

EcoVillage at Ithaca

Benefits and Challenges of Cohousing

Moving day: July 9, 2009. Almost nine years ago we left suburban Montclair NJ for the far more rural Finger Lakes region of New York State, as we moved to the cohousing community of EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI). The goal of cohousing is to re-establish “community” in people’s lives. But our first need had to do with “stuff” and where to put it. We left a 3,200 square-foot home with an attic and basement to begin anew our lives in a 1,642 square-foot duplex, no attic, and a tiny half basement. The moving company we hired was able to squeeze all the household goods we had not given away, sold, or otherwise disposed of, into a large van—with our avocado tree being the last to (barely) fit in.

Our new neighborhood looks different from the Montclair one we had lived in for 34 years. Instead of multi-story single-family homes with yards of grass and long driveways there are much smaller homes joined as duplexes. Each house does have its own front and back yards, but they are small, and in place of manicured, and possibly pesticide-doused, green grass we see flowers, trees and even vegetables. Most households own cars, but the private garages and driveways are replaced by communal parking lots and carports for some. The cars are mostly out of sight and traffic is on the periphery of the village, making walking (and for kids, playing) safer.

EXCHANGING LIFESTYLES

In Montclair we looked out on busy streets, large homes similar to ours, and heard the sounds of suburbia, changing with the seasons: lawn mowers in spring and summer, leaf blowers in the fall, snow blowers in winter, and always traffic noises. We exchanged these sensory experiences for views of rolling hills, trees, meadows and a large pond. All year bird songs replace machine and traffic noise, while in April the mating calls of peepers and frogs signal the end of winter.

In our Montclair home we had our own washer and dryer so could do laundry whenever it was convenient. At EVI we go to the neighborhood laundry room, hope there are empty machines, and make a return trip if they are all in use.

In Montclair we enjoyed a large refrigerator in the kitchen with a smaller one in the basement, both with good-sized freezers. And we had a stove with the usual oven. At EVI we had to get used to a small refrigerator and freezer and instead of an oven just a four-burner electric counter-top range. Now we cook using a microwave/convection oven or our toaster oven, being careful not to turn them on at the same time and trip a circuit breaker.

These changes all took some getting used to, but we are now comfortable with the differences and have adjusted our food buying and cooking habits to match our appliances. The appliance situation at EVI is a result of decisions to be energy efficient and keep a low carbon footprint rather than residents buying the latest, largest appliances they can afford.

REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE

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BARBARA H. CHASIN
and RICHARD W. FRANKE

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Issues of aging in community have recently become more salient.

at EVI the value system also acts as a brake on consumption. Going shopping is less of a recreational choice than in more mainstream communities. And there is certainly a good deal more sharing. Residents can and do place unwanted goods in a Reuse Room located in one of the Common Houses. Clothes, toys, kitchenware, books, etc. are there for the taking. In addition, EVI-ers use the email system to let their neighbors know when they have something to give away. Often a resident who needs something will send an email asking if someone has it and doesn't need it rather than making a new purchase. A fair amount of borrowing of tools, books and electronic device chargers goes on.

In at least one way, living in Montclair was actually more sustainable than our present lifestyle. In our Montclair

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neighborhood we could walk to a pizza place, a bagel store, cleaners and a Whole Foods. EVI is more than two miles from stores, restaurants, theaters, etc. This means a lot of driving: one estimate has it that our 100 households generate up to 500 trips daily back and forth on Rachel Carson Way, our main road. On the other hand, we can walk the

half-mile to West Haven Farm, a 10-acre organic vegetables and fruit farm run by an EVI resident. The CSA from this farm offers weekly an abundance of fresh produce during the 22-week growing season and has members from town as well as from EVI. Even closer, about a quarter-mile from our house, is an organic berry farm, also managed by a resident, which from June until October offers a variety of luscious berries through a CSA or a pay-as-you-go system.

SUBURBS VERSUS INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES

Suburbs resulted from land-use decisions driven by developers, supported by government policies, in contrast to intentional communities such as EVI. Intentional communities result from the visions of their founders and those recruited to join in an experiment. They harken back to the utopian community movement that has existed in the United States since the nineteenth century. The development of the environmental movement has been a major factor in the conscious creation of more sustainable lifestyles. With three cohousing neighborhoods, 100 households, and almost 250 residents, EVI is one of the largest of these communities in the country. Founded in 1991, it is also one of the oldest.

As the community has grown, more people can live the sustainable and cooperative lifestyle that characterizes EVI, but there is a trade-off to growth here. With more people it is more

difficult to know all the residents, and some of the closeness that existed at the beginning has dissipated as a result. On the other hand, there's a greater number of interesting people to get to know and more who can contribute to community enrichment.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AT EVI

What, exactly, is "community"? For us, as for many residents, an attraction of EVI is the opportunity to live in a community where there is a deliberate attempt to create *social capital*. Social capital refers to the resources that come from relationships with others. There can be economic benefits (inside information about a desirable job, for instance), but more common are the non-financial aspects of relationships with neighbors. While in many mainstream communities there is anonymity and lack of ties between neighbors, at EVI people see each other fairly regularly at dinners, parties, community rituals and monthly self-management meetings.

There are deliberate attempts to make newcomers feel they are part of the community. When people move in, the Membership Committee in their neighborhood organizes a "Meet and Greet" for them. More established residents usually sign a card welcoming the newcomers. In our "FROG" (First Residents Group) neighborhood our Meet and Greet often has been a Sunday potluck brunch. These have been so successful that we're now having them occasionally even when there aren't new residents to welcome.

MORE COHOUSING BENEFITS

While there is no pressure to interact with others, it is relatively easy to get to know people. For those moving into a new community this can be very reassuring. We quickly got to know many of our neighbors—much more so than in Montclair, where we mainly knew the people living directly on either side of us.

The three-times-a-week community dinners provide a place to sit and connect with people you already know or sit with those whom you don't know in order to expand acquaintances. There are numerous social events, often planned by the Committee on Community Life. This committee organizes the annual "Guys Baking Pies," a delicious occasion when men and boys prepare a variety of these desserts. Interested individuals or various committees show films (usually followed by lively discussions), present musical events, and organize poetry readings.

Any resident can create an event or organize an activity. Since we all live within walking distance, attendance is easy, so a great many occur—some planned, some impromptu. In Montclair there was lots to do, but it took more effort to get information about and then travel to activities of interest; and they frequently cost money.

In a suburban setting it's much harder to create an event with people you're not directly in touch with. Our EVI email system makes communication about activities very easy. In addition to electronic notices, those promoting events will sometimes tape a

notice to residents' doors. You can choose to be reclusive, but you can't honestly say you didn't know what was happening!

INTERPERSONAL ISSUES: OVERCOMING COHOUSING CHALLENGES

The name EcoVillage at Ithaca would seem to indicate a community focused on environmental sustainability. Yet a survey from 2006 found that 49% of respondents cited "living in community" as the "most important reason for living at EVI" compared with only 30% who chose aspects of "sustainability."

EVI has a loose, informal and not very thorough membership recruitment and selection process. If you want to purchase a house here and one to your liking is available, you just have to (1) attend a Meet and Greet, (2) attend one meeting where a consensus decision is made, (3) stay for five days in the community, (4) join a two-hour volunteer work group (usually a cook-team meal), and (5) sign a statement that you have read and understood the community bylaws. No formal vote is taken by any group within the village, although in theory the elected board of directors could refuse a sale to a person or family whose needs and interests seem incompatible with the goals of EVI. One result of this loose policy is that occasionally incompatible individuals do purchase homes—and sometimes they do not end up adjusting to community life. Since most local decisions are made by consensus, this can lead to a situation where a single person or household blocks decisions otherwise consensed on, necessitating a complex process of fallback—and lots of bad feelings. Despite a system for local self-management that encourages participation in decisions about budgets and policy, many EVI-ers are reluctant to deal with conflicts, which makes disagreements difficult to resolve. Typical problem areas have included such things as: allocating money for community projects; pet policies and practices; leaving inappropriate materials in the recycling bins; not following the rules for reuse items; leaving a mess in the Common House kitchen; allocating garden space; and access to carports.

Community members continue to work on overcoming problems such as these—and have successfully resolved a good number. One of the biggest issues of the past few years has been whether and how much of the dirt road (Rachel Carson Way, which connects us to the outside New York state highway) we should pave with asphalt. The need for paving has come up because of a short steep hill on the road that turns icy in winter, resulting in occasional slides and car crunches. In summer the road is often quite dusty. Many houses of the recently-completed neighborhood ("TREE," Third Residential EcoVillage Experience) were built right next to the road. Residents there have been complaining of asthma and bronchitis attacks.

The substantial projected cost of paving even a part of the road has opened up an awareness of the scope of economic inequality within the community. In response, residents have set up a voluntary "economic balancing fund" within our monthly

billing system. Upon implementation, the finance team found that most households (82%) are willing to be billed \$5 per month or more for this. For the 18 households unable to contribute to the fund, it's hoped that half will nonetheless be able to pay their own road-paving cost share. That will leave about nine households in need of internal funding support. The balancing fund is apparently the first direct attempt by EVI residents to compensate for local economic inequality, and some residents are thinking of further experiments. Unfortunately, in the FROG neighborhood moisture damage in several of the structures has resulted in substantial and expensive repairs that may compete with the balancing fund idea or absorb some of the funds that might otherwise have been able to go to new initiatives.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRADE-OFFS: AGE AND RACIAL DIVERSITY PROBLEMS

Since being founded in 1991 by mostly young householders, EVI's population has become older and is, in fact, aging rather rapidly. Currently about 26% of EVI residents are over 65; the comparable figure in Montclair is 13%. Issues of aging in community have recently become more salient. Some residents are trying to find ways to attract more young families, but it remains to be seen whether or not this will be successful. EVI is apparently attractive to people who have retired or are close to this stage of their lives. Older people can more easily afford to live here, especially if they have good pensions. And many feel that aging in place will be easier here.

Community conversations are developing around the questions of what we can and should do as residents age. How much responsibility do we have toward each other? The TREE neighborhood of 25 houses and 15 apartments was explicitly built to have accessible units, but the other neighborhoods were not. In FROG, of 30 houses, only four are accessible. The other 26 have stairs and doorways that cannot easily accommodate wheelchairs.

Aging is more than a question of material infrastructure, however. Should we help neighbors remember to take their medicine? Should we set up a check-in system where we make

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sure others are up and about by a certain time of day? Should we take responsibility for notifying relatives if our aging neighbors start to show signs of confusion or problems with mobility—or if we think perhaps they should not be driving?

There is a lack of ethnic/racial diversity at EVI. Fewer than five African Americans live here, and all are renters. By contrast, 27% of Montclair's population is African American. The larger local area—Ithaca City and surrounding Tompkins County—

itself lacks a sizable minority population from which EVI could conceivably draw new members.

Why is EVI unable to attract more residents of color? Besides the local-area homogeneity, one possible reason derives from EVI's origin and history: highly homogeneous from the start, it may not be attractive to those not fitting its existing demographic pattern. And acquiring a home here is relatively expensive. These are likely to be issues at other cohousing communities as well.

CONCLUSION

In our eight years at EVI, we've learned that to get the most out of cohousing, one must join the work of building community. Sometimes it is tedious, but mostly it's interesting and can give an expanded feeling of meaning in one's life—especially in a community such as EcoVillage at Ithaca where environmental and social justice issues engage many of one's neighbors and where satisfying relationships can be created.



RICHARD W. FRANKE, Ph. D.

is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Montclair State University and a resident of EVI since 2009. He is a board member of the FROG neighborhood cohousing cooperative and also works in the local area social justice movement. He is co-author with Srikumar Chattopadhyay of *Striving for Sustainability: Environmental Stress and Democratic Initiatives in Kerala* along with several other books and articles.

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BARBARA H. CHASIN, Ph. D.

is Professor Emerita of Sociology at Montclair State University (Montclair, New Jersey) and a resident of EcoVillage at Ithaca since 2009. She is active on local community committees and the Village Association Board. She also participates in the Ithaca area social justice movement. She is the author of *Inequality and Violence in the United States: Casualties of Capitalism*. She and Richard Franke have co-authored several books and articles on development issues in West Africa and in Kerala State, India.

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unsustainable countries, and especially the US, to take the lead in redeveloping themselves by implementing policies that will redistribute wealth and income, install effective minimum living standards, and institute drastically less energy-intensive development processes.”⁹

BECOMING THE PEOPLE OF THE SEVENTH FIRE

Our energy crisis isn't only about running out of fossil fuels or the dangers of climate change their use poses. It's about human overshoot and the need to heal our land and bring our societies back into balance with ecological realities. We face nothing less than the imperative to radically transform our way of doing things.

The coming transition is both a daunting challenge and an unprecedented opportunity. We can choose to continue on the ultimately self-destructive Burnt Path of growth, self-

indulgence, hard-heartedness, and anthropocentrism. Or we can choose the Green Path. In doing so, we can become those spoken of so hopefully in the Anishinaabe prophecies of the Seventh Fire, “the ones who will bend to the task of putting things back together to rekindle the flames of the sacred fire, to begin the rebirth of a nation.”¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 Kimmerer, Robin Wall. “Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants.” Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013.
- 2 Kingsnorth, Paul. “Dark Ecology: Searching for Truth in a Post-Green World.” Orion, Jan./Feb. 2013.
- 3 Heinberg, Richard. “Why Climate Change Isn't Our Biggest Environmental Problem, and Why Technology Won't Save Us.” Post-Carbon Institute, August 17, 2017. <http://www.postcarbon.org/why-climate-change-isnt-our-biggest-environmental-problem-and-why-technology-wont-save-us/>
- 4 Kunstler, James. “The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century.” New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005.
- 5 Green Party of the United States Platform. http://www.gp.org/ecological_sustainability_2016. Emphasis added.
- 6 Ibid. Emphasis added.
- 7 Haenke, David. “Bioregionalism and Community: A Call to Action.” <https://www.ic.org/wiki/bioregionalism-community-call-action/>
- 8 For a look at Finland's experiment with GBI: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/feb/19/basic-income-finland-low-wages-fewer-jobs>
- 9 Bodley, John H. “Anthropology and Contemporary Human Problems.” Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012.
- 10 Kimmerer, Robin Wall. “Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants.” Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013.



LINDA CREE

resides in the rural/wilderness of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. A retired teacher, she enjoys her family, writing, folk art painting, and the woods and waters of her home territory. She's been involved with the Green Movement since the mid-80s, and is currently a Co-Chair of the GP-US Platform Committee.