aware of their lifestyle choices. Some composted more than they had in their previous community while others felt that EVI made it easier for them to recycle and thus more likely that they would. The subtle reminders to reuse objects, the random discussions on how to save water, as well as the

opportunities to engage in community mediation when conflicts arose were all positive and encouraging mechanisms for creating a lifestyle that my informants felt was rewarding, not only for them, but for nature and the environment in general.

Informants also felt proud that they were creating a lifestyle that was aspiring to be sustainable. Although residents often prefaced their comments with “it is not perfect,” they also felt strongly that their EVI lifestyle was much better than the way they had lived in their former community. The project as a whole, and not necessarily any one piece of it, is what many residents felt was rewarding, they were part of a larger Ecovillage community and often identified themselves as members of that community. In a small circle of women, a mother announced jokingly that her daughter’s teacher reported that the daughter announced to her playmates “you’re not my real friends, my real friends live in Ecovillage.” Laughing, but with some concern, the story reminded us of the sometimes contradictory nature of EVI, that there is a strong identity to the community but one that is also exclusionary. The exclusionary nature of EVI both in its focus on environmentalism and on sense of community that segregates its residents in its unmarked boundary is significant and persistent. Most discussions of U.S. environmentalism aim to make a distinction between two worldviews: one that is considered environmentalism, and the other social justice (Harvey 1996a). This distinction is useful to understand why some environmentalist circles seem to care little about social justice, it also helps to excuse the behavior of individuals who actively choose to ignore social justice. What was apparent in EVI, is that people I spoke with were highly educated and well aware of the two forms of environmentalism: one that

consisted of non-human nature, and other that emphasized social justice/environmental racism. Yet, as a means to respond to the overwhelming reality of choosing between fighting for social justice and pursuing personal desires, residents choose to protect their own interests. An example of this was expressed when Doran insisted that her daughter would go to the local public school because she supported the rural school, yet, when it came time to make the decision, she chose to home school. She wanted what was best for her child, and although in theory the public school would be best, she couldn't take a chance on her daughters future. These are not uncommon or unrealistic choices, yet they are the ones that perpetuate the class and racial divisions that is affecting all U.S. communities. The forces that suggest consumption as a means to solve the environmental problems are the same forces at work when designing exclusionary communities. This issue is not unique to EVI, it is systemic in other part of the United States. It accounts for low voter turnout, a crumbling education system, the growth of Christian Fundamentalism, and the continued divide between environmentalism and social justice. Through emphasis on bioregionalism and deep ecology U.S. environmentalism actively removes itself from spaces that would require its proponents to confront race and class (Harvey 1996a; Sarkar 1999). The green lifestyle in effect creates a boundary in which those engaged in it can create the criteria by which they will confront social and environmental degradation.

Although an informant identified the community as one that recycles, composts and shares meals together, which made her feel good about living there, she did not herself participate in any of these "eco" activities, but she was nonetheless proud to be part of a

community that did. Another informant identified herself as being concerned for the environment by the fact that after moving to EVI, she was able to consume organic food thanks to the CSA just down the path; in fact, it was the CSA that was especially attractive to her and her family when deciding where to live.

Douglas and Isherwood (1979) argue that consumption is an important component to creating a unique lifestyle identity. They argue that specific items have value social because they allow households who own these meaningful objects to create stronger relationships with other households who possess the same value of objects. That is, objects carry with them distinct meaning that are used to create social identities (Appadurai 1986a; Carrier and Heyman 1997; Miller 1995b) This connection between valued objects and social relationships is also emphasized by Bourdieu's analysis of class and lifestyle in French social structure (Bourdieu 1984). Other scholars explore consumption through of political economy. Carrier and Heyman (1997) in their frustration with the direction of consumption studies in anthropology, which they see as focusing too narrowly on the symbolism of consumption, argue that focusing on mundane objects of consumption such as organic food versus non-organic foods, is merely identifying the symbolic values and not likely to make a significant impact. Carrier and Heyman argue that the focus symbolism neglects the political economic relationship of the process of production and consumption. The reorientation away from class to focus more specifically on consumption is related to a parallel emphasis on mass production and thus mass consumption (Carrier and Heyman 1997). Thus the consumption of specific goods reflects the social and political forces that shape households who possess

the objects in question. For residents, the unique identity of being a member of an ecovillage is achieved simply by purchasing a home in the community, yet is also carries with it the constraint of a larger social and political meaning for which households negotiate through their daily practice. The green lifestyle in ecovillage extends further than the “cheap” consumable of sustainably harvested chairs and into realm of class distinction. Thus the green lifestyle identifies residents with a particular place and culture. For many residents, part of creating a sense of community is to establish strong roots in a particular location. Some of the residents envisioned their children growing up in Ecovillage and being part of the third or fourth neighborhoods, envisioning a village with an extended family. Yet, the broader impacts consumption, of a green lifestyle) reinforce larger political and social divisions, namely race and class (Carrier and Heyman 1997). Thus the consumption of a green lifestyle in EVI goes beyond the mere purchase of an energy-efficient home, it is an act that is embedded in a wider and more serious debate, for which residents are aware and struggle to negotiate.

By buying a home and living in Ecovillage, residents are able to live a lifestyle that includes various energy-saving options like sharing resources with neighbors. In turn, living in Ecovillage is a way to create a personal identity of being green. According to Crawford “consumption hierarchies, in which commodities define lifestyles, now furnish indications of status more visible than the economic relationship of class position” (1992:11), that is, personal identities and class distinction are represented through the consumption of specific commodities that are marketed as symbols of class status (Appadurai 1986b; Crawford 1992). Residents in Ecovillage often describe themselves

as being ecological by the fact that they live in Ecovillage instead of in a typical suburban development. The community lifestyle as a whole becomes synonymous with environmental conservation and a regained sense of community. In turn, the project is marketed as a commodity that people concerned for the environment should strive to obtain. Even residents who did not move to Ecovillage for the environmental mission felt that by virtue of living in the community they were doing the right thing for the environment. Specific practices within the community reinforced the green lifestyle such as voluntary simplicity. Purchasing specific products that are considered green (such as solar panels) made the environmental efforts of the community visible in everyday practice. Although much emphasis was placed on green consumerism, less was mentioned when individual residents reduced their commodities or decided to live without a car. Erickson (1997) makes the point that reducing consumption is difficult if it is the very means that environmentally conscious people use to define themselves.

In *Regarding Nature*, McLaughlin (1993) argues that a society that focuses on consumption is an “ecologically lethal” way to form personal identity. While Thoreau’s “simplify simplify simplify” was a reoccurring theme in Ecovillage, reducing consumption of material goods was often limited to non-green items. Reminders of overflowing dumpsters led to informative discussions of waste and materialism, but eventually a larger dumpster was purchased (Walker 2005). Some residents responded that compared to the rest of the country, they were doing well on reducing their waste and materialism.

What is the significance of creating a green lifestyle in the United States? And what are the effects of creating such a lifestyle on the environment and environmentalism? The lifestyle option modeled in Ecovillage is not available to everyone. But it was never intended to be a model of green living for an average community in the United States. While Ecovillage uses consumption to help create a sense of community and preserve the environment, some scholars argue that it is consumption that has helped to lead to the breakdown of community tracing the breakdown of community to the industrial revolution and the expansion of a consumer culture (Sack 1990; Wachtel 1983).

### 7.3.2 Eco-exclusion

Although helpful in creating an alternative culture among small sections of the population and, at the same time, boosting morale for activists who wish to see an immediate change in their lives, this approach [of building ecovillages] does not have any chance of success—in the context of today's huge concentration of power—to create the democratic majority needed for systemic social change (Fotopoulos 2000:298).

The exclusionary nature of creating a new intentional community outside the established city, that is, the exclusionary nature of creating a private community, is another characteristic of green lifestyles and the EVI project. I propose that the EVI project has perhaps inadvertently created another means by which middle and upper middle class families in the United States can leave urban space and further create exclusionary spaces, what some have described as white flight (Gregory 1998). In the archives of the community literature, EVI argues that the community is not an average suburban village, but a model of community development done right. Although the community is set up as



a green theme park, it focuses inwards, excluding environmental and social degradation that remains in urban cities and in communities of the poor and often non-Caucasian populations.

EVI works outside and apart from other groups who are trying to improve the environment or community of all people (or those who are most disenfranchised) in the city, or working to preserve land for public use. While proclaiming to work for the environment, these new ecological co-housing communities help to redefine the solutions to environmental problems from lobbying government to strengthen laws that protect all people, to lobbying city government to allow only a small population to benefit from building a private green community. EVI chooses (consciously, and perhaps unconsciously) to exclude social and environmental justice and instead prefers to focus on issues of personal choices, taste, and lifestyle options. This choice lead to many families leaving the project in frustration and disillusionment with the founders original vision. A resident in FROG felt frustrated that no one else in the community seemed concerned about these larger issues. “ I feel selfish to ... live up here, have all this land to ourselves. I don't really know how to...I do know that I feel alone in that concern.” In addition to the lack of an overarching mission to address social and environmental degradation in poor, polluted communities, the immediate, though what some called mundane, issues like whether pets should be allowed outside, or the role of the “Process Steering Committee” is overwhelming to residents who then lack the desire or energy to fight against superfund sites or work to stop nuclear proliferation (issues that some residents had spent significant portions of their lives fighting against). As I mentioned in

earlier Chapters, being part of the EVI community requires a lot of time and energy for making group decisions, participating in the large number of events, as well as providing for one's family.

EVI has become a politically correct way for some families to live in suburbia. By design, the neighborhoods are excluded from the larger Ithaca community, preferring to construct new homes that are energy-efficient and comfortable. Several of the households in EVI are from outside of Ithaca and have only tangential connections to the wider community, giving the EVI community an artificial park-like presence in Ithaca. Molly, a mother of two in her late 30s, felt that EVI was “superficial because most of the families were middle class,” she felt that the “working class is more honest and real.” Although Molly was active in the EVI community, she often found it difficult to get to know people well. A meeting of the SONG group reiterated this concern. During the meeting about making more of the homes affordable, a future resident announced that he preferred not to have a flip tax (where a percentage of the profit on a sold house is returned to the neighborhood in order to keep the house affordable to the next resident; none of the homes that sold during my residency recorded a profit) because he wanted to build and sell homes for a living. He explained, “if co-housing really takes off, this could be really lucrative” (Martin). At the same time another resident in her 30's cautioned the group against creating an isolated island in Ithaca “it is extremely important for ...my family not to feel isolated up here in this little weird enclave.” These kinds of conversations revealed a tension between wanting to demonstrate a model of ecological living, but prioritizing the luxury of having exclusive access to views and open space.

I argue that creating an ecovillage is creating a lifestyle that excludes a wide variety of people and issues. In essence it is masking issues of race, environmental racism, white flight, and unequal access to healthy environments. By focusing on creating a green lifestyle in Ecovillage, the planners and residents have chosen to emphasize one type of nature and environmentalism over another. Specifically, residents focus on preserving only the immediate land around them, the land that primarily benefits only a handful of families who can afford to live there. Although one informant told me that the EVI project was protecting the land on West Hill from development, she did not include herself or her neighborhood as a form of development, rather she felt that her form of development was good for the environment and would show other families planning or able to build in suburbia a better way to create community. Yet if this particular EVI model was adopted, there would be nothing done for already polluted spaces (except perhaps the continued exodus of families); our cities would be left empty, our suburbs deserted while new ones are built, and there would still be inadequate public transportation, increased use of fossil fuel, increased loss of open land, and the poor would likely be further inundated by waste incinerators.

As many residents frequently reminded me, their Ecovillage lifestyle helped them to improve recycling and helped them to create the kind of friendships they value. While this form of suburban development that concentrates human density in the community as in cities, and leaves the surrounding area for agriculture, we need to ask who, besides the residents, benefits from this “miniature” model of living in harmony with nature. We

also need to question why this particular model was chosen over other means of working for environmental sustainability. Is creating green sprawl the most productive means of effecting global or local ecological change? If so, what should become of our cities? It is clear, however, that ecovillages are suggesting a new trend in community rebuilding and environmental protection aimed for the middle and upper classes. More specifically, EVI is suggesting an exclusionary vision of re-creating a sense of community and proposing a way to save the environment that is itself consuming a luxury. EVI can be perceived as a response to a larger need of creating a limited luxury. While living in EVI is an exciting opportunity, it is an opportunity to live a lifestyle that is marketed as positive, healthy, and innovative. I argue that this marketing effort has resulted in an ecological distraction such as preserving valuable resources and energy, to supporting degraded communities, encourage public transportation, and providing nature and natural spaces for all people.

Ecovillage is successful in that the people who created the idea, and those who are living there and benefiting from this lifestyle, are happy; those who felt otherwise left. Many residents admitted to joining Ecovillage because of where it was and what it included: free access to nature most people can enjoy only in national parks far away from the city. Ecovillage appeals to residents who are looking for accessible friendships and support in their efforts to be green. There are various reasons why families felt that the Ecovillage lifestyle provided a better way to live than they experienced in the community they had left. For example, residents felt that they benefited from collective pressure to recycle, share, and discuss the environment on an almost daily basis.

A significant factor in the exclusive nature of Ecovillage relates to the idea of creating a village of more than one neighborhood. Ecovillage is unique because of its mission to create several co-housing communities in a village. An early version of the community plan included six to eight clustered neighborhoods of fifteen to twenty-five families.

McCammet and Durret (1994) recommend that one neighborhood of twenty to twenty-five households is the best way to create a sense of community and make decision making manageable. Also, most co-housing communities in Denmark, where the housing model traces its roots, recommend one neighborhood with up to 30 households.

The planners of Ecovillage felt that a larger community was a better option for being a model because it would demonstrate an alternative to the generally held belief that if Ecovillage did not build, a typical developer would have built 150 houses on one-acre lots. This image helped to promote Ecovillage as a more sustainable option than the typical development. A larger project supported efforts by residents to create a green lifestyle, a themed community that would demonstrate sustainable living by having a critical mass to create car-sharing, fund gray water recycling, and create small cottage industries (amongst other project ideas). More people meant more opportunity to share, thus reducing the need to consume, but also, more people meant there would be more friends and the opportunity to connect with each other. During my research, however, it became clear that bigger is not always better. Some residents complained that there were already too many people in Ecovillage. The construction of the SONG meant that the new people, “strangers” in some ways, were being added to the freshly settled FROG. One resident of FROG complained that the SONG neighborhood brought younger,

“cooler” residents to the community and her neighbors in FROG were more interested in getting to know the new families than maintaining and being interested in deeper friendships with her and other FROG neighbors. Some felt the point of creating a community where neighbors knew each other well was being diluted by additional neighborhoods. More people meant that the beautiful open land would start to become congested. These attitudes reflected the fact that the original mission and vision of the EVI project was not well known or agreed upon. However, it also revealed the fact that not everyone wanted more neighbors and to some extent they were concerned that their peaceful backyard would be inundated with a lot of people, one of the reasons they left the city to begin with.

The question of how large the community should be is related to several contradictions that it faces on a daily basis. One such contradiction is the desire to create community by leaving established communities and building new homes as a way to prevent development. Yet the community was developed in a way that emphasizes personal benefits, like views, over ecological options, such as creating access for children and adults to use public transportation and easily pick up their mail. In an effort to encourage simplicity, the project did little to discourage larger homes in SONG and as many informants confessed, they preferred that only two neighborhoods were built on the land, and only if absolutely necessary, a third community.

Although Ecovillage wanted to demonstrate the benefits and positive outcome of building suburban communities that favored neighborliness and were beneficial to the

environment, many scholars and residents believe that sprawl is the result of ill-planned development. It is ironic then that the idea of sprawl could be greened and marketed in an ecologically preferable option. Part of the early mission of the EVI non-profit, and the selling point of the project was to demonstrate a better way to design new suburban developments. It was also to create a new kind of community with plans for an education center, village center, small businesses, and self-supporting economies, an edge city.

The juncture of consumption and environmentalism is most pronounced in this fact that Ecovillage has a goal of creating more than one neighborhood. This trend is also reflected in the desire to purchase a large piece of land in order to develop it. While the mission of creating a village implies the addition of other neighbors, it also suggests a desire to have more over less. On an individual level, some residents in the second neighborhood chose to add an extra foot here, and two more feet there, in order to get more “house” for their money. One family planned to build an apartment into their home with the good intent of renting the apartment to a low-income family as one way of addressing affordability issues in EVI. During a village association meeting, a participant had the idea of building a tennis court on the piece of land, called the village crux, which lies between the two neighborhoods. All of these choices point to a tension between creating a model of sustainable living and thus justifying the privatization of beautiful suburban land, and creating a lifestyle that is indeed sustainable and not simply a lifestyle that results in more consumption. The next section explores some of the contradictions that make the EVI project a complex and interesting experiment in community and sustainability.

Considering that the general trend in the U.S. is to consume more than necessary, it is not surprising that the U.S. is home to the first co-housing community with more than one neighborhood. This fact demonstrates a fundamental concern within the larger U.S. culture, the desire to consume more than necessary, that bigger is always better, or at least when given a choice to take more or the larger rather than less or none. Like most people living in the United States, EVI and its residents are immersed within a larger culture of consumption, or over-consumption (Shove and Warde 2002). In order to work against the trend of over-consumption and waste, projects like that in EVI need to be critical of long held beliefs that capitalism is the most effective model to solve ecological and communal degradation. Once we are able to move beyond the temporality of eco/natural capitalism, we can begin to look for alternatives as a way of creating harmony in our communities and between the human and non-human environment that will have sustainable results.

### 7.3.3 Contradictions of the Exclusionary Lifestyle

Much of the elements within [Eco-Village Movements] are politically apathetic, insufficiently socially responsible, sloppy, irrational and far too affluent, and not interested in structural changes. Much of it is quite self-indulgent, only concerned with establishing havens within capitalist society, in which people can go on consuming goods imported from Third World sweatshops (Trainer 2002:144).

Trainer is a supporter of what he characterizes as an Ecovillage Movement, arguing that modeling sustainable communities is the best way to change individual behavior from an



unsustainable lifestyle to one that benefits both people and non-human nature. Yet, he admits that the current Ecovillage Movement has fallen short of being a useful model (Trainer 2002).

I often felt that the model of environmentalism and community building that EVI is attempting to create is a “cover” for families who want a middle and upper middle class suburban lifestyle without the stigma of being elitist and admit that their lifestyle is contributing to sprawl. I believe that few people in EVI want to actively harm the environment and many more, including myself, are trying to find realistic and meaningful ways to balance our needs and the needs of the rest of the planet.

Furthermore, as I have tried to demonstrate in Chapter Five, accepting the message of green marketers and to a large extent natural capitalism, means that social justice become replaced with buying organic meats and driving alternative fuel vehicles. Thus the green lifestyle does little to change or raise awareness of fundamental environmental and community problems like white flight, toxic pollutants in food and water, lack of adequate social policies, meaningful employment, adequate childcare and education, streets without sidewalks and the lack of healthy grocery stores in low-income minority neighborhood, to name just a few.

In addition to creating a green lifestyle and thereby ignoring or misplacing the root causes of environmental and social degradation, I argue that EVI in particular has become another example of the way in which U.S. communities are creating exclusionary spaces.

I make this argument based on two contradictory features of the EVI project. First, in order to create a sense of community, the project emphasizes the creation of a new community separate from any established one. Families living in EVI had moved away from their biological families, or from places that have well-established communities like San Francisco, Berkeley, New York City, and Ithaca. Secondly, creating a sustainable community for many residents requires the acquisition of land (in this case farm land) and the construction of new homes. While it is clear that the project aims to demonstrate ways to construct more sustainable suburban development, it doesn't challenge the idea of sprawl, which many in the environmentalist circles, and in Ecovillage, have argued is one of the root causes of environmental and social degradation. Some informants praised the project as being a model against sprawl.

Although EVI is a model of a sustainable community that aims to educate the broader public about living lightly and harmoniously with nature, the community project works through the current power structures that propose the opposite of what EVI advocates. Specifically, as Fotopoulos argues, the power structures of the market fail to encourage social justice and equity, focusing more on consumption and individualism. The EVI, Inc. contains an education component that aims to spread the word on the possible ways of designing communities. However, during my study, most of the people I characterized as falling into "public education" category were university students and scholars. Other visitors were primarily tourists or potential residents. Only a couple of residents in FROG, and later more from SONG, made their living from leading tours, or by teaching seminars and workshops to students at Ithaca College or Cornell University. Other

residents resented being a laboratory and sometimes closed their windows when students or tourists walked through the community.

EVI illustrates an attempt to integrate a concern for the environment with everyday practices through the consumption of a particular place (West Hill) and other daily practices. Specifically, a green lifestyle adopts Hawken et. al's ideas of natural capitalism. Natural Capitalism argues that it is possible to create a higher standard of living and at the same time decrease the environmental impact (Hawken, et al. 1999). A green lifestyle privileges wealthy families who can enjoy the luxury of being green: afford organic food, afford to live 'close' to nature, and to drive alternative vehicles without needing to sacrifice. Producers of green commodities are designing new niches for consumption, which pushes people to change their lifestyle to meet those new niches, which in turn creates new needs and thus new markets. Thus the green market has been portrayed as the solution to environmental degradation. This can only be true, however, if social justice issues such as homelessness, unemployment and accessible (affordable) medical care are removed from a definition of nature and the environment and if only short-term solutions are sought through green technology. A green lifestyle only works when one defines nature and the environment as the non-human world something many participants are painfully aware of and struggle to negotiate.

In summary, creating a new green lifestyle through ecovillages at first glance appears as a wonderful idea, yet upon closer examination of the daily life and everyday practice, it is revealed to be a complex project. Green lifestyles take our attention away from larger

social, political, and economic concerns of the environment that many communities of color have been working to correct (Bullard 1990; Di Chiro 1996; Fotopoulos 2000; Guha 2000). Ecovillage focuses the lens of environmentalism on personal behavior and choices that mainly affect individuals. The Ecovillage project emphasizes that environmental and community degradation can be alleviated by changing where homes are built, considering whether former farmland is redeveloped more sustainably and whether neighbors are recycling. However, as is evident from interviews with participants who felt disillusioned and left, less emphasis is placed on issues of clean drinking water for poor neighborhoods, demonstrating affordable living, and increasing the use of public transportation. At a town board meeting I attended, where relevant permits were sought for the construction of the second neighborhood, a member of the town board raised the point that it was ironic that while the EVI community was seeking permission to increase the number and size of houses, the project had not approached the town to increase public transportation along the town road next to Ecovillage.

While Ecovillage attempts to make protecting the environment easier and effortless, it also demonstrates the difficulty faced by well meaning residents to voluntarily simplifying their lifestyle in a way that protects the environment. Bourdieu's idea that lifestyle is ingrained in us from a young age is reinforced by residents' inability to make sacrifices for the environment such as taking the bus or using public transportation when given the option to do so. It also reveals a fundamental flaw in U.S. environmental politics, the narrow definition of environmental problems and solutions in the U.S. mindset such that as Fotopoulos (2000) points out, even supporters of ecovillages admit

that while “the Ecovillage Movement includes a wide diversity of initiatives, many of which are not consciously intending to pioneer a new world order, many ecovillages simply involve people in trying to build better circumstances for themselves, often within the rich world in quite self-indulgent ways. It is a remarkably theory-less and a-political movement” (297). For ecovillages to become useful tool in U.S. environmentalism, they need to look beyond their intentional neighbors and into the larger community and the politics behind environmental and social degradation.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: Conclusion

*Arriving in the city of Ithaca is becoming an inspirational experience<sup>39</sup>. The streets are lined with trees, park benches dot the sidewalks, and many homes have flowers and vegetables growing in their front yards. Despite the long gray winter, spring is in full bloom and fading crocuses give way to bright yellow daffodils. City buses buzz up and down the main arteries of the city. The buses run frequently and reach every neighborhood, making it easy to get around the city without a car, especially for those who cannot afford one. Today, one of Ithaca's poorest neighborhoods is having a work party. Residents and friends do not plan to renovate an abandoned lot by building a larger house and gentrify the neighborhood; the plan is to turn the abandoned lot into a vibrant green public park. A city bus stops near the pedestrian-only street and drops off five volunteers who greet the neighbors and are greeted with lemon water.*

*The residents received a grant from the city as well as generous donations from some city residents who are concerned about the ecology of the larger Ithaca community. These neighbors want to put trees, flowers, and the insects that are attracted to the vegetation,*

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<sup>39</sup> This is a fictitious story of what a model of the sustainable community could look like.

*nature back into the city. They want to clean the environment of toxic chemicals that have been found to cause birth defects and asthma in young children, and the trees will be good indicators of a healthy environment. Neighbors have complained that the youth need something to do, jobs, hobbies, opportunities. A community project that improves the health of the neighborhood and gives the youth a productive place to use their energy has been planned by a small community taskforce.*

*Last week, the dilapidated house on the lot was torn down and on this spring afternoon, the neighborhood is buzzing with excitement. This project has been a long time coming. Women with young girls at their hems chat amongst each other “thank goodness it’s gone”; the men bring tools from their sheds and encourage the young girls to help them dig. After several meetings the previous winter with residents, volunteers, and city planners, it was decided that the best use of the space would be to put in a park, with a community vegetable garden, and a playground. Finally, keeping all our communities clean and safe is recognized as valuable, and there are people with time and resources to make it happen—social justice and environmentalism are merging. The group facilitator talks about the day’s plan. The children are taught how to identify the green tint of arsenic treated wood and told not to touch it, and if they do to wash their hands immediately.*

*The adults comb through the lot and remove old paint cans, rusty nails, and plant new vegetation. The city donated fruit trees, while neighbors brought cuttings of their iris, day lilies, and Shasta daisies. There are a lot of people who have skills and resources to*

*design a beautiful green space. Most of the youth, with supervision from the tradesmen and women, are building a play structure donated by Stephanie, a local professor who supports revitalizing the community. The youth will receive a small stipend for their work. It is clear to those who are present that everyone benefits from a healthy community. Other young adults are excited, they laugh and tease each other and gather stones into piles; the stones will be used to make a walkway through the park. When the mixture of clover and grass comes up in a few weeks, it will not need to be mowed; with most families needing two incomes to make ends meet, few residents have the time to maintain the public yard. A space for a vegetable garden is made. A compost bin will provide healthful soil and the opportunity for kids to see one of nature's recycling wonders as food is turned back into soil. The neighbors who want to garden will organize themselves into a work team to mind the compost. The abandoned lot turned into a public park is encouraging; the white flight has been replaced by green nature.*

*In the evening, there is a potluck in the house across the street from the new park. Everyone brings something, and passersby are invited to join in. The neighborhood is primarily African American and Laotian, but the dinner group is ethnically and religiously diverse. Over dinner, people share each other's life histories, how it was growing up in Georgia, how warm the summers are in Chad, and how the cities in Germany all have Fussgängerzonen—pedestrian-only city centers. As the children play, the adults debate what to do about unemployed youth and how difficult it is for the working poor to find decent childcare.*



This, unfortunately, is a fictitious story. There are, however, many environmental and community organizations, such as the Center for Environmental Health<sup>40</sup>, that are working hard to rid poor communities of toxic pollution. Other groups work to create healthy community gardens, and plant trees and other green plants in the city such as Urban Ecology<sup>41</sup> and ecocities organizations. Environmentalists at Redefining Progress are critical of how national “progress” is often defined and insist on including the physical and mental health of all citizens, the health of the environment, and the quality of social justice<sup>42</sup>. All of these groups emphasize the need to work on creating healthier communities and environments in the cities and neighborhoods that people already inhabit. The above narrative offers a possibility in which the principles of EVI could be adapted to a larger community, reaching more people from diverse backgrounds and creating a sense of community while improving the environment without the need to over-consume.

My study has attempted to understand the complex ways a concern for the environment and for a sense of community are negotiated through the medium of an ecovillage in the United States. My research explored the multiple ways environmentalism is expressed through the consumption of green commodities and through the creation of new forms of themed communities that emulate the ideal of living in harmony with nature and with other residents. The analysis has also suggested possibilities of why consumption has come to dominate U.S. environmentalism. It specifically argues that an unwillingness to

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<sup>40</sup> [www.cehca.org](http://www.cehca.org)

<sup>41</sup> [www.urbanecology.org](http://www.urbanecology.org)

<sup>42</sup> [www.redefiningprogress.org](http://www.redefiningprogress.org)

question consumption and capitalism has resulted in maintaining the status quo by replacing products known to cause environmental or social degradation with greener ones, such as hybrid cars, instead of challenging our very dependence on cars through urban design. It attempts to broaden the discussion of environmentalism, consumption, and community to include political ecological questions that are directly and indirectly changing our local and global environments. My research challenges the notion that a green lifestyle in and of itself is a viable solution to ecological and social degradation, by questioning the sustainability of capitalism as expressed through green technology and its desirability as a means to achieve harmony between nature and community. Finally, I explored the role of eco-villages in designing communities that are at once good for people and nature. Not everyone can live in an ecovillage based on the way they are currently designed, nor would it be sustainable if the remainder of U.S. family farms were developed as “green sprawl.” At the same time, ecovillages can teach us much about how families and individuals are critically rethinking the current trend of constructing McMansions, the development of new large homes in once open spaces with little or no opportunity for creating community cohesion. Ecovillages raise questions about how we live and about our relationship to community and environmental degradation. Ecovillage communities emphasize the reality that changing our lifestyle to a less energy intensive one will be the most significant way to create ecological and social sustainability. Finally, ecovillages demonstrate that it is possible to create one kind of alternative model of living that brings people together in an effort to improve the environment.

The study of Ecovillage at Ithaca also reveals a tension between creating a model of living that is better for the environment and using an economic framework that has been instrumental in creating social and ecological problems. For example, instead of supporting alternative transportation, like walking and biking, using “eco” and “natural” capitalism promotes the purchase and consumption of technologically “green” commodities. Richard Register, an advocate for Eco-cities and outspoken against electric vehicles argues the often overlooked reality that electric cars still require electricity. According to Register (1996), electric cars are not very useful in affecting social change. He argues that such technological alternatives are a diversion from confronting global environmental problems such as the rapidly diminishing natural resources caused by over-consumption. Register calls for social transformation that addresses the need to redesign the places where people live, and argues for the creation of green cities. What is needed, he argues, are eco-cities that reduce our dependence on the most environmentally and community destructive product—the automobile. The EVI goal to create a community in harmony with nature by building in nature creates a tension between needing to be outside of the city, and developing the farmland in order to suggest a way to save it from development.

## 8.1 Possibilities of the Eco-City

Many residents in EVI do not consider themselves environmentalists. They moved to the community not so much because they were dedicated to improving the environment, but

rather, because they were frustrated with what they saw as the continuously unsustainable development of farmland and open space into single-family detached homes. Many residents want to create a green lifestyle, that is, a lifestyle that values nature and community. Creating an ecovillage represents an opportunity to engage in a larger discussion about the future of U.S. community and neighborhood development, especially during a time when some people are feeling alienated and disconnected from the people around them. Specifically, though it attempts to offer middle and upper-class families a comfortable lifestyle that produces less damage to an already vulnerable planet, EVI is an idea that can be, and should be, adopted in an urban community where the shortcoming of EVI, such as the lack of access to public transportation and the exclusionary nature of the community to the public, can be ameliorated through creating eco-cities. At the same time that EVI addresses, for residents, the need to have a sense of community, to feel safe in neighborhoods, to provide recreation space for children, and access to clean air, all families across the country—urban, suburban, and rural—would benefit greatly from safer neighborhoods and cleaner environments.

The vision of creating an ideal village with five neighborhoods and shared community services like recreation halls, education centers, and local cottage industries is an indication of the energy and enthusiasm of the people working on the project and is evident from the success of the project. As I was leaving, however, several families complained that two neighborhoods were enough for EVI, more than two would make the community feel crowded and take away from the open land that they loved. Other contradictions included the fact that although the SONG intended to build smaller, more

affordable homes than the FROG, they ended up designing larger and more expensive homes, mainly because they could afford to consume a larger house. The tension between creating models of sustainable living and enjoying private access to large pieces of land was hard to negotiate. What is needed is a model of urban living that reduces our need to consume farmland, local organizing to create safe neighborhoods that have green parks and community gardens, recycle old furniture, reuse cloth grocery bags, supporting laundromats, and sharing the commodities that we already have. While this seems anti-thetical to capitalism, it will be the first step to reducing our impact on the environment, leaving more resources for future generations. Furthermore, there are several community organizations that are working together to build green urban neighborhoods.

In June of 2005, San Francisco hosted the United Nations World Environment Day conference with the theme of “Green Cities.” I was fortunate to be present for a number of talks that detailed the eco-city movement and the successful engagements of social justice and environment merging in the creation of green spaces in cities as well as discussions on transportation, alternative energy, and smart growth of the city to preserve open space. The papers included discussions of African American imprisonment, unequal exposure of low-income communities to persistent chemicals such as estrogen mimics, and the need to encourage walking as one way to respond to the growing obesity epidemic in the United States. The green city (or eco-city) model was Mumford’s vision of physically and psychologically healthy places to live. Now, more than ever as most of the world’s people live in the city, creating clean urban spaces and integrating nature with the built environment is essential for the health of our communities and the individuals

who make up the neighborhoods. Redesigning communities that are green and have walkable streets is an urgent imperative as children and adults in the United States continue to become obese, required to rely on their automobile on a daily basis and lacking everyday opportunities to walk.

## 8.2 Voluntary Simplicity

EVI has invested vast amounts of energy to change individual habits around community and environment. Although its mission has broad implications, the everyday practices have few tangible connections to wider political and social forces that are improving or degrading the current state of the environment. Rather, EVI offers some families an alternative way to live comfortably while reducing their impact on further environmental degradation. The “eco” in ecovillage is a bonus feature of the community, as some residents told me that they had not recycled or composted in their former community, and that EVI made recycling and composting easy. Thus EVI attempts to create harmony with nature and create a sense of community from within the current socio-economic realm. There is no effort to challenge the housing market to provide affordable housing to low-income families, but rather to create a green lifestyle within the boundaries of U.S. middle and upper-class expectations.

By a resident’s own admission, EVI falls short of reaching the expectation of creating a simpler way of life and reducing consumption. EVI is far from sustainable, not only

because individual families find it difficult to give up certain luxuries, but also because there is not a consensus on the definition of sustainability and thus no way to measure the effects of sustainable practices at the community level. The reality for some residents was that their effort to simplify their lifestyle only happened when their financial situation required it.

We know from ethnographic studies of Western communities that having more energy-efficient appliances does not necessarily result in less energy used. Erickson's (1997) work in Foley and Munka found that residents believed they could have the luxuries they desire and reduced impact on the environment; despite owning more eco-friendly products, residents of Munka still continued to engage in wasteful practices. Similarly, EVI advocates the ability to have a comfortable lifestyle and protect the environment while doing so, but I observed many residents behaving in ways they felt were unsustainable, like my informant Josephine who used paper plates at home because she did not want to do her dishes. Thanks to an aggressive green marketing campaign, the myth that technology will allow us to continue consuming at our current rate and protect the environment's limited resources is procured by well-meaning people who enthusiastically buy green commodities with the expectation that their purchase supports the sustainability of the earth. I have tried to argue that just the opposite is true. Buying green without questioning whether the product is necessary in the first place simply adds to waste. More directly, in order to make a significant ecological difference, we in Western countries need to reduce our consumption of commodities we have come to believe are essential, such as the automobile, be they green or not.

The failure of U.S. environmentalism to question market forces and capital accumulation has meant that environmental causes can be green washed or simply ignored by redirecting solutions and redefining the problems away from the continuous polluting of certain environments and in certain communities. The ecovillage movement, by constructing new green housing outside of the city, has moved away from addressing environmental degradation and instead focuses on developing pristine spaces for private green themed community parks. This paradox has helped to maintain the status quo that constructs the environment as wilderness and void of humans, and that social justice concerns of poverty, exposure to toxic chemicals, and over-consumption are secondary to the preservation of open space, especially if that open space is part of one's backyard. Finally, the ecovillage community model fails to challenge the model of capitalism that suggests that continuous economic growth is a sustainable way to address the problem of resource depletion and tremendous waste generation.

Why is it so difficult for middle and upper class households to voluntarily simplify their lifestyle and support obvious green solutions like public transportation? This question is especially relevant to those who acknowledge that a lifestyle shift away from suburban sprawl is necessary if environmental sustainability is possible. Most residents at ecovillage want to protect the environment and they want to have a connection with their neighbors. At the same time, they are deeply conflicted about how to achieve both; how to live a simpler lifestyle and to be accepting and tolerant of neighbors they don't like, while giving up the freedom to drive whenever they want.



To live in ecovillage and participate in its culture, one purchases not just a home but a green lifestyle, a lifestyle that is supposed to make voluntary simplicity straightforward, easy, and require little or no sacrifice. At the same time, this green lifestyle is not accessible to anyone who wants to live in ecovillage or the life that ecovillage suggests is sustainable. Only families with both the social and economic capital to participate in the green lifestyle are able to remain in the community. In this dissertation, I have outlined the various ways residents negotiate this privilege of participating in a green lifestyle and explored how the daily experiences of residents are played out. Erikson found that in Munka, Sweden, residents did not choose energy-saving practices like drying clothes on a clothesline or biking, because they were obvious sustainable options, but did them because “10 speed bicycles are part of the latest assemblages of status symbols rather than to save fuel or the environment” (Erickson 1997:51).

The implications of this dilemma for EVI and the ecovillage movement in general, is that the efforts of the participants become ineffective in the search for environmental sustainability. Instead, EVI becomes another suburban development project that uses the fashionably ideology of “being green” in much the same way that Celebration Florida uses the Disney theme to create a happy place to live. This conflict between voluntary simplicity and consuming a green lifestyle further alienates people who want to truly reduce their consumption and work towards a more just society. Almost all of the former residents or participants I spoke with felt that the community failed to address the elephant in the room: that there was little that made Ecovillage “Eco.” One active

resident attempted to raise the idea of changing the name of Ecovillage at a community meeting; but this idea was not taken seriously or pursued.

### 8.3 Green Capitalism?

The fact that the ecovillage version of U.S. environmentalism and community is symbolized through the consumption of green commodities and not as a critique of mass consumption can be attributed to an unwillingness to question the wisdom of using capitalism as the framework in which to solve ecological problems, when capitalism has been the cause of environmental degradation around the world (Adams 1990; O'Connor 1994). Ironically, some forms of environmentalism in the U.S., such as that represented in EVI, emphasizes the consumption of green commodities, such as hybrid cars, instead of advocating for greater public transportation. The focus of environmental solutions falls on the individual (a hybrid car) and not on the community (public transportation). These contradictions are embedded within larger historical and cultural values that fail to problematize capitalism as the solution to environmental degradation.

Many residents intentionally situate environmental solutions within capitalism, by consuming open land, building new homes in nature, and consuming green commodities. These innovative and socially energetic communities have replaced the spontaneity, diversity, and complexity of cities and the city centers with private, thematically constructed spaces that are accessible only to residents who can afford to own shares

within their boundaries. This shifting of environmentalist focus away from the communal and on to the personal is not unique to EVI, but reflects larger trends in a market system that emphasizes technology as the environmental solution and a culture that values individualism. In EVI, concern for the environment is situated in personal lifestyle choices through maintaining a small, beautiful piece of land looking out over the city below, at the cost of overlooking larger community issues such as toxic waste and joblessness. This juxtaposition comes from an inability and unwillingness to confront capitalism and the reality that U.S. families will need to change the current course of environmental destruction, by changing their lifestyle of consumption. Instead, people need to focus on increasing shared commodities like parks, community gardens, and public transportation that integrate all communities, especially the organic city, with nature.

That problems are being sought from within a capitalist economic framework is problematic by its emphasis on continuous growth and its inevitable separating of social classes. As an alternative to large single family homes and the SUV craze, EVI has offered an attractive solution, but as a model of how to reduce our impact on the planet, it has fallen short by co-opting a narrow and personal definition of the environment as well as a narrow definition of environmental problems. Thus the solutions to personal lifestyle changes by consuming green commodities as opposed to fewer commodities and more publicly shared resources appear realistic based on the narrow definition.

Many habits of residents in ecovillage contradict their belief in conservation. For example, although a clothesline is available just outside the laundry room, when given a choice, residents often used the dryer, even on beautiful sunny days; one resident commented that she preferred using the dryer because her clothes were softer. By exploring the practices of residents in creating a green lifestyle, I attempted to understand how neighborhoods can create a sense of community and protect the environment. Considering that it was *involuntary simplicity* that helped well-meaning families reduce their house size and consumptive habits, public policy is the best tool we as a society can use to begin to address over-consumption. The EVI project revealed the tension between the desire to live simply by consuming fewer commodities, but at the same time being confronted with a powerful marketing industry that encourages the purchasing of commodities that are marketed as “good” for the environment (whether or not they are essential commodities). The magazine *Plenty* is an example of the marketing of the green lifestyle where they claim: “...green options... are pleasing to the eye but also require no sacrifice of comfort or design. You simply have to hunt a little harder to find them. There are hybrid cars that get unprecedented gas mileage, but still have most of the power we’ve come to enjoy and expect. Tasty organic foods, designer clothes, and elegant furniture made from sustainably harvested natural resources are available at competitive prices. There are even ways to build a beautiful house from ecologically friendly materials” ([www.plentymag.com/mission](http://www.plentymag.com/mission)). What is needed then is a discussion of green consumption, the marketing of green commodities, and the relationship between capitalism and environmentalism. A critique of capitalism is necessary before we use its framework to reverse the current social and ecological destruction it has caused.

## 8.4 Closing Thoughts

I suggest that by replicating the features of EVI such as sharing laundry space (using community laundromats), supporting alternative transportations (through carshares, public transportation), and getting to know our neighbors, we can begin to reduce our need to consume commodities and at the same time create community without building new neighborhoods. In order to do this in an effective way, however, communities that already exist need to be the focus of our attention. Our collective energy can transform abandoned buildings into parks and gardens, paint schools with lead-free paint, lobby local and federal governments to clean up toxins such as Superfund<sup>43</sup> sites and waste incinerators in all communities. The energy in EVI to re-design the human habitat is inspiring and can be even more impressive when it is applied to improve all our communities, especially those spaces that are already in the city, instead of creating themed communities that are exclusive and outside the city. Instead of leaving cities to build in nature, the ecovillage movement might be more effective by following Mumford's vision of putting nature back into cities.

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<sup>43</sup> Superfund sites are lands in the United States that have been contaminated by toxic hazardous waste (abandoned mines, illegal dumping of wastes and toxic chemicals, or accidental spills).. These sites have been identified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as the most hazardous and pose the highest risk to human health and the environment. Placing a site on the EPA's superfund site list is one way to begin the process of cleaning it up and making the polluter accountable.

I was often asked if I would live in EVI. Sometimes I was asked with the clause, “we need more diversity here,” other times I was asked inquisitively to gauge my feelings about the project. Several years later, I find myself appreciating the opportunity to meet and live with many wonderful caring people, who in their small ways are trying to respond to social and ecological degradation. As an informant pointed out, EVI is a place you might go to while on vacation, and in many ways it resembles a theme park. One gets a special feeling driving along the dirt road, the surrounding beauty is breathtaking, and the everyday life, the comings and going of neighbors is pleasantly unique. I experienced neighbors to be welcoming and generous. Residents are friendly, yet the neighborhoods FROG and SONG are closed to the residents in the larger Ithaca community. It felt exclusive and to some degree like an escape from reality. There is a peaceful, yet inorganic feeling in EVI that has to do with the intentionality of the place. The random greetings of neighbors felt as though too much effort was made to be “in community”, it was hard to know if the same enthusiasm would be given to members of the larger community. I found this to be true when members who left fell out of contact with members of the community, feeling that they were no longer part of the community. Those who no longer live in EVI are, by virtue of no longer living within the community boundaries, not part of the community and thus excluded from that community’s public-private life.

Ecovillage at Ithaca, and ecovillages in general, reflect ideas of Mumford, Geddes, and Howard who called for merging nature with the city, yet these new co-housing communities often create new cities in nature, isolating themselves from the larger

community and moving further away from public transportation and grocery stores. Thus the attraction to live within a wilderness type of nature seems to outweigh the effort to protect it and conserve these spaces. Rachel Carson sparked a call for the government to protect the public from industrial toxic pollution, pointing out that persistent organic compounds know no boundaries as they spread through wind, water, and in the soil. These solutions need to be sought from a wider social and ecological context.

It is interesting to note that many residents were active in the anti-nuclear war movement in the early 80s, grew up in households that were politically engaged in environmental causes, or moved away from cities like New York City or Berkeley to live in green suburbia. Many residents were activists on issues that focused on global political concerns that emphasized aiding the poor in the US, eliminating global poverty, improving children's education and health, and ensuring human rights; yet, the project that developed from these activists focuses inwards on a personal environmentalism, where most residents simply recycle and compost. The connection between our lifestyle and the larger environment remains disconnected, perhaps by choice. The Ecovillage project has been successful in demonstrating a different way to design suburban sprawl. It has provided an opportunity for its residents to recycle easily, compost easily, and meet and make friends. It has not, however, provided a replicable model of how to live harmoniously with nature, and thus adopting the belief that this model would be good for the environment is not useful but a distraction that affects our society as a whole. By making protecting the environment easy, we risk ignoring real problems while turning apparent solutions into theme parks to be frequented by those who can afford their luxury

of harmony and safety. U.S. environmentalism and those concerned for the environment need to redefine the problems by looking holistically at community and environmentalism and how these concepts are framed by large political ecological factors such as race and class.

In order to achieve effective solutions to social and ecological degradation, we need to focus environmentalism on public policy action that will address the root causes of environmental degradation and restore social cohesion. While the scope of this project did not include a detailed analysis of capitalism, it becomes clear from my ethnographic data that an open discussion of the contradictory nature of capitalism and the logic of capitalism as a vehicle for environmentalism needs to be addressed if the future of our communities and the planet is to be altered. Such a discussion can begin the process of creative thinking about real alternative, long-term solutions.



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