

The Urban Ecovillage Experiment

The Stories of Six Communities that Hoped to Change the World

Michael Blouin

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a
Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Analysis

Readers

Professor Char Miller

Professor Richard Worthington

Pomona College

December 2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
PART I	9
Early Communities.....	9
Brook Farm.....	12
Continuing the Tradition	19
Twin Oaks.....	20
A New Brand of Community Living: Ecovillages.....	26
Ecovillage at Ithaca	32
Reflection.....	41
PART II	43
Moving to the City	43
Los Angeles EcoVillage	48
Jamaica Plain Cohousing.....	53
Reflection.....	56
PART III.....	58
Ecovillage Dilemmas	58
Ideas for Building Sustainable Urban Communities.....	64
Reflection.....	77
CONCLUSION.....	80
BIBLIOGRAPHY	83

INTRODUCTION

"A decisive collision looms: On one side is the "grow-or die" economy, lurching out of control. On the other, the fragile conditions necessary to the maintenance of advanced life-forms on this planet. This collision, in fact, confronts humanity itself with sharp alternatives: an ecological society structured around social ecology's ideal of a confederal, directly democratic, and ecologically oriented network of communities, or an authoritarian society in which humanity's interactions will be structured around a command economics and politics. The third prospect, of course, is the immolation of humanity in a series of ecological and irreversible disasters."

-Murray Bookchin¹

Take a moment and imagine what you think the world will be like in a hundred years.

Do you envision a globally prosperous society in which technology has led us into a new Golden Age? Do you see disaster, where the degradation of our environmental resources has led to our civilization's downfall? Perhaps the image in your mind's eye does not include humankind at all; maybe you think the Fates will finally catch up to us, in the form of nuclear holocaust or giant meteor, before we reach the 22nd century.

Gary J. Coates describes four extremes that currently dominate speculation about humanity's future. He calls them "metaindustrial," "superindustrial," "preindustrial," and "hyperindustrial." Two spectrums are used to divide up these visions; one separates optimistic and pessimistic predictions, the other distinguishes predictions that feature centralized societal organization from those that feature decentralized organization.

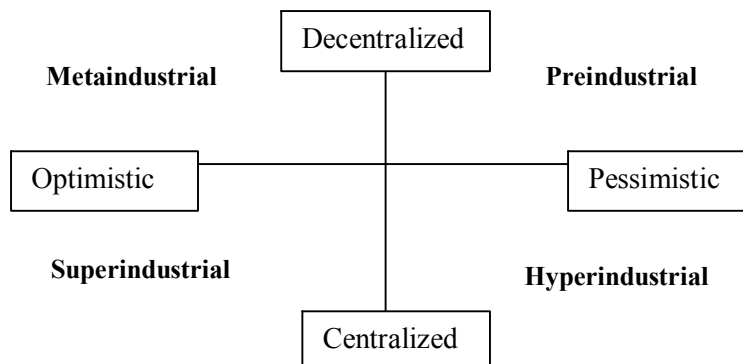


Figure 1. Coates' map of current speculations about the future²

¹ Murray Bookchin, "Which Way for the Ecology Movement?" *Nature*, 1994.

The superindustrial prospect is one in which world-wide development of postindustrial economies occurs; we would see “fifteen billion people earning \$20,000 a year. Elimination of poverty and disease. Infinite supply of energy and materials through the exploitation of space.”³ The hyperindustrial prediction is its pessimistic counterpart; in this view, there would be a worldwide freeze on industrial growth, and a revolt of the masses requiring massive and often harsh control by the state. Technical and military elite would join together to prevent the collapse of civilization, privileging the few at the expense of the many.⁴ The preindustrial view is also pessimistic, and predicts worldwide collapse of interconnected global economies that will lead to a massive drop in population, chronic cycles of plague and famine, and a “return to savagery.”⁵ The metaindustrial view predicts a brighter, decentralized alternative, in which the worldwide decline of urban-industrial civilization is eased by a return to local and regional economies.⁶ Coates thinks we should pursue a metaindustrial future; he argues that centralized superindustrialism is a chimera and that a break from the urban-industrial complex is the only viable way forward if we hope to avoid disaster.

Coates seems to be correct that humanity cannot continue along its current trajectory.

The cracks have begun to show in our present paradigm. David Orr, distinguished Oberlin professor and advocate for a more sustainable future, writes:

A world with a large number of desperately poor cannot be sustained because they have the power to disrupt lives of the comfortable in ways that we are only beginning to appreciate...The perpetual enlargement of the human estate cannot be sustained because it will eventually overwhelm the capacity and fecundity of natural systems and cycles...A world of ever increasing economic, financial, and technological complexity cannot be sustained because sooner or later it will

² Gary J. Coates, “Future Images, Present Possibilities: Revisioning Nature, Self, and Society,” in *Resettling America: Energy Ecology, and Community*. ed. Gary J. Coates (Andover, Massachusetts: Brick House Publishing Co., Inc., 1981), 55.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

overwhelm our capacity to manage...Unrestrained auto-mobility, hedonism, individualism, and conspicuous consumption cannot be sustained because they take more than they give back.⁷

From nearly any perspective, our current global lifestyle is not tenable in the long-term. We are depleting many natural resources much faster than they can be regenerated (from forests to fertile land); we are polluting the planet, most notably with greenhouse gases that have the potential to dramatically impact all of human civilization; we are widening the gap between rich and poor, and from the perspective of the lucky few who are well-off, equity remains only an afterthought.

We need a new global paradigm. Small changes to the current system, I believe, will not succeed in wresting us from disaster, especially the disaster spelled out by our current environmental trends. Simply fitting concerns about the environment or human equity into the dominant worldview will not work. Our present economic paradigm, for example, discounts the future and essentially only seeks change “at the last minute.” If we stick with this setup, we will be spurred to alter our way of life only when environmental catastrophe becomes imminent, and for many eco-dilemmas (think global warming and the degradation of fertile land) last minute change will be far too late. If our species is to avoid self-destruction and have any hope of long-term global prosperity, we need to choose a different path. “Genuine sustainability,” David Orr writes, “will come not from superficial changes but from a deeper process akin to humankind growing up to a fuller stature.”⁸ Gary Coates agrees, arguing that “we need new assumptions about what we are and what we wish to accomplish. We must now establish new perceptions of how our institutions actually operate, and what changes need to be made.”⁹

I think the alternative we strive for must be genuinely sustainable. The word “sustainability” has been thrown around a great deal, especially in recent years, so allow me to

⁷ David W. Orr, “Four Challenges of Sustainability,” *Spring Seminar Series, University of Vermont*. 2003.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gary J. Coates, “Future Images, Present Possibilities: Revisioning Nature, Self, and Society,” 92.

describe how I view this sustainable future. First, it must be environmentally sustainable; this necessitates that nature not be subject to systematically increasing concentrations of substances extracted from the earth's crust, concentrations of substances produced by society, or degradation by physical means.¹⁰ It must also include a human component: for us to consider our global society truly prosperous, human needs must be met worldwide.¹¹ Beyond these pieces of sustainability, I believe we should push for social and economic wellbeing: humans should have the opportunity to interact positively with their neighbors, to build relationships with the places where they live, and to find meaningful ways of making a living that provide sufficient monetary security for them and their families.

But how can we get closer to this ideal? Herman Daly, one of the preeminent ecological economics thinkers of our day, proposes a solution that makes use of political and economic policy drastically divergent from our present practices. He thinks birth licenses could be used to control population; depletion quotas auctioned by the government could “stabilize the stock of physical artifacts;” and maximum and minimum limits to personal income could limit inequality.¹² Of course there would be political challenges that would make implementing such measures difficult, but I think the ideas themselves have the potential to be efficacious. But I worry about this pathway to sustainability; in practice, relying on our centralized governments to take it upon themselves to change the economic systems that have made them so powerful and successful may be wishful thinking. And if they do change, then I worry how people will react to federal governments drastically restricting human freedoms, especially when it comes to having children. What mechanisms will governments need to use to enforce policies limiting

¹⁰ “Understanding Sustainability,” *The Natural Step*, 2004.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Herman Daly, *Steady-State Economics* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1991), 53.

consumption and population? Do we risk becoming far more authoritarian than we ever intended?

Other solutions focus less on national economic schemes and more on locally oriented ideas. Gary Coates believes that we need to focus on building a post urban-industrial world made up of integrated, sustainable communities. This requires that we “destructure our vast and anonymous cities into coherent and meaningful social and territorial groups. We must recreate, in historically novel forms, the opportunities to experience the nurturing bonds of place and the primary face-to-face group – family, household, and neighborhood.”¹³ This reinvention Coates calls for does not recommend the immolation and reconstruction of our communities; instead it requires drastic improvements to our residential, industrial, and commercial landscapes. The vision “implies the decentralization of center-city employment concentrations, the redistribution of commercial and residential areas in a pattern of mixed-use land development, and the diversification of transportation options with a heavy emphasis on electrified mass transit...and personally powered movement systems.”¹⁴ Coates has put together an anthology, *Resettling America*, which provides a number of “practical, people-oriented solutions” to the complex community problems of food, energy, and shelter; it focuses on building sustainable human environments that grow out of the collective efforts of their inhabitants.¹⁵

Coates’ vision, this meta-industrial alternative, seems to be worth fighting for. This is not to say that we cannot use some of Daly’s ideas (or any other ideas, for that matter); I only claim that working locally to make communities more sustainable should be a central component to our efforts in changing the world. This vision can promote real sustainability while also focusing on facilitating meaningful human interactions and promoting a sense of place. These local solutions,

¹³ Gary J. Coates. “Future Images, Present Possibilities: Revisioning Nature, Self, and Society,” 79.

¹⁴ Ibid, 33.

¹⁵ Ibid, back cover.

because they are created directly by the people who will benefit from them, will be in line with what people want and need, making their successful implementation a real possibility. We will need additional help to become more equitable and sustainable; building local models of sustainability will not succeed in changing the world in itself, but will require cooperation from government, business, and ordinary citizens at a multitude of levels. Promoting sustainability locally will no doubt bring challenges, including some we haven't yet considered, but I think it presents a positive way to start our charge toward "saving the world."

I have come to think that building local, sustainable communities is worth doing, but I'm still far from certain about how to best go about constructing them. That's the purpose of this thesis: to start the search – my search at least – for viable mechanisms to build local, small-scale, holistically sustainable communities. In the pages to follow, I focus on the potential for the ecovillage model, an idea that has gained an international reputation in the past decade and a half, to create these communities. Robert and Diane Gilman, who helped found the ecovillage movement in the early 1990s, describe an ecovillage as a "human-scale, full-featured settlement in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future."¹⁶ Ecovillages are intentional communities and they are, more often than not, started from scratch, often in rural locations. People dissatisfied with mainstream society, with its environmental and social destruction, its lack of emphasis on community, and its failure to solve problems of equity, seek to lead a different sort of life in ecovillages. They often conserve and share resources, grow some portion of their own food, make use of renewable energy, and focus on promoting positive connections among community members (to name but a few dominant

¹⁶ Robert Gilman, "The Eco-village Challenge," *In Context Magazine*, Summer 1991.

characteristics). Ecovillages in the United States are small, usually numbering fewer than a hundred individuals; often 30 or 40 people make up the entire community.

The question I strive to answer is: do ecovillages present a viable mechanism to build a world of local, sustainable communities? And if not, then what lessons can we take from the ecovillage model? Where should we turn next in our efforts to construct these communities?

There will be three parts to this project. In the first, I present a brief history of intentional communities in the United States. I use three case studies to show how these communities have been founded, what visions they have adopted, some interesting qualities of everyday life, and some major challenges they have faced. I look at Brook Farm, an 1840s antebellum community; Twin Oaks, a 1970s community founded loosely on the ideas of behaviorist B.F. Skinner; and EcoVillage at Ithaca, a suburban “model of sustainability” created in the 1990s. I connect the historical idea of intentional community to the modern ecovillage model, and show how the ecovillage is part of a new chapter in the history of U.S. intentional communities.

In the second part, I examine how the ecovillage model functions in the city. I do this as a test, to determine if ecovillages present a viable mechanism for “changing the world.” If we intend to make real progress in building local, sustainable communities, we need to provide a model that could work anywhere, and for anyone. Cities present a challenge for the ecovillage model, as they represent the current paradigm in full force. Urban ecovillages, unlike their rural counterparts, must change society from how it actually is – constructed, car-dominated, polluted – rather than working from a blank slate. Yet, as Coates argues, we must focus on the city; we must transform these unsustainable centers of civilization if we hope to make progress toward a metaindustrial world.¹⁷ To learn more about the successes and challenges of urban ecovillages, I

¹⁷ Gary J. Coates. “Future Images, Present Possibilities: Revisioning Nature, Self, and Society,” 79.

focus on two communities on opposite coasts: Los Angeles Ecovillage and Jamaica Plain Cohousing. The latter is not designated an “ecovillage,” but boasts a number of eco-conscious features and houses very environmentally aware residents. I examine each community’s environmental, social, and economic features, focusing specifically on how these aspects function in an urban setting.

In the third part of this project, I present a critical analysis of the urban ecovillage. I question their ability, as intentional communities, to facilitate progress toward a world of more sustainable, local communities. I show that the ecovillage model as it is currently formulated does not have the potential to bring society much closer to Coates’ metaindustrial vision. It does, however, provide a number of promising ideas that can be used in other contexts. In the second section of Part III, I narrate a fictional account of a Boston neighborhood that became more sustainable, drawing upon several ideas used by ecovillages (and some that are not). The purpose of the narrative is to weave together numerous real-world efforts in community-oriented sustainability, and to begin to piece together an alternative to the ecovillage model.

This paper is about the future, and about the ability of impassioned citizens to affect it. I present only one idea of what a future based on our current patterns would hold, and I focus on only one alternative to it – the metaindustrial vision. There are infinite numbers of visions of where we are going and where we *should* go; it is important to remember that this is but one of them. What follows is an exploration of how we might achieve this one vision, a vision I have come to admire and think, on my more optimistic days, to be at least somewhat plausible.

PART I

“Our farm would be a place for improving the race of men that lived on it; thought would preside over the operations of labor, and labor would contribute to the expansion of thought; we should have industry without drudgery, and true equality without its vulgarity...If wisely executed, it will be a light over this country and this age. If not a sunrise, it will be the morning star.”¹⁸

-George Ripley, founder of Brook Farm, 1840

“The ultimate goal of EcoVillage at Ithaca is nothing less than to redesign the human habitat. We are creating a model community...that will exemplify sustainable systems of living – systems that are not only practical in themselves but replicable by others. The completed project will demonstrate the feasibility of a design that meets basic human needs such as shelter, food production, energy, social interaction, work, and recreation while preserving natural ecosystems.”¹⁹

-EcoVillage at Ithaca Mission Statement, 1994

What follows is an exploration of three communities that may not seem to have very much in common. Founded in vastly different eras and built on entirely unrelated visions, one may encounter little more than a strange sense of déjà vu when comparing them. A common thread, without close inspection, may seem lacking. But I ask that you trust that all these endeavors grow from the same seed. All these projects, as part of the intentional-community tradition in the United States, respond to a world they find unpalatable, and seek to create an alternative. And though it is not always the case, many of these communities hope for – and sometimes actively work toward providing – a model for the rest of the world to follow.

Early Communities

The roots of intentional communities stretch deep into American history. The idea of utopia in the United States is older than the nation itself; Ephrata, one of the earliest communitarian ventures in American history, was started in 1732 in the Pennsylvania

¹⁸ Henry W. Sams, *Autobiography of Brook Farm* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1958), 7.

¹⁹ Stephanie Greenwood, e-mail to the author, 19 November 2007.

countryside by Conrad Beissel and a few followers.²⁰ The community was intensely religious: for members of the group, “life's goal was not material prosperity but the union of the individual soul with God.”²¹ To come closer to God was a painful process that included shunning physical comfort, eating very small quantities of food, and rejecting marriage and family life (celibacy was the norm). By 1750, the separatist community was home to over 300 people who had chosen to leave mainstream society.²² Pietistic communities were the most common type at this early stage in American history – this period also saw the rise of the Shakers and George Rapp’s Pennsylvania-based community, called Harmony. These models often lasted for quite a long time (the Shakers represent one of the most successful intentional communities in history); their success was facilitated by “Old World ties of kinship and friendship...[and] by the experience of speaking the same language in a foreign land.”²³ Furthermore, most community members were peasants for whom farming, simplicity, and hard work were second nature, and they were willing to subordinate themselves to authoritarian leaders and exacting regimen.²⁴

The communities that would come along in the first half of the 19th century represented a new stage in the intentional community tradition. Instead of pious, hardworking immigrants, “communitarians after 1825 were Americans who lacked a peasant tradition, or even much skill at farming. They were individualistic, self-assured, and intellectually restless...”²⁵ These communities tended to be formed because of a deep dissatisfaction with mainstream society. People had had enough of an American way of life that was decidedly “institutional,” where

²⁰ Ronald Walters, *American Reformers: 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 41.

²¹ John Bradley, “Pushing William Penn’s ‘Holy Experiment’ to its Limits: Ephrata Cloister,” *Pennsylvania Heritage Magazine*, Fall 1996.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Walters, 48.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

money-grubbing, prejudice, and patriarchy was the norm.²⁶ The spirit of reform was in the air, and intentional communities fit in well with the trend. They represented an opportunity to escape, and to try out radical social ideas that diverged from common practice in mainstream society. Evangelical communities continued to be founded during this period, but the intentional community movement had developed a new flavor. No longer were these communities only about getting closer to God – many were now characterized by their attempts to restructure dominant social and economic paradigms. At least 119 communal and utopian societies were formed in the United States between 1800 and 1859; sixty of these were established in the 1840s, when the call for reform reached a fever pitch.²⁷

A handful of the communities from this period stand out from the rest. One particularly fascinating society was created a few miles outside of Boston, Massachusetts. It went by a quiet name: Brook Farm. The ripples it caused belie its apparent nonchalance – tied directly to the famed Transcendentalists, influenced by the eccentric social ideas of Charles Fourier, and marked by economic erosion and eventual failure, Brook Farm was, in many ways, a fitting centerpiece for the communitarian impulse of the early 1800s. Despite its iconic stature, Brook Farm was not so different from other early intentional communities: it serves – alongside other famous early endeavors – as a solid historical foundation for the utopian creations of the 1960s and 70s, and for many of the contemporary ventures in communal living today.

²⁶ Lawrence, Veysey, *The Perfectionists: Radical Social Thought in the North, 1815-1860* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1973), 5.

²⁷ Sterling Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), xiv.

Brook Farm

On a hot and hazy August day in 1840, Reverend George Ripley began a sixty-mile trek from his new home at Ellis Farm in North Roxbury, Massachusetts to attend a convention in Groton. At the convention, the 275 participants discussed religious reform during three days of sessions. Yet George Ripley was intrigued by a less common subject; here he heard more about Adin Ballou's plans to start a "Practical Christian" community in Hopedale, Massachusetts, and for the first time began to give serious thought to starting his own intentional community.²⁸

Though drawn by Ballou's communitarian plans, Ripley disagreed with some of the ideological foundations of the Hopedale community. The irresolvable sticking point came down to the whether or not to formally require potential members to sign a religious pledge before entering the community.²⁹ Though Ripley was comfortable with the content of the pledge, he didn't believe it should be a formal requirement for entry. And so Ripley set out to build a community according to his own vision.

George Ripley and his wife, Sofia, set about learning how to live from the land and creating a vision for their utopia. George immersed himself in the pages of the *Farmer's Magazine*, *Laudon's Encyclopedia of Gardening*, and the *New England Farmer and Horticultural Register*.³⁰ He visited nearby farms to learn what he could from local farmers; agriculture in the rocky New England soil would not be easy. Concurrently, the Reverend's ideas for his new venture were solidifying. In a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson penned on November 9th, 1840, Ripley laid out his vision for the new community, and asked for Emerson's aid and cooperation. He wrote:

²⁸ Ibid, 23.

²⁹ Ibid, 28.

³⁰ Ibid, 33.

Our objects, as you know, are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry; to do away with the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all; and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions.³¹

Emerson, spending several weeks to make up his mind, finally decided against joining George Ripley's adventure. But with or without Emerson's blessing, George and Sophia were going to plow ahead – at the end of 1840, they left their comfortable lives in Boston to organize their new secular community in West Roxbury.

What the Ripleys set out to do was virtually unprecedented – at least in frigid New England. Brook Farm would be the first nineteenth-century secular community to be established in the region.³² The Shakers had broken ground on intentional communities in New England, but this was a different sort of endeavor: all the Shaker communities had been established before 1800, and they were all religiously inspired. In fact, of the thirty-seven communal societies organized in the United States between 1800 and 1840, only two were located in New England, and both were religiously based.³³

George and Sophia decided to start their community at Ellis Farm, where the two had spent the previous summer. Ellis Farm was located about a mile Northwest of West Roxbury; it consisted of 170 acres of open pastures, rolling meadows, and scattered woodlots.³⁴ The soil was, like much of the soil in New England, rocky and gritty. Growing crops was not advisable: the Ellis property had been used mainly as a dairy farm before the Ripleys arrived. George and

³¹ Ibid, 34

³² Ibid, 39

³³ Ibid, 40

³⁴ Ibid, 41.

Sophia came upon the scene with a few followers eager to transform this piece of the New England countryside into their “city of God” – they began their work zealously.

Spirits were high at first. The most famous early settler of Brook Farm, Nathaniel Hawthorne, wrote to his wife, Louisa, excited about the communitarian endeavor. He described his milking and manure adventures to her, writing, “This very morning, I milked three cows; and I milk two or three every night and morning...I am transformed into a complete farmer.”³⁵ It seemed as though Hawthorne was impressed by every aspect of Brook Farm life; he described it as “one of the most beautiful places I ever saw in my life” and wrote that “such a delectable way of life has never been seen on earth, since the days of the early Christians”³⁶ Other newly-minted farmers had similar feelings. After his first two weeks on the farm, Harvard educated George Bradford told a friend that he was working very hard, but was happy: “I have a sense of vigor and robustness that I have scarce felt before for a long time.”³⁷

The formal ideology of Brook Farm can be found the preamble to the community’s “Articles of Agreement.” More detailed than George Ripley’s letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, these words defined what the people of this new society hoped to build:

In order more effectually to promote the great purposes of human culture; to establish the external relations of life on a basis of wisdom & purity; to apply the principles of justice & love to our social organization in accordance with the laws of Divine Providence; to substitute a system of brotherly cooperation for one of selfish competition; to secure to our children & those who may be entrusted to our care the benefits of the highest physical, intellectual, & moral education which in the present state of human knowledge the resources at our command will permit; to institute an attractive, efficient & productive system of industry; to prevent the exercise of worldly anxiety by the competent supply of our necessary wants; to diminish the desire of excessive accumulation, by making the acquisition of individual property subservient to upright & disinterested uses; to guarantee to each other forever the means of physical support & of spiritual progress; & thus to impart a greater freedom, simplicity, truthfulness, refinement & moral dignity to

³⁵ Sams, 18.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Delano, 49.

our mode of life; - We the undersigned do unite in a voluntary Association, & adopt & ordain the following Articles of Agreement & Association, to wit.³⁸

The new community members desired to escape the problems of larger society; they hoped to leave behind the system of “selfish competition” and to satisfy wants while diminishing “the desire of excessive accumulation.” They desired a simpler, more moral life, and in these early days, with grand ideas and refreshing hard work, this alternative reality seemed much more than a chimera.

These happy days would not last; social and economic difficulties would plague the community almost constantly during its six-year lifespan. However, there were notable successes at Brook Farm. Chief among these was the community’s school. It was divided into three programs: the “infant program” for children below the age of six, the “primary program” for children between ages six and ten, and the “preparatory program,” a six year long course of study designed for students who intended to go on to college.³⁹ Several Harvard University graduates (Ripley, George Bradford, and a man named John Sullivan Dwight) taught classes, and all members of the community – not just the wealthy – received a first-rate education. The education program was so highly regarded, in fact, that Harvard endorsed it for students looking to go to college.⁴⁰ A nursery was also established – it was one of the first in the United States. There were also evening classes for adult learners; Brook Farm served as a prototype for the adult educational programs that can be found throughout the United States today. No other antebellum community had nearly as diversified and developed an educational program as Brook Farm.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid, 64-65.

³⁹ Ibid, 80.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 81.

⁴¹ Ibid.

The farm also succeeded in providing new opportunities for women – there was more chance for personal growth and development for women in the community than in mainstream society. In the “Plan of the West Roxbury Community,” published in *The Dial* in 1842, Elizabeth Peabody describes how payment worked at Brook Farm: “All labor, whether bodily or intellectual, is to be paid at the same rate of wages.”⁴² The reason, she writes, “for setting the same pecuniary value on every kind of labor, is, to give outward expression to the great truth, that all labor is sacred, when done for a common interest.”⁴³ Since all labor was considered dignified, it made sense to compensate men and women equally, regardless of whether it was work in the fields or in the home. Most women did domestic work, but where they worked was not circumscribed by gender. There are no recorded complaints from Brook Farm women regarding their role in the home (this cannot be said of other New England antebellum communities)⁴⁴ – again, this can be traced back to the respect shown to all jobs, including cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. These ideas about equal compensation for equal time, regardless of task, would be found in communities founded hundreds of years later, notably at Twin Oaks.

Despite these successes, Brook Farm soured for many as time went on. Members previously enlivened by the hard work on the farm found that their enchantment waned as the daily grind became tired routine. In a letter Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote to his wife in August 1841, only three months after telling her he had “been transformed into a complete farmer,” he was indeed transformed – but not into a farmer. He wrote: “And – joyful thought! – in a little more than a fortnight, thy husband will be free from his bondage – free to think of his Dove – free to enjoy Nature – free to think and feel!...Oh, belovedest, labor is the curse of this world,

⁴² Sams, 64.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Delano, 325.

and nobody can meddle with it, without becoming proportionally brutified. Dost thou think it a praiseworthy matter, that I spent five golden months in providing food for cows and horses? Dearest, it is not so.”⁴⁵ Hawthorne’s frustrations may have been exacerbated by the poor location of the farm – the rocky soil made it nearly impossible to grow crops. The site of the farm led to a great deal of fruitless labor; this was one of the primary reasons for the community’s eventual failure.⁴⁶

Constant economic difficulties further jeopardized Brook Farm’s future (as we will see later, money woes plagued Twin Oaks and EcoVillage at Ithaca as well). In December of 1841, George Ripley wrote to Ralph Waldo Emerson seeking funds for his community endeavor. He warned, “without larger means than are now at our command, we must labor to great disadvantage, and perhaps retard and seriously injure our enterprise.”⁴⁷ It was not uncommon for the community to seek external aid for their floundering economy. As the years went on, Ripley and his followers realized that farming would never be successful enough to help fund the community. The group began to focus more on industrial work, developing a “sash and blind” industry in 1845. But poor financial judgment made it hard to get back on track. The creation of the sash and blind industry was probably a major error – it was very cost-intensive and put the already indebted community even deeper in debt.⁴⁸ Brook Farm was never able to generate enough capital internally, and was forced to rely on external benefactors for its continued existence.

Even with these major problems, Brook Farm persisted for six and a half years. Events in later years, however, would make it impossible for the community to survive. In 1845, Brook

⁴⁵ Sams, 30.

⁴⁶ Delano, 320.

⁴⁷ Sams, 61.

⁴⁸ Delano, 215.

Farm suffered a smallpox outbreak, and in 1846, a fire destroyed its largest building. In the weeks after the fire, in March of 1846, Brook Farmers appealed to creditors in New York City and Boston for financial relief. Ironically, Alfred Kay had criticized the financial insecurities of the community in a letter to John Dwight, longstanding member of Brook Farm, the day before the fire (his letter actually arrived *after* the fire). He minced no words: “you have not for a single day paid your way, & have throughout the whole experiment been dependent on...the charity of others.”⁴⁹ Kay urged practical measures to fix up the farm, such as closing the community to all new applicants, putting the administration of the community back into the hands of “the people,” restoring the school to its once “paramount position,” and ejecting community members who did not demonstrate an ability to support themselves.⁵⁰ If Brook Farmers had followed some of Kay’s advice, the fire might have been a turning point; it might have incited the community to get back on track. But there was to be no turnaround – Brook Farm was slowly dying.

In November 1846, George Ripley sold several hundred volumes from his personal library in order to pay off some of the community’s debts. For him, the end was in sight. He wrote to a friend: “I can now understand how a man would feel if he could attend his own funeral.”⁵¹ The true funeral would not come for several months, however. In August 1847, Ripley transferred ownership of the community to a board of three trustees, Theodore Parker, George Russell and Samuel Teal.⁵² Some members hung on until the bitter end; about twenty people lived in the now eerily half-empty buildings until October. It was then that Ripley finally left the community he had so eagerly founded six and a half years earlier.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 262.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, 283.

⁵² Ibid, 308.

Continuing the Tradition

Though Brook Farm and many other antebellum communities shut their doors in the mid-nineteenth century, by no means did intentional communities disappear from our nation's landscape. Whole books have been written to catalogue these communities during times of seemingly minor activity. Historian Robert Fogarty argues that the perceived "collapse" in communitarianism in the 1850s is inaccurate: "...instead of discontinuity there was continuous colony organization, that instead of a few there were numerous collective settlements, and that instead of weakness and irrelevance there was strong social purpose and a serious intent to respond directly to emerging social conditions by both spiritual and secular leaders."⁵³ There were 140 communities founded between 1860 and 1914; some of these lasted a generation, while others never made it past their infancy.⁵⁴ In this period, most utopias remained distant from mainstream society. Fogarty notes that "even though such utopian communities were often ideologically and socially in opposition to American society, they were, by and large, left alone to carry out their own destinies and to run their course with a minimum of interference" from government and larger society in general.⁵⁵

Many of these communities lasted into the 1900s, and a number of new ones were founded at the start of the century as well. Timothy Miller notes some of the transformations that set these new communities apart from their predecessors. These new endeavors tended to be smaller in size – communities with several hundred adherents at one site became much rarer. There was a decline in the personal, centralized leadership of earlier utopias; new communities tended to be less hierarchical. Land ownership patterns changed as well: instead of having a

⁵³ Robert S. Fogarty, *All Things New: American Communes and Utopian Movements, 1860-1914* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

single tract of land, communities were more often made up of small, adjacent tracts to which their occupants had certain specific rights – either ownership or leasehold rights.⁵⁶ Finally, many communities intentionally kept a low profile: the American fear of communism made it unwise to loudly broadcast an alternative, more communal way of living. If nothing else, there was variety: there were art colonies and “new communes,” religious groups and social experiments. The famous rise in communal living and intentional communities in the 1960s and 1970s was not an isolated event in history. In fact, Miller argues, this explosion of intentional communities was “a piece of a continuous, if not utterly seamless, communal fabric that stretches back more than three centuries.”⁵⁷

Twin Oaks

The 1960s and 70s marked a high-water point for communal living in the United States. Richard Fairfield, who surveyed the movement over the course of several years, wrote in 1972, “From a few urban groups, crash pads, and a handful of intellectual utopians and Christian conservative communes, the movement has grown very rapidly so that there are now over 2,000 communes,” not including the several thousand additional urban co-ops and collectives that came into existence.⁵⁸ Many of these community endeavors were part of the counterculture – these “hip communes” often received their initial inspiration from the use of drugs, and tended to have an anarchist quality. Others were religious retreats, often a mixture of Christian and Eastern traditions. Some were “group marriage communes,” dedicated to working out new kinds of family and interpersonal relations.

⁵⁶ Timothy Miller, *The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth Century America* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), xvi.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, xiv.

⁵⁸ Richard Fairfield, *Communes USA: A Personal Tour* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc., 1972), 3.

It was in this milieu of community construction that Twin Oaks was founded. Like Brook Farm, it was created out of a sense of dissatisfaction with the world. Kat Kinkade had long been frustrated with her job and felt a lack of purpose in her life – she was eager to make a change. In 1966, she joined seven others, mainly social activists, to found the Twin Oaks community. They based their utopia on the behaviorist B.F. Skinner’s book, *Walden Two*. In the novel, Skinner presents his vision for utopia; he thought it was possible to change society only by altering fundamental human behavior, which could be accomplished through behavioral engineering.⁵⁹ All human behavior, Skinner asserted, was dependent on external influences, and positive reinforcement was much more successful at promoting behavior than punitive measures. His perfect society was designed by behavior engineers, who would condition people to live and enjoy the good life and free themselves from their aggression, jealousy, and competitiveness.⁶⁰ Though Twin Oaks was the most famous “Walden Two community,” most of Skinner’s radical ideas were never implemented – his work would be inspiration but not prescription.

The founders corresponded for more than a year before meeting at the Waldenwoods conference in 1966. The eight idealists had plenty of grand ideas, but not nearly enough money to put them into practice. Luckily for them, however, the Waldenwoods conference was also attended by a benefactor Kat Kinkade calls “Bud,” who had the financial means to help them realize their dream. He provided the community with a six-year lease on a farm in Louisa, Virginia; this would become Twin Oaks’ home. On June 16, 1967 the group left mainstream society for their utopia: the founders of Twin Oaks moved onto what had been a 123-acre tobacco farm in rural Virginia.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Hilke Kuhlman, *Living Walden Two: B.F. Skinner’s Behaviorist Utopia and Experimental Communities* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), ix.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Fairfield, 60.

Twin Oaks' ideology was not as clearly stated as Brook Farm's. There would be no written "Articles of Agreement" or constitution in these early years. Yet this did not mean that the founders lacked a clear vision for their community. In a pamphlet published by the community in 1969, Twin Oakers describe their intent to create an alternative model; they expressed their hope to radically restructure both the society and the individual so that people would become "committed to nonaggression...concerned for one another...where one man's gain is not another man's loss...where disagreeable work is minimized and leisure is valued: an economic system of equality and a society which is constantly trying to improve in its ability to create happy, productive, creative people."⁶²

Though filled with enthusiasm, the community had much work to do if it was going to make it through its first winter. Housing was extremely limited – there were only four viable rooms on the property – and the members scrambled to put up their first new building before the cold came. None of the founders had any experience with agriculture, yet they attempted to continue farming tobacco on the land to make money. This and other early farming efforts went awry, and Twin Oakers decided they would need to switch industries if they were to develop any sort of economic viability. In 1967 the community became involved in a new venture – hammock making. By 1973, this made up one-third of the community's revenue, and eventually constituted two-thirds of its income.⁶³ The major retailer Pier One purchased large numbers of hammocks; it is thought that this alone kept Twin Oaks financially afloat through its more cash-strapped years.

Several radical and intriguing ideas came out of Twin Oaks. One especially interesting element in community life involved the political process. Kinkade and her comrades started out

⁶² Fairfield, 100.

⁶³ Kuhlman, 91.

attempting to make decisions by consensus, but this soon fell apart. Even at the beginning, with only eight members, the process was slow and tedious, and certain people tended to rush ahead, do all the work, and not bother to wait for the support of the entire group.⁶⁴ The community struggled to set up a new system of governance; five weeks after Twin Oaks' inception, a Board of Planners was created. This board was in charge of general decision-making, but appointed "managers" to deal with more specific aspects of village life. Managers were responsible for determining the community's diet, work distribution, architectural plans - even clothing.⁶⁵ The planners served staggered eighteen-month terms, and any decision they made could be overruled by a majority vote.⁶⁶ In the 1970s, with an influx of new members, this system underwent notable changes. New Twin Oakers demanded more input in their political system – they wanted more of a voice in the decision-making process. Thus planners shifted from a role in which they made long-range, relatively independent decisions to one in which they facilitated compromise acceptable to everyone in the community. In contrast, the manager position has changed very little throughout Twin Oaks' history. The main problem that has developed in this system, surprisingly, is political apathy. This may be attributed to the fact that much time is now spent – like in the early consensus model – on facilitating compromise. One former member noted his frustration: "the decision-making process at Twin Oaks is slow, tedious, and unrewarding for those involved in it."⁶⁷ Despite these ongoing difficulties, the system – with some alterations – has guided the community for several decades.

The economic structure of Twin Oaks was (and still is) very different from that of mainstream society. The community's economic system was not created immediately –

⁶⁴ Ibid, 92.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 93.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 100.

members were so excited about building their new utopia during the first three weeks that no incentives were needed. But soon complaints began to surface; people weren't volunteering for the more undesirable tasks in the community. In response, the "labor-credit" system was established. In its first incarnation, people received credits based on how desirable a job was – doing a job very few others had signed up to do that week would earn one more credits.⁶⁸ In the 1970s, the community experimented with doling out credits based on how "personally disagreeable" one found any particular job. So if one community member found shoveling manure far more unpleasant than another, he or she might earn more credits for doing the same work – even if the two individuals worked side by side for the same amount of time. After five years, this system fell apart. People took advantage of the setup: less dedicated members worked fewer hours on jobs they reportedly disliked. The community finally instituted a new labor-credit system in the late 1970s, which has continued since, in which one credit equaled one hour of work, regardless of personal or overall desirability or estimated time necessary for the job's completion.⁶⁹ Under this system, all work was to be valued equally; this setup was foreshadowed more than 100 years earlier at Brook Farm. Much has been learned from this alternative economy. David Ruth, former Twin Oaker, wrote in 1978: " 'In the absences of differential material rewards, members have found that the pride of accomplishment, concern for the group as a whole, and the need for peer-group approval are powerful motivators' ."⁷⁰ The system includes a great many complexities, and often takes new members quite some time to learn, but it seems to be (at least relatively) functional.

Life has been far from perfect in this utopia. Disillusionment and departure was and is common; in fact, the community seems to rely on turnover to make it sustainable. This constant

⁶⁸ Ibid, 107.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 109.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 112.

cycling-through of members “fulfills the double function of constantly providing the community with idealistic new workers while allowing disillusioned members to leave.”⁷¹ Why does this utopian dream fail to last for new arrivals? “Some people leave because they have personal problems they that they came hoping Twin Oaks would solve,” notes Kinkade. “Another reason people have left is because they stay for a while and realize there are distinct ideological differences between the core group – the power structure, the Twin Oaks Establishment, so to speak – and themselves.”⁷² The life here doesn’t work well for everyone – or even for most people – but it provides an alternative to mainstream society.

Twin Oaks has survived for the past 40 years, and it doesn’t appear to show signs of faltering. The community currently includes about one hundred members: 85 adults and 15 children.⁷³ Though not part of the ecovillage movement, there are many connections to be found between life at Twin Oaks today and the ecovillage model we will discuss next. The community shares residences and vehicles; there are only 7 residences and 18 vehicles for the hundred people that live there.⁷⁴ Though most of the structures themselves are fairly conventional, Twin Oakers have installed a variety of eco-friendly features, including passive solar heating in the form of large south-facing windows, super-insulation, solar hot water, solar photovoltaic power in one residence, and permaculture gardens around some of the buildings.⁷⁵ Residents grow a significant portion of their own food in an on-site organic garden, reducing the use of pesticides, oil needed for transport, and packaging normally included with grocery-store purchases.⁷⁶ This

⁷¹ Kuhlman, 122.

⁷² Fairfield, 80.

⁷³ “Twin Oaks Intentional Community Homepage,” <<http://www.twinoaks.org>> (9 October 2007).

⁷⁴ “Ecological Sustainability,” *Twin Oaks Community FAQ*, <<http://www.twinoaks.org/FAQ.html#basic>> (5 November 2007).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

reflects a trend of modern times, in which communities are responding to environmental degradation and pushing for sustainability.

A New Brand of Community Living: Ecovillages

In the early 1990s, the intentional community landscape of the United States entered a new season. An exciting coalescence of ideas gave birth to a new model for communities: the ecovillage. Attempts to create sustainable communities were not unheard of when this new movement burst into being. Projects like Findhorn Ecovillage, located in Moray, Scotland, had already sprung up; most of these early endeavors were concentrated in Europe. Work on Findhorn Ecovillage began in the early 1980s,⁷⁷ when the intentional community that had existed at Findhorn since 1962 attempted to create a human settlement that could be considered sustainable in environmental, social, and economic terms.⁷⁸ Wind turbines were installed, an ecological wastewater treatment system was created, and “eco-houses” were built as part of the endeavor.⁷⁹ But projects like the one at Findhorn were not yet identified as part of a common movement.

This connection was finally created, in large part, by Danish social activist Hildur Jackson, and her husband, Canadian entrepreneur Ross Jackson. Hildur had already been deeply involved in the co-housing movement in the 1980s. Co-housing served as an alternative to modern residential life; it focused on facilitating community and connection among neighbors, largely through building design. In co-housing, a number of households cluster together around a “common house” where members eat communally and where shared resources – laundry,

⁷⁷ Findhorn was not called an “ecovillage” when it began; this title would come later, with the rise of the ecovillage movement in the early 1990s.

⁷⁸ “Findhorn Ecovillage,” *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Findhorn_Ecovillage> (22 October 2007).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

garden tools, play space, etc, depending on the preferences of each individual group – are stored.⁸⁰ Though this model often led to ecological benefits, Hildur and several of her colleagues remained dissatisfied. They were convinced that a more substantial transformation was needed in how humans live on the Earth. With this in mind, Hildur and her husband established the Gaia Trust in 1987, in an effort to support “the transition to a sustainable and more spiritual future society through grants and proactive initiatives.”⁸¹

Enter Robert and Diane Gilman. Throughout the 1980s, the Gilmans had been writing about what they saw as the best examples of sustainable communities in their magazine, *In Context*, and had some powerful ideas on how all these ideas could be connected. In 1990, the Gaia Trust engaged the Gilmans to undertake a more comprehensive study of the best practices in the field of sustainable community. A year later, the Gilmans produced “Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities,” a report in which international best practices were highlighted, and a series of recommendations to the Gaia Trust on how to help the movement take off were provided.⁸² This was the first time, at least to the Jacksons’ knowledge, that the word “ecovillage” was used in a public context.⁸³ The report would be the centerpiece of a meeting in Denmark in 1991 that was attended by twenty leading thinkers in the sustainability movement, including the founder of the Natural Step, Karl-Henrick Robert, and eco-sensitive economist David Korten.⁸⁴ This meeting would mark the true start of the ecovillage phenomenon.

After the conference, the ecovillage movement quickly gathered steam. In May 1992, Michael Boddington was commissioned to prepare a report “Technologies for Life, Sustainable

⁸⁰ Jonathan Dawson, *Ecovillages: New Frontiers for Sustainability* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2006), 12.

⁸¹ “About Gaia Trust,” <<http://www.gaia.org/gaia/gaiatrust>> (22 October 2007).

⁸² Dawson, 13.

⁸³ “What is an EV,” <<http://www.gaia.org/gaia/ecovillage/whatis>> (22 October 2007).

⁸⁴ Dawson, 19.

Technologies for Ecovillages;” an intense period of discussions and networking followed, and those involved in the Gaia Trust’s project decided that these community-based sustainability initiatives were growing fast and had revolutionary potential.⁸⁵ Supported by a Gaia Trust grant, the first Ecovillage Training Center was established in Tennessee. Simultaneously, the Green Kibbutz movement was started with the support of ecovillage activists across the globe. The first ecovillage conference, “Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities for the 21st century” was held in 1995 in Findhorn Ecovillage. It drew 400 participants from around the world, and 300 more had to be turned away.⁸⁶ At the UN HABITAT conference in Istanbul in 1996, the Global Ecovillage Network was created as “ ‘a global confederation of people and communities that meet and share their ideas, exchange technologies, develop cultural and educational exchanges, directories and newsletters, and are dedicated to restoring the land and living ‘sustainable plus’ lives by putting more back into the environment than [they] take out.’ ”⁸⁷ The Network was split into three regions: ENA (Ecovillage Network of the Americas), GENOA (Global Ecovillage Network for Oceania and Asia) and GEN-Europe. These linkages have allowed the movement to grow, and have given people involved in sustainable-community building the opportunity to connect with one another.

Many ecovillages have been built in the United States since the early 1990s. Some were founded right around the time the term “ecovillage” was coming into being. More common were communities that struggled to get started for several years in the early to mid-1990s, and then finally succeeded in getting off the ground by the end of the decade. In 2007, ecovillages can be found from coast to coast, and in various stages of formation. These communities feature some very disparate social and economic setups, as well as a variety of ecologically sound features

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

(from wind turbines to solar panels to super-insulation). But despite some major differences, these intentional communities claim to be part of the ecovillage movement.

This leads us to the unavoidable and exceedingly interesting (and challenging) question: what is an ecovillage? If their specific ideologies are not uniform, and their practices are even more divergent, what ties them together? I will provide several definitions and explanations below, but note that every ecovillage is unique, and each community fulfills the following definitions to different degrees. The Global Ecovillage Network actively avoids including some communities as “ecovillages,” while rejecting others. At a GEN board meeting in Denmark in 1998, it was decided that “a community is an ecovillage if it specifies an ecovillage mission, such as in its organizational documents, community agreements or membership guidelines, and makes progress in that direction.”⁸⁸ The Community Sustainability Assessment was created by the Global Ecovillage Network to offer some balance to the many approaches that can be used to make communities more sustainable, but it is not used to test the legitimacy of ecovillages. In the early stages of ecovillage networking, the decision was made that the movement would be inclusive; instead of using the CSA to keep members out, it became “an auditing tool communities could use to find direction and identify steps they could take.”⁸⁹ According to Robert Gilman – recall that he and his wife were central in starting the ecovillage movement – “there are as yet no communities that *fully* express the eco-village ideal.”⁹⁰ But he believes that this should not stop one from attempting to define the model ecovillage.

The Gilmans’ definition of an ecovillage, included in their report to the Gaia Trust in 1991, has been one of the most frequently adopted. They describe an ecovillage as a “human-scale, full-featured settlement in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Linda Joseph and Albert Bates, “What is an Ecovillage?” *Communities Magazine*, January 2003.

⁹⁰ Robert Gilman, “The Eco-Village Challenge,” *In Context Magazine*, Summer 1991.

natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future.”⁹¹ Robert Gilman breaks up this definition into five constitutive parts and explicates them in turn in his essay “What is an Ecovillage?”

“Human-scale,” he writes, refers to a community size in which people are able to know and be known by others in the community, and where each member feels he or she is able to influence the community’s direction.⁹² Gilman argues that “considerable practical evidence” indicates that the upper limit for this sort of group is about 500 people, and so he designates this as the maximum size for a functional ecovillage⁹³

A “full-featured settlement,” says Gilman, is one in which all major functions of modern life – residence, food production, manufacturing, leisure, social life, and commerce – are present in balanced proportions.⁹⁴ This is an alternative to the segmentation we find in today’s society, in which districts tend to be isolated by function. Instead of driving many miles to go to work or shop, these pieces of society would be integrated with - and physically closer to - residential life. Gilman notes that not every small community could have all necessary services (hospitals and airports, for example); however, he believes that a network comprised of small ecovillage units could run these sorts of larger institutions.

Harmlessly integrating human activities into the natural world is an essential component of Gilman’s ecovillage vision. This integration relies on a two major principles. First, humans must not attempt to dominate over nature, but rather find their place within it. Secondly, they must commit to the cyclic use of natural material resources, rather than the linear approach (dig

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

it up, use it once, throw it away) that has characterized industrial society.⁹⁵ The upshot of these principles is a micro-society that uses renewable energy resources, composts organic waste, recycles and reuses to the greatest degree possible, and avoids toxic substances.

Gilman's fourth principle is the promotion of healthy human development. He notes that an adequate investigation of just what constitutes this "healthy human development" would take a full book to examine, but offers his belief that it involves "a balanced and integrated development of all aspects of human life – physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual."⁹⁶ This piece notes the importance of people in the community – the ecovillage is not meant to benefit only the natural world, it is intended to facilitate healthy and happy human lives as well.

Finally, we come to Gilman's "sustainability principle," which dictates that activities in the ecovillage should be able to be continued into the indefinite future. This principle intends to "keep ecovillagers honest," for unless all the pieces of the community are functioning, the potential for a way of life that could continue into perpetuity disappears. An ecovillage must live off its own capital, promote healthy human development, and become integrated with the natural world in order to satisfy this last principle.

Karen Svensson provides a complimentary definition of ecovillages. In *Ecovillage Living: Restoring the Earth and Her People*, a work she edited with Hildur Jackson, Svensson writes: "Ecovillages embody a way of living. They are grounded in the deep understanding that all things and all creatures are interconnected, and that our thoughts and actions have an impact on our environment."⁹⁷ She claims that ecovillages build on various combinations of three dimensions: ecology, community (the social dimension), and culture-spirituality. The ecological

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Hildur Jackson and Karen Svensson, *Ecovillage Living: Restoring the Earth and Her People* (Foxhole, Dartington: Chelsea Green, 2002), 10.

component refers to people's connection to the Earth; the social dimension refers to people's desire to spend more time together and to create a supportive environment where one can thrive individually and as part of the group; the cultural-spiritual dimension alludes to a return to a way of living in which harmony with all living things is the backbone of daily life.⁹⁸ These three dimensions, together with the Gilmans' definition, help define just what we are talking about when we use the word "ecovillage."

Placing ecovillages in the context of intentional communities may seem an awkward fit at first. The ecovillage philosophy, for example, seems quite different from most intentional community philosophies of the past. But if we look a little closer, we find deep connections that tie modern ecovillages to the earlier communitarian tradition. Caroline Lucas, the English Green Party's Principle Speaker, writes, "The ecovillage movement was born when the ancient idea of intentional communal living met the burgeoning international green movement of the 1960s and 1970s."⁹⁹ Ecovillage founders consider mainstream society deeply flawed: they point to the environmental problems, social injustice, and the personal dissatisfaction it often causes. Like the communities of the past, ecovillages hope to escape the problems of the mainstream by offering something better. Just as in the past, we find radical mission statements, new social strategies, economic dilemmas – all the good and bad of intentional-communal living is built into the ecovillage model.

Ecovillage at Ithaca

Liz Walker and Joan Bokaer got to talking while walking across the United States. It was 1990, and about 150 people from six different countries walked – an average of 20 miles a day,

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Dawson, 9.

six days a week – across the country in an effort to raise environmental awareness.¹⁰⁰ The group stopped in more than 200 communities; one of these was Arcosanti, an intentional community of about 50 people in the Arizona desert. The village inspired Joan. She bought Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett’s *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, and gushed about it to Liz over the campfire one night outside of St. Louis.¹⁰¹ Her initial vision to build a sustainable community was grandiose – she talked at first of a city of 50,000 – but little by little she scaled down her plans into something reasonable. As the idea grew more realistic, with fewer residents and smaller startup costs, Liz grew more intrigued.

The walk ended, and at first, not much happened: Liz and Joan didn’t immediately join forces and set off to turn dreams into reality. Liz went back to her home in San Francisco, Joan to hers in Ithaca, New York. But Joan kept talking to people: at a speech at her Unitarian church in May 1991, she related her “ecovillage vision” to an audience of 100 people. She found people far more excited about her idea than she had imagined: this wellspring of interest would set her big plans in motion at last. Joan planned a five-day retreat for the end of June to add some details, people-power, and money to her dream. She invited Liz to come. Liz was nervous; she notes: “I felt as if I was poised on the edge of a cliff, being asked to fly.”¹⁰² But despite her reservations (leaving her job in San Francisco and moving with her kids to New York were high on the list), Liz decided to go to Ithaca and help facilitate the conference. Her future would become clearer after the retreat, she thought.

In the third week of June, Liz flew out to Ithaca. About 100 people from all over the country had decided to attend the retreat; their home base would be several big white tents located in a field a few miles outside Ithaca. Some people stayed at a local Bed and Breakfast,

¹⁰⁰ Liz Walker, *Ecovillage at Ithaca* (British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2005), 7.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 11.

but most camped out. The retreat started with presentations. Joan shared her vision; Marcia Forte, who ran a local community center, spoke about the importance of making the new community as diverse as possible; and Bart Conta, a Cornell professor, talked about solar technologies.¹⁰³ Participants soon grew tired this pattern, however, and pushed to get things going: they wanted to talk about principles and values, decision-making, and the site plan. Liz, facilitating all this, was along for the ride. “By the end of the five days I was dizzy with exhaustion,” she reflects. “But I was also grinning from ear to ear. An organization had been born!”¹⁰⁴ The enthusiasm and dedication of the people at the retreat helped Liz overcome her doubts and jump from the cliff on which she had been poised. She and Joan would serve as co-directors for the newly minted Ecovillage at Ithaca.

In the next few weeks, many things happened simultaneously. Several committees formed, visions were solidified, land was chosen, money was raised. A local benefactor had given Joan \$60,000 just before the retreat, so the group was off to a good start monetarily. They set about scouring the area for a location to start their community. The site committee, and eventually most of the group, came to prefer a large, open parcel of land about a mile and a half outside of Ithaca. The site, called West Hill, “had beautiful views, pockets of rich agricultural soil, and open rolling meadows. No trees would have to be cut down to build homes...”¹⁰⁵ The property, though beautiful, was very expensive – the original asking price for the land was \$800,000. An interim Board member bargained the owner down to half that price, and Joan and Liz quickly set about raising money. Through their contacts, they were able to obtain sufficient loans for the purchase – ten people loaned the entire amount – in only six weeks. On June 23rd, 1992, 175 acres of rural New York farmland was theirs.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 12.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 13.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 16.

Like Twin Oaks and Brook Farm, Ecovillage at Ithaca faced the “now what?” question after purchasing the land. There was much to learn and much to do if they were to succeed in getting their community off the ground. Unlike their predecessors, however, Ecovillage at Ithaca undertook a long-term, detailed planning process to carefully guide their development. In June 1992, a Planning Council was formed; it met for three hours every Monday afternoon to research the best use of the land, and was made up of ten people, including two local architects, a landscape architect, a biologist, several Cornell graduate students, and several future village residents.¹⁰⁶ They worked hard, and shared their findings at the first EcoVillage Land Use Planning Forum (LUPF) in September 1992. The forum brought together Council members, over 60 participants from the EcoVillage community, and a range of local professionals. The villagers focused on six main areas: agriculture, natural areas and recreation, neighborhood siting, transportation, village siting, and water/waste management.¹⁰⁷ The event was a big success, and over the next nine months three more weekend forums were held to further develop the vision. In June 1993, the EcoVillage came to consensus about the future of the community, encapsulated in an eight-page document titled “Guidelines for Development,” which delineated environmental and social goals for the village.

The community also worked to establish an official vision statement that would guide EcoVillage at Ithaca. On January 6, 1994, the EVI Board of Directors put this vision in writing:

The ultimate goal of EcoVillage at Ithaca is nothing less than to redesign the human habitat. We are creating a model community of some five hundred residents that will exemplify sustainable systems of living – systems that are not only practical in themselves, but replicable by others. The completed project will demonstrate the feasibility of a design that meets basic human needs such as shelter, food production, energy, social interaction, work and recreation while preserving natural ecosystems.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 24.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Stephanie Greenwood, e-mail to the author, 19 November 2007.

EcoVillage at Ithaca was to be a model of sustainable community in a suburban setting; it sought to show mainstream society that a more sustainable way of life was possible. Like Brook Farm and Twin Oaks, the community found the current trends in the world unsatisfactory, and sought to create an alternative. Perhaps more than its predecessors, EcoVillage at Ithaca actively worked to provide a model that could – at least theoretically – be widely adopted and change the world.

Though the plan had become well developed, there were many more difficulties to overcome; political and economic headaches would make the process of gaining final approval and starting construction on the first homes at the EcoVillage a long and arduous one. But with perseverance and cooperation with the town of Ithaca, the process moved along. In the summer and fall of 1994, the EcoVillage's First Resident Group (FROG) approved the house and site design, and the Town of Ithaca was involved in a Sketch plan review. The group received special zoning status to become a Special Land Use District in January 1995.¹⁰⁹ This rezoning would allow them to build their alternative community without major legal impediment. Final Site Plan approval for FROG came on July 18th, 1995, and in October 1996, the first families moved into their homes.¹¹⁰ Six years after the idea first came to Joan on a walk across the United States, EcoVillage at Ithaca became a reality.

EcoVillage at Ithaca, like the intentional communities of the past, includes several components well worth further exploration. One interesting piece is the West Haven Farm; this 10-acre certified organic farm was the first part of the community to come into existence. The farm is a small but powerful instance of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). CSA farms

¹⁰⁹ Liz Walker, "History of the Project: The First 11 Years," <http://www.ecovillage.ithaca.ny.us/evis_history.html> (24 October 2007).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

create connections between people and the land; by joining a CSA, people can enjoy organic seasonal food produced closer to home while supporting sustainable agriculture. They are considered “shareholders” and pay a portion of the farm’s expenses in return for a weekly provision of freshly picked vegetables, herbs, and flowers throughout the growing season (from late May to early November).¹¹¹ West Haven Farm uses this model to provide food to local CSA members, but it also provides food at a nearby Farmers’ market – about 60% of the food goes to CSA members, with the remaining 40% going to the Farmers’ market. Liz Walker estimates that the farm feeds about 1,000 people a week during the growing season.¹¹² The farm is able to be so productive and sustainable largely because of the way Jen and John Bokaer-Smith, the principal owners, nurture the land. The couple uses green and composted manure, plants nitrogen-fixing cover crops, and practices crop rotation to replenish the soil.¹¹³ The farm (and the farmers) has developed deep connections with the people who surround it, and serves as a superb example of a locally oriented, more sustainable type of farming.

The community focuses on sustainability in all realms, not merely in food production. Liz Walker describes the EcoVillage at Ithaca approach to sustainability as “pragmatic,” writing: “We are building a ‘green’ community and culture, rather than individual state-of-the-art ‘green’ buildings.”¹¹⁴ There are numerous achievements of note. The community’s location, carefully chosen because of its relative proximity to the city of Ithaca, has drastically cut transportation use; Gary Thomas, a former resident and energy consultant, estimated that over the course of three decades the community would save about \$716,000 in gas costs compared to a more rural

¹¹¹ Walker, *Ecovillage at Ithaca*, 40.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

site they had considered.¹¹⁵ The ecovillagers also frequently share cars and rides, and even lobbied for a bus stop at their entry road so residents would have access to public transportation. Land use at the site provides a viable alternative to suburban sprawl: the community plans to preserve 90% of the 175-acre site as open space by building homes in dense clusters. Each neighborhood at the EcoVillage only requires 3 or 4 acres for about 30 homes.¹¹⁶ Finally, there is a focus on energy conservation and, at least in some of the homes, energy production. Because of “green design” measures in the homes, the First Resident Group (FROG) uses about 40% less gas and electricity compared to typical homes in the Northeastern United States.¹¹⁷ A quarter of the buildings generate their own electricity via solar panels. All these measures encourage residents to live a holistically “greener” lifestyle, and to influence their friends and neighbors to do the same.

EcoVillage at Ithaca uses the consensus model to make community decisions. In this model, objections get discussed and solutions are proposed; facilitators help the group come to a place where commonly held values lead to clear agreement. Though an individual may disagree with the final decision, they will still abide by it; only if someone feels very strongly that a group decision is wrong will they “block” it. Blocking a decision is seen as a very serious step, and is thus rare. As a grassroots organizer, Liz Walker has had lifelong experience in this process, and has helped it function well at Ithaca. “By inviting people into the [decision-making] process,” she writes, “they quickly became part of the community. But perhaps more importantly, they helped broaden and deepen the scope of the work. The more expertise people brought and were willing to share with the community, the more we were able to accomplish as a community.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 126.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 128.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 157.

This shared leadership and consensus model can indeed slow things down and cause frustration, as we saw in our exploration of the Twin Oaks community, but with trained facilitators, it appears to have the potential to be a major boon. Liz Walker notes that, in general, the consensus model has worked.

The economic system at EcoVillage appears to be surprisingly traditional. The farm provides some income, but this goes to the owners – and it isn't much, as the farm is only marginally profitable. Jen Bokaer-Smith teaches full time, and still she and her husband John barely make enough to support themselves.¹¹⁹ The community receives some money by sharing its knowledge. In 2002, after a decade of working with Cornell University students, EcoVillage branched out to develop a joint partnership with the Environmental Studies Department at Ithaca College; the National Science Foundation provided a three-year \$149,000 grant to develop a working curriculum for students. EVI residents have taught courses on general sustainability and on more specific topics, such as “Energy Efficiency and Sustainable Energy.”¹²⁰ Interns have donated their time and helped keep the community functioning; the EcoVillage has had about 12 interns work with them, often in exchange for college credit. These are modest labor and income streams leading into the community – most people make a living by working in nearby Ithaca.

Life at the EcoVillage, Liz Walker will be the first to admit, is no adventure in utopia. There is social strife, and disagreement and even departure are not uncommon. Living in such close quarters with the same individuals for long periods of time, especially with the addition of numerous committees and seemingly endless meetings, can become stressful. Some individuals may decide that communal living and the decision-making strategies that come along with it are not for them. Liz provides the example of three families who moved into the EcoVillage in

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 43.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 173.

1995. The men in each family seemed to feel especially uncomfortable with the consensus-based decision-making process, and they frequently blocked votes whenever a decision did not benefit their families. They showed distrust and hostility towards many in the community, and after two years, the tension between the families and the rest of the group was becoming unbearable. Only when the families eventually decided to leave the community did things improve.¹²¹ Clearly the social balance at Ithaca is very delicate, and the influence of those not invested in the principles of the community can cause great disruption.

Another reality check at EcoVillage at Ithaca had to do with money. The community had difficulty paying off its loans, and it took about a decade to become debt free. In 2003, with a number of generous donors forgiving their loans, and some substantial fundraising by community members, the village was finally able to pay off its debt. So as of today, the community is in decent financial shape. However, Liz notes that the EcoVillage nonprofit continues to struggle, for its holistic approach tends to exclude it from many narrowly defined grants available from foundations or government agencies.¹²²

Another notable money problem exists: the EcoVillage is not very affordable for individuals who want to join. Homes in the first group of residences now cost from \$130,000 to \$175,000 or more, while homes in the second group (founded a few years later) cost from \$120,000 to \$300,000.¹²³ Buying a home here requires at least an upper-middle class income. However, EVI is taking steps to address these problems. By using a grant from the Federal Home Loan Bank, the SONG village (the second group of residences) was able to subsidize 20% of the homes; six houses were set up as affordable housing for people whose income is 50 to 80% of

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid, 211.

¹²³ Ibid, 210.

the median income level in the United States.¹²⁴ The community has also instituted a “flip tax” that requires that a portion of the profit made by home resale (20% in FROG; 50% in SONG) goes towards supporting other affordability measures.¹²⁵

EcoVillage at Ithaca has accomplished a great deal. The vision, it seems clear, is becoming a reality. The community has been able to pay off the mortgage it used to buy West Haven Farm, and two residential segments have been constructed. The group has succeeded in being at least somewhat more sustainable, with an ecological footprint at least 40% less than typical U.S. neighborhoods.¹²⁶ They have reduced their energy consumption and purchase much of their food locally. The community has reached out to local colleges (including Cornell University) by offering courses in sustainability, has educated local politicians about environmentally-oriented communities, and has impacted countless others, nudging them in the direction of greater sustainability. They have generated a significant amount of media coverage, and have served as a pilot for sustainable suburban communities. Despite its social and monetary dilemmas, EcoVillage at Ithaca shows no signs of faltering, and will likely be a viable model for more sustainable intentional communities for years to come.

Reflection

Brook Farm, Twin Oaks, and EcoVillage at Ithaca all have tried to change a small piece of the world. Each in its own way, they work to revolutionize the human habitat – and humans themselves. They all react to the eras and societies in which they were created, and seek to create a microcosm of a better civilization. And in some sense, they all succeeded: the lives led in these alternative settlements have not been considered “normal” in the eyes of mainstream

¹²⁴ Ibid, 211.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 209.

society. Even if their very different social, economic and ecological setups did not function quite as intended (and in some cases did not function at all), all three provide glimpses of what is possible in intentional community endeavors.

Most intentional communities have not been satisfied with trying only to change a small piece of the planet. Instead, they hope to provide a model that the rest of the world can latch on to, a microcosmic example of the macrocosmic change they desire. Today, concerns about unsustainability in modern society have spurred a new series of intentional communities that are incorporating revolutionary ecological ideas, innovative social structures, and an emphasis on growing local economies. Next, I will test just how replicable these intentional communities are by analyzing how they attempt to create a viable microcosmic model for sustainable living in the city.

PART II

Moving to the City

Envision your ideal eco-conscious intentional community, the ecovillage of your dreams. You've used certified wood products in construction, maximized day-lighting through smarter site-orientation of your buildings, added solar panels and even wind-turbines, and super-insulated your residences. You have a functioning compost program that provides healthy soil to your on-site organic farm, where you grow enough food to satisfy most dietary needs of the residents; the farm also makes use of a sophisticated gray-water system that recycles your shower and sink water for irrigation. Most current residents were involved from the very beginning of the project, and they have committed great amounts of time, money, and energy to make this dream a reality. They are all on the same page, adhere to the same vision, and are dedicated to helping the community succeed. Any new members are carefully chosen, and must demonstrate their belief in the community's vision; they must also get along with the people who have spent years helping build the ecovillage. You have built a community that is far more sustainable and self-sufficient than most, and you are proud of your accomplishments. Through years of dedication and hard work, you've created a model of a healthy, sustainable community.

Now gather up all these pieces of your dream and move to the middle of New York City. Could you ever hope to build a model of sustainable community here, not in a relatively pristine rural setting but in one of the most human-altered places on the planet? You might respond with doubt and frustration: "how can I build a model of sustainability when everything around me is working against me?" Ross Jackson, one of the founders of the modern ecovillage movement, would agree; he thinks that building urban ecovillages is "tough work when almost everything in

the current system is a barrier.”¹²⁷ In the city, building your own brand new eco-friendly residences may not be an option: the costs incurred and waste generated by starting over might negate the benefits of the project. Some rooftop or courtyard gardening might be possible, but a full-scale farm that would feed any significant portion of ecovillage residents would be wishful thinking. People might already live in the buildings you want to use to start your community. So why even consider moving your dream to the city?

Many, though not all, involved in the ecovillage movement hope and expect ecovillages to play a role in changing the world. Karen Svensson writes, “The deep motivation for ecovillages or intentional communities is the need to reverse the gradual disintegration of supportive social-cultural structures and the upsurge of destructive environmental practices on our planet.”¹²⁸

Jonathan Dawson, in his overview of the history of the ecovillage movement, notes that from the very start “the vision was one of total societal transformation along ecovillage lines: ‘...a key principle in our definition of ecovillages and sustainable communities is that they be designed so that a fully-functioning society could be mostly comprised of such units’.”¹²⁹ To build a world replete with small, sustainable ecovillages, it is necessary to create a viable model of urban community living.

Cities represent the pinnacle of our industrial civilization and all the environmental destruction it brings; to succeed in changing the world, we need to provide models that actively reinvent that paradigm. Cities are built on only two per cent of the world’s surface, but use up to 75% of the world’s resources and discharge similar amounts of waste.¹³⁰ Robert Owen writes,

¹²⁷ Ross Jackson, “The Ecovillage Movement,” *Permaculture Magazine*, 25-30.

¹²⁸ Karen Svensson, “From *What is an Ecovillage?*” in *Ecovillage Living: Restoring the Earth and Her People*, eds. Hildur Jackson and Karen Svensson (Foxhole, Dartington: Chelsea Green, 2002), 10.

¹²⁹ Jonathan Dawson, *Ecovillages: New Frontiers for Sustainability* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2006), 14.

¹³⁰ “Ecovillages: New Approaches to Urban Regeneration,” *CIFAL Curitiba Training Session*, December 5-7, 2005.

“Calculated by square foot, New York City generates more greenhouse gases, uses more energy, and produces more solid waste than most other American regions of comparable size.”¹³¹ The modern urban environment, it may seem, necessitates environmental degradation. If ecovillages are to “save the world,” they need to change all that – they need to turn the city into a network of sustainable communities, to alter infrastructure and mindsets.

To be relevant, ecovillages need to create models of sustainability where people live now, and where they will live in the coming decades. Today, most people in the world live in or near cities, and this percentage is increasing. In 1996, the World Resources Institute found that more than 150,000 people were being added to urban populations in developing countries every day and estimated that by 2025, two-thirds of the global population would live in cities.¹³² As urban living is increasingly becoming the norm, ecovillages need to find a way to fit into that trend and provide urban alternatives, not irrelevant rural retreats. Furthermore, if ecovillages hope to have an audience to influence, these more populous cities provide a better way to broadcast their alternative model. “To model sustainable living for others, outreach and education are essential,” Jacob Cordivae writes in *Communities Magazine*, “In cities, any local news coverage will reach hundreds of thousands instead of just hundreds or thousands.”¹³³

No doubt, putting ecovillages in an urban context is a challenge. But cities have some surprising potential when it comes to facilitating more ecologically sound living. Cleveland EcoVillage founders believe that some pieces of urban life present intrinsic environmental benefits:

¹³¹ David Owen, “Green Manhattan: Why New York is the greenest city in the U.S,” *The New Yorker*, 16 October 2004.

¹³² “New report documents world urbanization trends and impacts,” *World Resources Institute*, 18 April 1996, <http://archive.wri.org/item_detail.cfm?id=111§ion=biodiv&page=newsrelease_text&z=?> (8 November 2007).

¹³³ Jacob Corvidae, “Why Urban Ecovillages are Crucial,” <<http://urban.ecovillage.org/resources/why-urban-ecovillages.shtml>> (5 November 2007).

By concentrating population in compact areas, [cities] can help conserve the land. By developing sophisticated treatment systems, they can minimize the water pollution of millions of people. By promoting compact neighborhoods and public transit, they can reduce housing costs and dependence on the automobile. By facilitating trade and social interaction, they promote the flowering of human culture.¹³⁴

With this very different backdrop, ecovillages must take advantage of their surroundings in different ways. No longer is it prudent to focus on self-sufficiency; instead, one should take advantage of the large surrounding populous, and work to create a successful life of interdependence. Mandy Metcalf of Cleveland EcoVillage notes that this interdependence allows everyone to focus on what they are passionate about, rather than on growing food and building shelter. People are able to pursue a variety of satisfying professions. Cities, she writes, encourage us to “look at ourselves as connected to a larger society and world beyond our immediate families and social groups. Cities foster the open minds and new conversations that are a necessary requirement for a sustainable world.”¹³⁵

Some ecovillages have made the jump to the city already, but it is far from common. In 2003, Jacob Corvidae noted that there were only four completed urban ecovillages in the United States; these were located in Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Los Angeles.¹³⁶ Lois Arkin, founder of Los Angeles EcoVillage and central player in the U.S. ecovillage movement since its inception in the early 1990s, could only cite six examples of urban ecovillages in the United States as of 2007.¹³⁷ Intentional communities in general tend to be located in more rural settings, though the trend is not quite as striking: 54% of the communities listed in the 1995 Communities

¹³⁴ “Faith in ‘real’ cities,” *Ecocity Cleveland*, <http://www.ecocitycleveland.org/ecologicaldesign/ecovillage/faith_in_real_cities.html> (8 November 2007).

¹³⁵ Mandy Metcalf, “The EcoVillage and the virtues of urban interdependence,” *Ecocity Cleveland*, <http://www.ecocitycleveland.org/ecologicaldesign/ecovillage/urban_interdep.html> (8 November 2007).

¹³⁶ Corvidae.

¹³⁷ Lois Arkin, personal interview, Los Angeles, CA, 3 November 2007.

Directory are rural, 28% are urban, 10% have both rural and urban sites, and 8% don't specify.¹³⁸

In the pages to follow, we will examine two examples of eco-conscious urban living. The first is Los Angeles EcoVillage. Founded in January 1993, LA EcoVillage is largely the brainchild of Lois Arkin. Lois moved to the Bimini Place neighborhood in downtown Los Angeles in 1980; that same year she created an organization called the Cooperative Resources and Services Project (CRSP).¹³⁹ In the early 1990s, she and several colleagues were involved in a project to build a sustainable community in another part of LA – they planned to build a new ecovillage on what had once been a dump. The 1992 riots changed their plans, and their minds. Several buildings in the Bimini Place neighborhood burnt to the ground, and the area was in dire need of repair and revitalization. Lois decided that it would be best to focus on her own vastly imperfect neighborhood instead of building a utopia from scratch. Soon, with the support of a 30-person “envisioning committee” and six regular volunteers, people started planting trees and reaching out to the neighborhood, and LA EcoVillage was born. Today the intentional community has about 40 members housed in two buildings, but ecovillagers consider the entire two-block area in which they live to be LA EcoVillage.

Jamaica Plain Cohousing, located in Boston, Massachusetts, has a very different, far less tumultuous history. Diane Simpson first imagined building an intentional community in the Boston area in 1995. She suffered two false starts before getting her vision off the ground – the first two groups she worked with fell apart, largely because people couldn't agree on where to start the new community.¹⁴⁰ In 1999, she got a group together that decided on a location very early on, and things finally began to take shape. After much planning and fundraising,

¹³⁸ “What’s True About Intentional Communities: Dispelling the Myths,” *Fellowship for Intentional Communities*, October 1996, < <http://www.ic.org/pnp/myths.php> > (5 November 2007).

¹³⁹ Arkin.

¹⁴⁰ Diane Simpson, personal interview, Cambridge, MA, 21 October 2007.

construction began on a semi-contaminated “brownfield” site in 2003; the 30-unit cohousing community was completed by 2005. Jamaica Plain Cohousing now includes 54 individuals, including 15 children; all residents were involved – to varying degrees – in the planning and construction of the community.¹⁴¹

These case studies highlight several of the ecological, social, and economic features of modern ecovillages. They will help us begin to determine the viability of ecovillages as models of urban sustainability.

Los Angeles EcoVillage

Lois Arkin greets each of us as we arrive in the front lobby of LA EcoVillage. She is a short, kind looking woman who looks almost exactly her age – she’s 70 years old. She tells early arrivers to feel free to explore, and assigns one of us the task of making masking tape nametags for the tour participants. As people continue to straggle in, we gather around several couches in the lobby. Lois starts by explaining her history in this neighborhood (she’s lived here 28 years), how the project began, and a little bit about what’s happening now. She talks about the oft-cited Gilman ecovillage definition, and notes that while the community strives to fit that definition as much as possible, they are still a long way from being a “true” ecovillage. Moments later we are up and walking, and we enter the courtyard.

Entering the courtyard at LA EcoVillage is like stepping into a different world. Gone are the noises of car-jammed downtown Los Angeles, replaced by the sounds of chirping birds and, of all things, quiet. The courtyard is filled with a beautiful permaculture garden. There are upwards of 85 varieties of fruit and vegetable plants and trees, a coop with seven young chickens

¹⁴¹ Jeanne Goodman, personal interview, Cambridge, MA, 21 October 2007.

inside, and a lonely rabbit in her cage. There are benches and chairs, an area set up for weaving (one of the ecovillage residents teaches weaving classes), compost pits, and – as it’s now early November – fallen leaves strewn everywhere. The garden, Arkin estimates, produces 5% to 20% of the diet for about half a dozen to a dozen of the ecovillagers (of the 40 who live here), depending on the season. In addition to the main garden in the courtyard, there is a new garden on the side of one of the buildings. The community dug up the edge of an old parking lot, added several tons of soil, and started planting. Water from this part of the roof, instead of hitting the parking lot and ending up in the sewer, is now funneled to plants in the garden.¹⁴²

Los Angeles EcoVillage uses a food co-op to purchase local, high-quality food. The community buys fresh produce in bulk from local organic farms (much of this produce is organically raised but not certified organic). Once a week on Sundays the food is delivered to the EcoVillage, and a few of the members get together to distribute the produce into individual boxes, which are then distributed to co-op participants. A full box provides enough food for two to three people for the week, and costs \$20; a half box costs \$10. There is no additional cost for membership, but all members must work 1.5 to 2 hours each month to keep the system functioning. About 25 to 30 ecovillagers have chosen to participate in the system.¹⁴³

We reenter the building, and find ourselves in the living room of an ecovillager named Lara. Lois describes some of the eco-friendly features the community has installed – all these improvements have been made as retrofits to the worn-down building. Layers of paint were scraped off the walls in the living room, and were replaced with longer-lasting, safer, low-VOC (that is, low volatile organic compound) paint. A drafty window was knocked out and replaced by airtight, double-paned French doors made from certified wood; these lead into the courtyard.

¹⁴² Arkin.

¹⁴³ “LAEV Food Co-op Wiki Page,” <http://urbansoil.net/wiki.cgi/More_Food_Coop_Specifics> (8 November 2007).

As we leave the apartment and walk upstairs to the second floor, Lois points out that the no-slip surface of the stairs was constructed from recycled tires. The carpet in the second floor hallway was supplied by Interface, a company that produces a more eco-friendly, recyclable product; Interface has created a campaign called “Mission Zero,” in which they have promised to “eliminate any negative impact [their] company may have on the environment by 2020.”¹⁴⁴ Lois lets us know about some of the ecological features we can’t see, noting that three units were recently outfitted with solar panels, and that the community is considering a move to using solar energy to heat its water.¹⁴⁵

LA EcoVillagers integrate additional eco-friendly components into their lives through their daily habits. Lois notes many residents tend not to use their heating in the winter, and opt to bundle up a little more instead. Most ecovillagers here take shorter showers, bring reusable bags to the grocery store, and use compact fluorescent light bulbs in their apartments. People use a “free table” in the lobby to exchange items, and don’t frequently buy many new products.¹⁴⁶

We come downstairs again and exit the building on the other side of the lobby, into the neighborhood. Here we discover Lois’s vendetta against the automobile. She leads the group of us out into the middle of the road (luckily we are on a less-busy side street) into a faded painted circle. The circle lies between two stop signs on either side of a T-intersection just outside the main entrance to the EcoVillage; the stop signs read “STOP” and in smaller letters below “...driving, start walking and biking.” Don’t worry, Lois tells us, we are “retraining” the cars, letting them know that the street is for people, not automobiles. As cars slowly drive past, Lois leans down and waves at the drivers, yelling “thank you!” (for going around us).

¹⁴⁴ “Our Goals: Mission Statement.” *Interface Carpet*. <<http://www.interfaceinc.com/goals/mission.html>> (6 November 2007).

¹⁴⁵ Arkin.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Lois and LA EcoVillage focus extensively on promoting alternative transportation. There is a bike shop in the main building, which was originally known as the “The Bicycle Kitchen,” and gained a good deal of notoriety in the area. Lois notes that it was more than just a bike shop; it became a center of “bike culture,” and because of its excellent organization, enjoyed great popularity. It grew so substantially that it had to move out of the building and is now located about a half mile away – a small bike shop and storage area remains, however. Several spin-offs of the Bicycle Kitchen have sprung up in other parts of Los Angeles, in Northeast LA and in Santa Monica, and there is even a spin-off now in the San Francisco area. Owning a car is discouraged here. Members who don’t own cars receive a small discount on their renting fees. There is a *Flexcar* (a vehicle that can be rented by the hour) located on the side of one of the buildings for situations in which car-less community members need an automobile to travel somewhere; residents also share cars among themselves when necessary. Public transportation is promoted; Lois emphasizes that the community is within walking distance of 20 bus lines, two subway stops, four supermarkets, and a variety of shops and stores.¹⁴⁷

As we return to the lobby, Lois talks about how the community functions socially. She and her fellow EcoVillage residents call the two-block, 500-resident neighborhood in which they live “LA EcoVillage.” However, only about 40 residents live in the two buildings owned by LA EcoVillage; these are the people who are actively involved in the community. These community members meet weekly in a large “social room” on the second floor. Rules for the meetings include:

- “Emotions are okay, aggression is not”
- “Silence equals agreement”
- “If you’re confused, ask”
- “The facilitator will try to be everyone’s ally”

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

- “If there is no clear preference about what to do next, the facilitator will decide”

The group makes decisions by consensus. In this system, there is no voting; rather, solutions are proposed and discussed until everyone is satisfied. People who are full members of the community have the right to “block” a decision, but this occurs only when one has very serious reservations and does not occur frequently. There are six teams of facilitators who are in charge of leading the meetings, and the teams rotate weekly. Each meeting ends with an evaluation, so facilitators receive feedback about the meeting and their leadership. Lois believes that this setup represents “a more sophisticated level of democracy that encourages civic dialogue.”¹⁴⁸

Lois moves on to discuss the intriguing economic situation at LA EcoVillage. The two buildings of the “official” EcoVillage are owned by the nonprofit she heads, the Cooperative Resources and Services Project. All current residents rent, and CRSP offers these properties at about half the market rate. Singles, which range from about 400 to 450 square feet, cost from \$450 to \$650 per month. The larger apartments all cost about \$730. CRSP hopes to, in the near future, sell the entire property to the tenants in the form of a “limited equity cooperative,” which would cap the appreciation of each co-op share. Lois and her organization are also working on creating a community land trust, to make sure that the co-op does not abandon the EcoVillage and sell the building on the open market. The intent is to preserve LA EcoVillage in the place where it was started.¹⁴⁹

Before we depart, Lois gives people on the tour the opportunity to ask questions. A young couple, on the tour with their toddler-aged daughter, asks how the ecovillage accepts new members. Lois explains that there is a “Bienvenidos Committee” that facilitates the introduction of new members into the community, and decides who will be permitted to join. The process of

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

joining the community usually takes from four to six months, and begins when one expresses interest in the community by going on a tour and filling out a questionnaire.¹⁵⁰ Potential members are then assigned a liaison to guide them through the membership process; the liaison helps them get to know community members and keeps them abreast of EcoVillage events. For several months, potential members are expected to be heavily involved in community events and actively work to get to know all the community members. At the end of this period, the Bienvenidos committee conducts an interview with the candidate, and makes the final decision about whether to make him or her a full member. The committee chooses people who they think will advance the mission of LA EcoVillage, and who will add to the diversity of the community.¹⁵¹

Jamaica Plain Cohousing

I knock on the door of Jeanne Goodman's first floor condominium on Sunday morning to take a tour of Jamaica Plain Cohousing. Jeanne is a red-faced, heavysset woman of about 40, and she leaves a first impression of being levelheaded, genuine, and friendly. For the next hour, she takes me around the community, which includes a "common house" with a shared kitchen, dining room, children's play area, living room, and laundry room; the rest of the complex is made up of 30 residential units and a number of outdoor shared spaces, including several gardens. All this is housed in and around two three-story yellow buildings connected by a second floor 40-foot wooden walkway decorated with overflowing flower buckets.

Jamaica Plain Cohousing does not call itself an ecovillage, but it certainly *feels* like one. Cohousing, a phenomenon that – like ecovillages – originated in Europe, features a system in

¹⁵⁰ "Becoming a Member," < http://urbansoil.net/wiki.cgi/Becoming_a_Member> (8 November, 2007).

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

which residents “organize to practice ideals of participation, cooperation, sharing, and knowing one's neighbors.”¹⁵² People eat meals together several times a week and share in community responsibilities, such as cooking and cleaning. “JP,” as its residents affectionately call it, has much in common with urban ecovillages, from its focus on community to its plethora of eco-sensitive design features, but residents are content with the “cohousing” label. So what’s the difference? Jeanne Goodman is actively involved in the construction of a new intentional community in Jamaica Plain, called EcoVillage at JP. The main difference between the two communities, in her mind, is that the EcoVillage will focus on “mixed-use” development (i.e. commercial and perhaps even some small-scale industrial development), while JP Cohousing focuses exclusively on residential life.¹⁵³ I think the important thing to note when it comes to JP Cohousing is that it presents a model of an urban, eco-conscious intentional community; in this way, it fits in with “official” urban ecovillages.

As Jeanne leads me around the community, we talk about the numerous environment-friendly features of the buildings. The units were built with a clustered design to reduce heat-loss and heat-gain. As much passive solar heating as possible was incorporated by maximizing the amount of south-facing walls and windows, and by including a two-story solar atrium in the Common House.¹⁵⁴ The community uses one highly efficient heating system to keep all thirty units warm in the winter, and also makes use of Hardieplank siding (a concoction of wood pulp, cement, sand and water) to help keep the heat in during colder months. In the summer, residents can open their front doors and French doors on a back porch to get a significant cross-breeze; this helps keep things cool without the use of air conditioning. The community is only a couple

¹⁵² “Cohousing,” *Intentional Communities Wiki*, <<http://wiki.ic.org/wiki/Cohousing>> (8 November 2007).

¹⁵³ Goodman.

¹⁵⁴ “Green Page,” *Jamaica Plain Cohousing*, <<http://jpcohousing.org/Green.htm>> (12 November 2007).

blocks from the Boston “T” (the subway), giving residents the option to use public transportation to get around the city.¹⁵⁵

As with LA EcoVillage, JP community members here tend to live “greener” lives by conserving resources wherever possible. Residents put their food scraps in a large compost bin in the common kitchen, and use the compost in the organic gardens that lie between the buildings. About half of the residents abstain from purchasing their own washers and dryers, using the energy-efficient machines in the Common House basement instead. Communal dinners always make use of the community dishware rather than disposables. Community members conserve energy as well; only two or three units have installed air conditioners, and compact fluorescent light bulbs are prevalent. For transportation, many residents use the subway, and the community is currently working on organizing its own car-sharing program.¹⁵⁶

At the end of the tour, Jeanne and I arrive back where we started: in the community dining hall and kitchen area. There I help make lunch for an incoming tour group, and have the opportunity to see a central aspect of the JP community, the interaction and connection among residents. As I help the community’s founder, Diane Simpson, and several other residents make lunch, we talk about some of the interesting social components of the community. They tell me that the whole group cooks and eats a meal together at least once a week, often more frequently. Children play together in the common play area, and many residents eat breakfast together in the common dining room every day. Community members even gathered this October to watch Boston Red Sox playoff games in the courtyard on a projector screen. There are small alcoves with tables and chairs in various parts of the complex to encourage spontaneous social interaction among residents, and all doors open to a walkway in the interior of the community,

¹⁵⁵ Goodman.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

rather than out to the street. Everyone seems to know everyone else; this was demonstrated repeatedly when Jeanne and I walked around earlier, as she said “hello” to every person we passed by.¹⁵⁷

The economic setup at JP Cohousing is very different from LA EcoVillage; all residents here own their apartments. After two years, JP is seeing its first two residents depart, and is going through the process of selling a unit for the first time. The price of the one bedroom unit is about \$200,000. Jeanne believes this is competitive with comparable residences in the surrounding area; though the apartment is slightly smaller than comparably priced units, prospective buyers will have access to the JP Common House, which includes the shared kitchen, dining room, living room, and children’s play area.¹⁵⁸ Unlike LA EcoVillage, the unit prices are not subsidized, and there is no emphasis on providing affordable housing for members of the surrounding community.

Reflection

LA EcoVillage and Jamaica Plain Cohousing are only pieces of a larger puzzle. They do not represent the full spectrum of activities currently taking place in urban ecovillage models in the United States, and are especially incomplete compared to any amalgamation of urban ecovillage practices around the globe. Yet they provide us with a window into “green” urban intentional communities, and highlight some intriguing ecological, social, and economic features. I think these two communities, much more than their rural counterparts, contribute to a societal transformation toward small-scale, local, sustainable communities. They present some interesting ideas to city dwellers, many of which could be adopted by any urban resident (e.g.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

composting, conservation, use of public transportation, organic gardening). However, I have come to believe that while pieces of the ecovillage model can and should be adopted by society, we cannot hope to implement the idea wholesale. Lois Arkin, with her 15 years of experience at LA EcoVillage, has concluded that the urban ecovillage “is always a demonstration and never a model.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Arkin.

PART III

Ecovillage Dilemmas

Urban ecovillages, necessary components in our world-changing endeavors, are not impossibilities. LA EcoVillage, Jamaica Plain Cohousing, and the half dozen urban ecovillages in the United States show that we can move the model to the city. But ecovillage believers want it to be more than merely *possible* to build urban ecovillages; they want these ideas to change the world. If ecovillages are to revolutionize our industrial paradigm, they must have the capability to spread to every corner of the city, and the globe. Do they, in their current form as eco-conscious intentional communities, have this capacity? The answer: it doesn't appear that they do.

Creating an ecovillage isn't easy. It requires months, perhaps years, of intense preparation, and all members must be on the same page from the start. Diana Leafe Christian, author of *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities*, describes an upstart midwestern intentional community she calls Willow Bend. The group created their community in the early 1990s without a vision statement – without even an unofficial “why we're here” declaration. They relied on making wooden children's toys for their economic survival, and when the market for the toys suddenly disappeared, the community floundered. Christian writes, “With no common vision, they had nothing to return to – no common touchstone of values, purpose, or aspirations about why their community life mattered, how it fit into the larger world.”¹⁶⁰ This story is a common one; community members must know what they stand for, and they must all stand *together*, if their communal experiment is to

¹⁶⁰ Diana Leafe Christian, *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities* (British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2003), 35.

survive. Getting together a group of people who all subscribe to the same vision (and *stick* to that vision) is challenging. Diane Simpson, founder of JP Cohousing, suffered two false starts over the course of four years before finally building a group that believed in a common vision and stuck together.¹⁶¹

Ecovillages sometimes don't fit in well with existing zoning and building laws, and changing these rules can be a long and arduous process. Diana Christian writes, "In many cities, towns and counties, zoning regulations regarding population density prohibit building more than a certain number of dwellings per acre or clustering houses together and leaving much of the property as open space, requiring instead that houses each sit on its own same-sized lot."¹⁶² This density issue is more of a hurdle for suburban and rural ecovillages – EcoVillage at Ithaca spent many months working with the city to build more clustered housing. Yet urban ecovillages face zoning challenges as well: Jeanne Goodman cites mixed-used development as being a key component to true ecovillages, but creating these sorts of developments, in which commercial enterprises are located near homes, is often prohibited by law. Gray-water recycling systems and composting toilets, though they may be perfectly sanitary, are often made illegal by health-department regulations. Changing these laws may require petitioning the city council for a zoning variance or special use permit, which can lead to tedious public hearings that include recalcitrant neighbors.¹⁶³ Creating an ecovillage with any significant eco-conscious features can easily turn into a drawn-out political ordeal.

Ecovillagers desire to have control over where they live, and to have the opportunity to make their homes more sustainable. This requires either working with designers and developers to build new, more sustainable habitation, or working with a contractor (or doing the work

¹⁶¹ Diane Simpson, personal interview, Cambridge, MA, 21 October 2007.

¹⁶² Christian, 81.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

independently) to retrofit existing buildings. Each of these options presents its own challenges. JP Cohousing was built from the ground up, and residents worked closely with the designer and developer to get the project done. They worked with Kraus Fitch Architects, Inc. during the design process, and this went relatively smoothly because the firm had significant experience in building cohousing; head architect Laura Fitch had lived in a cohousing community for over a decade. The developer, Domenech, Hicks and Krockmalnic, had no such experience; Jeanne Goodman reports that the community was deeply dissatisfied with the company, and that the firm made it very difficult for residents to build the condominiums the way they wanted.¹⁶⁴ At LA EcoVillage, two old, decrepit buildings were purchased by the CRSP nonprofit, then retrofitted. The challenge here was that the process of becoming more sustainable was incredibly slow, as the community did many retrofits itself (with the financial support of CRSP), and the vastly unsustainable buildings they started with were improved piece by tiny piece.

With all the impediments ecovillages face, it is no surprise that they often sacrifice their radical vision of sustainability. As bills and headaches begin to pile up, residents often find themselves putting more advanced sustainability measures off until later, which in reality may mean never completing them. “The ideas of solar electricity and solar hot water,” Lois Arkin explains, “got waylaid as we focused on habitability issues.”¹⁶⁵ The community only installed solar panels on three of the units in 2005, and is just now considering installing solar hot water heaters, 15 years after its inception. Jeanne Goodman notes that the JP community had to carefully choose which eco-features to include in the project, as they went way over budget during construction.¹⁶⁶ Though quite understandable, the lack of substantial sustainability in

¹⁶⁴ Jeanne Goodman, personal interview, Cambridge, MA 21 October 2007.

¹⁶⁵ Lois Arkin, personal interview, Los Angeles, CA, 3 November 2007.

¹⁶⁶ Goodman.

many ecovillages is a concern, for it may negate their ability to serve as models for a truly sustainable, community-oriented future.

We might consider many of these surface-level problems; if ecovillages received better funding, political support, and more positive recognition, they might be easier to create. And while it would be difficult, such change would not be impossible. However, I think ecovillages suffer from a much deeper problem, one derived from the kinds of things they are: intentional communities.

All intentional communities, by definition, are made up of groups of people who share a certain set of beliefs. In fact, the Fellowship for Intentional Community defines “intentional community” as “an inclusive term for ecovillages, cohousing, residential land trusts, communes, student co-ops, urban housing cooperatives, alternative communities, and other projects where people strive together with a common vision.”¹⁶⁷ As we’ve seen, this vision needs to be agreed upon early in the process of ecovillage creation if the community hopes to find long-term success. But this requirement for a common vision makes it impossible for ecovillages to achieve *widespread* success. Far from everyone in our society has the desire to live a more sustainable, community-oriented life; in fact, I think people with such predilections make up a tiny fraction of the U.S. population. Even if this uninterested majority were somehow convinced that sustainability was a desirable goal, I think it unlikely that many would be willing to go through the pains of working to create an ecovillage, or even living in one.

Even among people who do desire to live in a more sustainable community, there will be very different ideas about what this community should look like and how to make it a reality. This is the reason why many ecovillages don’t make it past the idea phase, why it took Diane

¹⁶⁷ “Intentional Communities Website,” *The Fellowship for Intentional Community*, < <http://www.ic.org/> > (15 November 2007).

Simpson four years to get a likeminded group of people together, and why places like LA EcoVillage have a four to six month process for bringing new members into the community. People who are part of an ecovillage need to subscribe to almost precisely the same vision if the community is to function properly. And in a society with nearly as many ideas of “what is right” as there are people on the planet, organizing *everyone* into a group where people share a common vision seems to be an impossible task.

Beyond idea sharing, as ecovillage life tends to involve much more communal decision-making and a greater level of neighborly interaction, residents – at least on some basic level – need to get along. People who can’t stand one another (or can’t stand the community) can poison the atmosphere; this occurred during the 1990s at EcoVillage at Ithaca. In some communities, this mutual respect seems to be the case; everyone at JP Cohousing, for example, seems to genuinely value and care for his or her neighbors. But can we hope to build a world of tiny utopias in which all residents are respectful of one another, and can successfully make communal decisions together? I consider this little more than wishful thinking.

Throughout U.S. history, intentional communities have been on the fringe of society, and I think it is likely they will remain there. Going all the way back to Brook Farm, we see the tendency to escape from the mainstream; the community’s stated mission was “to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions.”¹⁶⁸ Twin Oaks intended to create an alternative to the dominant paradigm, but like modern ecovillages, also intended to change the world: “The concept behind Twin Oaks offers a radical approach to revolution – that of creating the post-revolutionary society now, during one’s

¹⁶⁸ Sterling Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 34.

lifetime.”¹⁶⁹ Ecovillages today focus on providing a similar sort of post-revolutionary model, demonstrating what the world could and should look like. By their very nature as intentional communities, ecovillages intend to present an alternative to mainstream society, something separate from the norm. Part of the attractiveness of ecovillages, and intentional communities in general, comes from the fact that they provide something very different from what is found in most of society. If the mainstream were ever transformed into a network of “green” intentional communities, I think these alternatives would cease to be alternatives, and would lose their appeal. By being communities on the fringe, almost by definition, it is difficult for intentional communities to ever become the norm.

Perhaps the most fundamental problem with the modern ecovillage model, however, is that it does not approach the dynamics of change correctly. Ecovillages intend to change the world by promoting a different way of life, and then expanding that way of life around the globe. But creating small, sustainable communities throughout society is impossible unless one addresses – and works to alter – the political, economic, and social frameworks that hold our cities, and our society, together. The more surface-level issues that plague ecovillages (e.g. rigid zoning laws and health and safety codes) are representative of a larger system of rules and norms that perpetuate unsustainability – this problematic system must be addressed. Yet ecovillages tend to ignore these real-world concerns. They do little to affect the relationship between those in power and those challenging the status quo. Proliferation of an idea so distant from the societal norm cannot happen unless this relationship is changed and constraints are altered. The present ecovillage paradigm does not focus on this need for iterative, interactive change, and thus falls short in its ability to bring about a meta-industrial future.

¹⁶⁹ Richard Fairfield, *Communes USA: A Personal Tour* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc., 1972), 100.

My study of the history of U.S. intentional communities and my visits to two modern urban eco-communities have opened my eyes to many great ideas that are part of the modern ecovillage movement, but have also led me to believe that this model will never substantially transform society. So if the present ecovillage idea is not viable, what are we to do? Lois Arkin hints at a possible solution: “I’m not suggesting that in every case an ecovillage needs to have an intentional community – it does not. And as a matter of fact, there are some of us [at LA EcoVillage], even today, who think that the idea of the intentional community actually slowed and got in the way of moving forward and making the community sustainable.”¹⁷⁰ If we separate the ecovillage idea from the idea of intentional community, I think we begin to see some exciting potential for societal change.

Returning to the city, where a transformation to a more sustainable society is especially pressing, we still face the challenge of building small-scale, environmentally sensitive communities. I think an alteration of the ecovillage project to something that focuses on local, community-based solutions for *existing* urban neighborhoods will help lead us closer to a more sustainable future. “If the eco-village project is reconceived in terms of local action,” Nigel Taylor writes, “it has a part to play in contributing to environmental sustainability.”¹⁷¹ I will end this paper by explicating this alternative, exploring some exciting ideas in the realm of making urban communities more sustainable at the local level.

Ideas for Building Sustainable Urban Communities

When one starts to focus on building sustainable communities instead of sustainable *intentional* communities, it is necessary to attack the problem in an entirely different way. One

¹⁷⁰ Arkin.

¹⁷¹ Nigel Taylor, “Eco-villages: Dream and Reality,” in *Sustainable Communities*, ed. Hugh Barton (London, England: Earthscan Publications, Ltd., 2000), 27.

must work with individuals who may have had no prior interest or experience in environmental issues; one must redesign features of the community she doesn't own or control; one must educate and involve the public. Change in this context must struggle against the constraints of society, and the vision for a more sustainable community will be altered by its contact with mainstream society. "Agents of social change often find that they have made history," writes David Hess, "but not exactly according to their original vision. Rather than achieving a full victory, they usually become caught up in a more complex dance of partial success and cooptation."¹⁷²

In what follows, I explore several projects that could help make communities more sustainable; these projects often have corollary benefits, such as promoting community connection and local economic self-sufficiency. The projects I will describe come from a variety of sources, and have found variable success. To coalesce a number of worthwhile ideas that might otherwise seem disconnected, I weave together a short narrative. The story provides a fictional first-hand account of a series of small-scale, locally oriented sustainability projects undertaken in Boston, Massachusetts.

Life in the city had proven frustrating. My work with local nonprofits had been unfulfilling of late: I was looking to get out, to turn the corner and start something new. I decided to work in my own neighborhood: I was discomfited by the disconnection and environmental ignorance I saw around me, and as I talked with friends and neighbors, I realized that many of them shared my sentiments. A group of five of us decided to take on the project of

¹⁷² David J. Hess, *Alternative Pathways in Science and Industry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007), 236.

making our community more sustainable, devoting every available night and weekend to transforming our home.

One major component lacking in our neighborhood was a sense of community; people didn't know their next-door neighbors, much less the family across the street. If we were ever going to get people to join in a push toward sustainability, we needed them to feel connected, to have a sense of a shared identity. This spurred us to start our project with the creation of a community garden.

Urban-community gardens, we soon found, are a great way to start building sustainable communities. These gardens “transform empty lots into green, living spaces. They are collaborative projects created by members of the community; residents share in both the maintenance and rewards of the garden.”¹⁷³ Through our research, we found one particularly successful community garden project in Colorado. Denver Urban Gardens (DUG) was founded in 1985, and has helped facilitate the creation and maintenance of 70 urban community gardening projects in the city since its inception. The nonprofit offers educational programming to potential gardeners, recruits and coordinates volunteer labor teams, provides free seeds and transplants, and helps design and construct new garden sites. There have been a number of positive effects, and DUG notes, “Through the gardens, participants assume responsibility to improve their community, initiate a sense of pride in their surroundings, and improve their nutritional status through healthy, fresh food.”¹⁷⁴ The program has involved over 22,000 people in its projects each year, and has expanded to five cities additional cities near Denver.

DUG was a great success story, but it wasn't quite the model we were looking for. Not only did we desire to build a healthier community, we also hoped to start a neighborhood-wide

¹⁷³ “What is a community garden?” *Urban Community Gardens*, <<http://www.mindspring.com/~communitygardens/>> (18 November 2007).

¹⁷⁴ “About DUG,” *Denver Urban Gardens*, <http://dug.org/about_dug.asp> (18 November 2007)

educational endeavor on sustainability. We soon became very intrigued by the idea of permaculture, an idea that draws on the “practical application of ecological theory to analyze the characteristics and potential relationships between design elements. Each element of a design is carefully analyzed in terms of its needs, outputs, and properties.”¹⁷⁵ In urban gardening, this means paying careful attention to the species of plants and trees used, and as much as possible, choosing varieties that ecologically complement one another. Peter Harper, long-time gardener and permaculture expert, explains, “I am trying to design a multipurpose garden that will combine all the ecological functions and maximize the garden’s value as a contributor to environmental quality. The most important thing is recreation. That might sound surprising, but gardening is a tremendous source of spiritual strength.”¹⁷⁶ We knew that we could never hope to grow nearly enough food to supplant a significant proportion of local residents’ diets, so we chose what to grow carefully.

We learned that urban permaculture gardens can supplement residents’ diets with specialty foods and spices, and fruits and vegetables far superior to that found at the local supermarket. “What can you produce that the suppliers cannot?” asks Peter Harper. “They are very good at producing cheap calories and proteins. They are not so good at producing vitamins, minerals, and flavors. You can do that.”¹⁷⁷ Hildur Jackson lists her essentials: herbs and flowers for cooking and medicinal purposes, bamboo for building furniture, berry bushes, fruit trees, nut trees, and various types of vegetables.¹⁷⁸ Filled with excitement, our small group recruited several more neighbors, pooled our funds together, and purchased an abandoned lot to start our

¹⁷⁵ “Permaculture,” *Wikipedia*, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permaculture>> (18 November 2007).

¹⁷⁶ Hildur Jackson, “Self-sufficient Food Production: A Veteran’s Advice,” in *Ecovillage Living: Restoring the Earth and Her People*, eds. Hildur Jackson and Karen Svensson (Foxhole, Dartington: Chelsea Green, 2002), 34.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

community garden. Within 8 months of buying the land, we had replaced several hundred square feet of an eroded parking lot with our garden. More than 50 neighbors volunteered in the project, and we had all learned a great deal about permaculture-growing techniques. This initial success would be the toehold for our next sustainability project.

With momentum on our side, we grew more ambitious. Many residents in the community had been clamoring for a community center, a place where people could gather, socialize, and get to know their neighbors. We saw an opportunity here, a chance to build community while at the same time moving forward with an emphasis on sustainability. Our original group of activists decided to lead the push for an eco-oriented community center.

We were inspired by the town of Kalix, located in the northern region of Sweden. There, a group of villagers banded together in the late 1990s to save an old general store. The village association applied (and succeeded in obtaining) a small government grant to purchase and run the store as a cooperative venture.¹⁷⁹ The store has become an enormous success: it is now the social, economic, and public information center for the area. It also provides services for elderly residents, including grasscutting and food purchasing. And when the local recycling contractor decided it wasn't cost effective to keep the community on its recycling pick-up route because they often encountered many empty bins, Kalix located a recycling center at the store, calling the company when these central bins were full.¹⁸⁰ A community center, we saw, had the potential to strengthen the social ties of our neighborhood, and might also play a role in a facilitating greater sustainability.

We were lucky enough to obtain a state grant, which, in combination with a good deal of fundraising, helped us purchase what had once been a street-side shop and convert it into our

¹⁷⁹ Sarah James and Torbjorn Lahti, *The Natural Step for Communities* (British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2004), 100.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

community center. We decided to use the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Existing Building standard from the U.S. Green Building Council¹⁸¹ to create a more environmentally benign space; we weren't able to pay to officially certify the building, but it boasts all the features of a "LEED Silver" project. The center took several years to complete, but raising the money for it, designing it, and building it cooperatively helped bring our neighborhood closer together. Now community get-togethers take place there, including community garden meetings and Friday night socials.

At the same time that we were building our community center, the group decided to take on another project: sustainability education. We had recently learned about the success of Tegelviken elementary school, located in Eskilstuna, Sweden. The school was constructed entirely from natural materials, including wood, brick, stone, and organic paint; it boasts an excellent natural lighting system, solar panels that heat hot water, and a gray-water system that reuses water from sinks in irrigation.¹⁸² We were even more interested in the educational program at the school. The curriculum at Tegelviken includes an "outdoor nature education program," based on the premise that "positive nature experiences will create a better environmental behavior and understanding for the future."¹⁸³ The program focuses not only on providing students with environmental knowledge, but also on developing positive attitudes and values toward the planet. Children have the chance to get outside, to learn about building fires and getting rained on. "They learn not just about the scientific aspect of these activities but also about the happiness of experiencing what is happening in nature."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ For more information on LEED: <<http://www.usgbc.org/DisplayPage.aspx?CategoryID=19>>

¹⁸² Sarah James and Torbjorn Lahti, 115.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 116.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Many of our neighbors had children who attended the elementary school just a few blocks down the street; after helping build the community garden (often with the help of their children), many were interested in adding an environmental component to the school curriculum. Several of us went to speak to the principal of the school, who turned out to be quite interested in our “ecological education” idea. We helped several teachers at the school develop environment-oriented components for their classes, and today, most elementary school students are involved in some sort of eco-education activity. Classes often come to learn and play in our community gardens, and occasionally there are field trips to local streams and rivers. Recently, some of the older students have even started, with the help of their teachers, creating a tiny “farm” right outside the school, at the edge of the playground. We didn’t have the money to renovate the school to make it more sustainable, but we hope to someday retrofit it to include an efficient heating and cooling system, and perhaps even a gray-water system.

When we started our endeavor, many neighborhood residents used a car for all their trips. Though we were located in a compact urban area and were decently close to public transportation, many opted to drive. As the community became more environmentally minded, we began to examine alternatives to the automobile. The city of Eskilstuna, Sweden, where we had found a school from which to model our sustainability education, also exemplified several of the steps we might take to reduce our transportation emissions. Eskilstuna has maintained and improved local stores to promote walking and diminish driving. For trips that are relatively short but are too great a distance to walk, Eskilstuna promotes bicycles: “the city has undertaken a systematic effort to encourage bicycling that includes expanding the present 60-mile network of bike trails, improving bicycle-riding safety, and designing traffic flows in the city center to give

bicycle priority over vehicle traffic.”¹⁸⁵ The city has even redesigned public transit to increase frequency and create more stops along the routes, and has worked with neighboring municipalities to improve regional transit opportunities.

Sometimes, especially in the car-centric culture of the United States, an automobile is necessary; we found that organizations like *Zipcar* and *Flexcar* can be useful in providing cars for these instances. Members can easily reserve a car located at a designated parking spot in the neighborhood, use it for an hourly rate, and when finished, return it to the original parking space.¹⁸⁶ Several communities in the U.S. have made use of this service, including LA EcoVillage.

Our community decided to improve bicycle transportation and to provide the *Zipcar* service for residents who chose to get rid of their cars. We succeeded in convincing the city to start a multi-year project of constructing new bike paths and improving existing ones. We obtained a grant from the Department of Transportation to pilot a small “bike lending” program, in which residents can sign up to rent bicycles from a location near our community center. They are provided with an electronic I.D. that permits them to remove and use bicycles from the rack outside the center; this allows the community to track the bicycles and prevent theft. We also worked out a contract with *Zipcar* to provide two hybrid vehicles (these are also located near the community center), for residents to use when they absolutely need a car. Both these projects have been popular, and have helped us reduce our environmental impacts.

Recently, several decrepit housing units in our neighborhood were condemned and demolished by the city. Our community, now organized and generally very interested in sustainability, asked to work with the city to create new, sustainable residential housing at these

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ “How it works,” *Flexcar*, <<http://www.flexcar.com/HowItWorks/tabid/53/Default.aspx>> (19 November 2007).

sites. Impressed by our previous successes, the city government agreed. We sought out case studies of affordable “green” urban construction projects that might serve as models for our development, and found an inspiring example nearby, in Roxbury, Massachusetts. The Erie-Ellington Homes development, built through cooperation among neighborhood residents, the City of Boston, Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation, and several other public and private agencies, led to the construction of 50 new efficient, environmentally friendly homes.¹⁸⁷ The homes are designed to use 49% less energy and 41% less water than comparable residences; they reduce air pollutants by 25 to 60%, cost 25% less to build, and reduce water, electricity and heating expenses by 46%.¹⁸⁸ The key to the astounding environmental performance of these units is found in the whole-building design concept; Green Village architects and engineers designed the home with all components – and the interaction between these components – in mind. For example, Green Village included high quality windows to conserve energy, allowing them to use smaller heating systems. Rebates helped make all this even more affordable: the project received over \$50,000 from Energy Star for energy efficient appliances, and over \$16,000 from Boston Gas for heaters, thermostats, and windows.¹⁸⁹

Our investigations led us to believe that real strides toward more sustainable affordable housing were possible. We have, as of three months ago, embarked on an “integrated design process” with the city, a local Community Development Corporation, and two small, eco-oriented nonprofit organizations. This process is “iterative, value and systems based, and focused on performance. Throughout the design process, team members are brought together in a

¹⁸⁷ “Erie-Ellington Homes: The Green Story,” *Green Village Company / Hickory Consortium*, <www.eere.energy.gov/buildings/building_america/pdfs/db/30944.pdf> (19 November 2007).

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

series of analysis and decision-making meetings or clusters.”¹⁹⁰ The process has helped us consider the project holistically, and we have had several “charrettes” – short, intensive, facilitated workshops that include all team members – to creatively address design issues and ensure that all stakeholders are actively involved. We hope to build 10 to 15 new homes (2 to 3 within each structure) over the next several years. Though we are still in the design stages, I think this project has the potential to be our greatest success yet.

The city just recently asked us to help planners and politicians create a “Sustainability Plan” for our district in Boston. Proud that our neighborhood has come to be admired and looked upon as a model of sustainable community, we agreed to help. These plans are essential to achieve sustainability over the long term, for they help make up “the official policy documents through which local governments can systematically guide their future and assure that their policies in land use, housing, economic development, transportation, public facilities, among others, are systematically moving in the desired direction.”¹⁹¹ To be successful in creating the plan, we know we need to build a broad network across professions, interests and organizations to work on various themes, including employment, as well as the physical and social environment.¹⁹² But how will we go about doing this?

We’ve found several useful guiding principles to help us in the process of creating our Sustainability Plan. One especially helpful set of principles is found in “Swamp Yankee Planning.” The Swamp Yankee idea originated in New England during the 1970s, and has been employed by over a hundred communities as a democratic, bottom-up approach to town and city planning.¹⁹³ Community members begin by creating a community-defined vision of a desired

¹⁹⁰ Global Green USA, *Blueprint for Green Affordable Housing* (USA: Island Press, 2006), 13.

¹⁹¹ Sarah James and Torbjorn Lahti, 162.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 194-195.

future, informing this vision with data and projections based on current practices. Vision, planning and action is combined from the start and throughout the planning process; by getting started early and picking the “low-hanging fruit,” it is possible to demonstrate that planning will result in concrete change. The full range of community interests, values, and perspectives must be included – everyone involved should come to view the plan as their own. A systems approach should be used to solve problems, and a combination of strategies should be incorporated. Planning should occur in cycles, not in one linear pass; ongoing planning tests the viability of long-term goals with the experience of implementation. The focus should be on finding agreement, rather than dwelling on disagreements. Finally, this process should be “led from the side,” meaning that the planner or process leader should provide a structure that allows and focuses community expression of their desired future, recognizing and building upon citizen expertise about what it is like to live and work in the community.¹⁹⁴

Many of the leaders in our community have not worked closely with politicians before, and this experience is opening our eyes to the bureaucratic challenges of such a partnership. Several of our district planners and politicians do not see good reason to use the Swamp Yankee process, or any bottom-up approach, as we put together our Sustainability Plan – they are uncomfortable with this different sort of decision-making. We have not been deterred in our efforts, however, and hope to convince our district leaders that they must receive substantial community support and participation if they want this plan to find success.

The past few years have taught us a great deal about building a sustainable community. We quickly realized that *how* one goes about seeking sustainability is just as important as *what* one does. In the early stages of our efforts, we sought information on organizational processes that would help us bring about the change we desired. We found a great deal of insight in Daniel

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 197-200.

Goldrich's exploration of the Whiteaker community in Eugene, Oregon. Whiteaker is a small, poor, neighborhood of about 7,000 people; Goldrich examines its efforts to facilitate environmentally sensitive community-controlled economic development, looking at the history of the movement and analyzing several of the underlying factors that have influenced its success.

Goldrich describes two vital internal organizational components: organizational structure and process, and support groups.¹⁹⁵ In the Whiteaker effort, there appeared to be a well functioning support group: "People got support for a tough situation, applause for a job well done, a chance to rehearse a crucial presentation, advice, a set of caring friends with whom to share anxieties."¹⁹⁶ Community members had the opportunity to check in with one another, and to create a shared sense that what they were doing was significant. A fully developed organizational framework, however, was lacking: there was no structure in place to provide support or deal with conflicts.¹⁹⁷ This contributed to interpersonal challenges within the group, which caused some individuals to avoid working together, and led others to depart the enterprise. Goldrich believes that this misstep is common, that many community-oriented groups miss this key focus on organization and process. "One of the hardest obstacles to successful, long-lasting community-building," he writes, "is the lack of consciousness of the need – as a high priority – for support and process arrangements and their implementation on a regular basis."¹⁹⁸

We kept Goldrich's assessment in mind as we began our work in the community. From the very beginning, we worked to institutionalize a clear structure in our organization, and to provide support for all community members. We developed a system to evaluate and develop our staff, to plan events and meetings, and to deal with potential conflicts between members.

¹⁹⁵ Daniel Goldrich, *A Community-Controlled Economic Development Enterprise; and the Politics of Transition to Economic Democracy*, 28.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 29.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 32.

Things have not been perfect – we have had some significant conflicts over the past few years – but these problems have not seriously damaged our organization or our efforts, largely because of the careful attention we paid to process at the start of our journey.

Some of what we learned regarding the “how” of building sustainable communities came from experience. Looking back, it is evident that three major components played a large role in our success.¹⁹⁹ First, we found the “fire souls,” the citizens who had a burning interest in sustainable development and community change. In our case, these “fire souls” consisted of the five of us who started the project, and a few others who got involved early on. Secondly, we focused centrally on education and raising awareness. Broad education initiatives, especially ones that involved community leaders, served to speed up the process of change. From our first initiative (the community gardens project), we have attempted to not only build community, but to educate people about sustainability. Thirdly, we achieved official endorsement of sustainability operating principles. We knew that when top officials endorsed sustainability principles as a guide, this would show government employees and the larger community that the municipality was serious about sustainability. We began to see buy-in from some leaders in our district after our community garden success, and the support has grown with the creation of our community center, our transportation initiative, and our more recent green building project. Now with the creation of a Sustainability Plan, we feel that we have the political leaders of our district firmly on board.

As we enter this new stage in which we seek to expand beyond the local, new organizational challenges will surely arise. Again, Daniel Goldrich helps explicate some of the issues, noting that while it is essential to build support across community boundaries (especially

¹⁹⁹ Note that these three components/principles are drawn from the *Natural Step for Communities*’ “Steps to Change”: Sarah James and Torbjorn Lahti, 203-210.

if we hope to influence policy), there are also dangers in expanding the enterprise. The resulting loss of neighborhood identity that comes with expansion could undercut local support; growth and greater complexity may cause problems for democratic decision-making; maintaining adequate accountability across a greater number of neighborhoods will be more challenging.²⁰⁰ Despite these risks, our neighborhood intends to expand its influence where possible: to make big strides in sustainability, we cannot be content with staying local. We will be careful to avoid taking on too much, and will focus on providing educational materials – and perhaps some training – for other neighborhoods interested in following in our footsteps. We will work to affect policy through cooperation with like-minded communities; this will help redefine some of the boundaries currently limiting the change that is possible in our neighborhoods.

Our community is still far from being truly sustainable, but we are confident that our efforts have made a difference. The process has not been easy: we have overcome some considerable challenges, and perhaps even more daunting ones are visible on the horizon. The process required (and will continue to require) great vision and dedication from a few individuals, and the willingness of many more to listen, and then act. Perhaps we were lucky; perhaps our success might have been impossible in many other communities. But we hope that our projects and our process of change can and will be replicated, that many more urban communities will follow this pathway toward greater sustainability.

Reflection

Perhaps what most obviously gives away the preceding story as fiction is what it lacks: struggle against the dominant paradigm. The narrative is intended to serve as a clearinghouse of

²⁰⁰ Goldrich,38.

ideas for community oriented sustainability projects, to give a sense of where to turn next now that we have lost faith in the ecovillage's ability to transform the world. As such, I avoid spending too much time on the inevitable struggles that would characterize these endeavors. David Hess catalogues how these sorts of social change efforts are co-opted and altered by the societies they intend to change, and notes, "societies change as a result of social-change action, albeit not enough from the perspective of the challengers and too much from the perspective of the elites."²⁰¹ Change occurs iteratively as the challengers to the dominant paradigm push against societal constraints.

Because of the way this sort of social change works, when brought to the realm of reality, this story will often not occur linearly. Frustrations in getting the permits to build a community garden, for example, may spur residents to become involved in city politics from the start. Work on several levels would be necessary to add *Flexcar* to the neighborhood, to change the school's curriculum, and to get involved in the planning process for the new affordable housing project. Things might develop in a different order, or in very different ways (perhaps with more top-down influence, for example), as the relationship between community members and decision-makers shifted. The process would be much more complex than what I describe; institutions on various levels would probably need to be affected simultaneously for significant transformation to take place.

Despite a focus and process quite distinct from the ecovillage model, many of the endeavors described in this story connect to ecovillages. Permaculture techniques were used to build the community garden that started it all – these same techniques are used in an urban setting at LA EcoVillage. The idea of the community center harkens back to Jamaica Plain's Common House, where residents have the opportunity to meet, socialize, and connect with one

²⁰¹ Hess, 237.

another. Reducing car use and promoting bicycling draws upon LA EcoVillage's focus on alternative transportation. Even in the community residential construction project, ideas of cooperation and providing eco-friendly housing can be connected to Jamaica Plain, LA EcoVillage, or any ecovillage. Though these projects were informed by other sources as well, the ecovillage model helped provide valuable inspiration.

CONCLUSION

The journey is far from over. I have begun the process of searching for viable ways to achieve Coates' metaindustrial future, but that search will not be completed soon; perhaps it will never be completed. But what I have learned thus far will prove valuable as I continue on: I now know that ecovillages provide some powerful ideas to help promote local sustainability, but fail to provide a model that can change the world. As demonstration projects, they can serve as a proving ground for sustainable practices, helping us start down the road to the metaindustrial ideal. We need only remember to avoid making ecovillages more than demonstrations; because they are intentional communities, they are not replicable models for all of society.

I don't think any one mechanism of change will be sufficient to achieve a world of sustainable communities. I've discussed what I consider to be an interesting alternative to the ecovillage model, one that focuses on "community" instead of "intentional community," but it too has problems. These movements tend to be co-opted and transformed by the world they want to change, and this often weakens their power. And these community movements don't simply happen; they arise out of a specific set of circumstances. As Nigel Taylor observes:

In particular, local communities tend to arise where, firstly, the inhabitants of an area lack any real choice to move away from their locality and so come to be acquainted with each other through long-term residence; secondly, where the majority of these inhabitants share a common social position and so tend also to share similar interests; and thirdly, where the inhabitants of a given area face similar problems and difficulties, and so come to cooperate with each other to combat adversity. Generalizing, local territorial communities have tended to arise in areas where there is the common experience of economic hardship and territorial immobility.²⁰²

It seems that without a specific motivating factor, most often in the form of a fight against some injustice, community mobilization may prove exceedingly difficult. Is it realistic to think that

²⁰² Nigel Taylor, "Eco-villages: Dream and Reality," in *Sustainable Communities*, ed. Hugh Barton (London, England: Earthscan Publications, Ltd., 2000), 23.

the world can be transformed into a network of sustainable communities if not all communities have direct motivation to become active in bringing about change? Is it reasonable to think that as these movements progress, they will somehow avoid being transformed and diluted by society? In many ways, the outlook appears bleak.

There is cause for hope, however. We are not relegated to building sustainable communities solely from the ground up; we can simultaneously work on many levels, using regional and even national politics to facilitate these efforts. We can make use of the support of nonprofit networks, experts who are involved in similar efforts in other parts of the world, and perhaps even socially and environmentally conscious businesses. Local efforts can – and in fact must be – complemented by this work in other realms. My next goal in my search for a sustainable future will be to learn more about how these efforts can positively interact to affect change.

“The meta-industrial culture called for,” writes Gary Coates, “must be created by a process of evolutionary experimentation guided by an ecological and evolutionary ethic and informed by an abiding faith in the goodness of life and the sacredness of creation.”²⁰³ The urban ecovillage experiment has helped me understand what is and is not feasible when it comes to building sustainable communities; it has helped me gain a better understanding of how impassioned citizens – myself included – might affect our collective future. I have learned much through my exploration of intentional communities, from Brook Farm to LA EcoVillage, and will carry this knowledge with me as I continue to consider how to bring about societal change. For me, the question of whether achieving a world of sustainable communities is possible remains open. I think substantial challenges stand in our way, and that all roads that come even

²⁰³ Gary J. Coates, “Planning and the Paradox,” 549.

close to this ideal will be fraught with danger and difficulty. But at the same time, I remain cautiously optimistic: I have found that society can indeed be changed, if only one community at a time. “While it is not possible to foresee what will happen,” Coates writes of our efforts to build a sustainable society, “one thing is certain – the future will not be boring.”²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “About DUG.” *Denver Urban Gardens*. <http://dug.org/about_dug.asp> (18 November 2007).
- “About Gaia Trust.” <<http://www.gaia.org/gaia/gaiatrust>> (22 October 2007).
- Arkin, Lois. Personal interview. Los Angeles, CA. 3 November 2007.
- “Becoming a Member.” <http://urbansoil.net/wiki.cgi/Becoming_a_Member> (8 November, 2007).
- Bookchin, Murray. “Which Way for the Ecology Movement?” *Nature*. 1994.
- Bradley, John. “Pushing William Penn’s ‘Holy Experiment’ to its Limits: Ephrata Cloister.” *Pennsylvania Heritage Magazine*. Fall 1996.
- Christian, Diana Leafe. *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities*. British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2003.
- Coates, Gary J. “Future Images, Present Possibilities: Revisioning Nature, Self, and Society.” In *Resettling America: Energy Ecology, and Community*, edited by Gary J. Coates. Andover, Massachusetts: Brick House Publishing Co., Inc., 1981.
- Coates, Gary J. “Planning and the Paradox.” In *Resettling America: Energy Ecology, and Community*, edited by Gary J. Coates. Andover, Massachusetts: Brick House Publishing Co., Inc., 1981.
- “Cohousing.” *Intentional Communities Wiki*. <<http://wiki.ic.org/wiki/Cohousing>> (8 November 2007).
- Corvidae, Jacob. “Why Urban Ecovillages are Crucial.” <<http://urban.ecovillage.org/resources/why-urban-ecovillages.shtml>> (5 November 2007).
- Daly, Herman. *Steady-State Economics*. Washington DC: Island Press, 1991.
- Dawson, Jonathan. *Ecovillages: New Frontiers for Sustainability*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2006.
- Delano, Sterling. *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.
- “Ecological Sustainability.” *Twin Oaks Community FAQ*. <<http://www.twinoaks.org/FAQ.html#basic>> (5 November 2007).

- “Ecovillages: New Approaches to Urban Regeneration.” *CIFAL Curitiba Training Session*. December 5-7, 2005.
- “Erie-Ellington Homes: The Green Story.” *Green Village Company / Hickory Consortium*. <www.eere.energy.gov/buildings/building_america/pdfs/db/30944.pdf> (19 November 2007).
- Fairfield, Richard. *Communes USA: A Personal Tour*. Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc., 1972.
- “Faith in ‘real’ cities.” *Ecocity Cleveland*. <http://www.ecocitycleveland.org/ecologicaldesign/ecovillage/faith_in_real_cities.html> (8 November 2007).
- “Findhorn Ecovillage.” *Wikipedia*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Findhorn_Ecovillage> (22 October 2007).
- Fogarty, Robert S. *All Things New: American Communes and Utopian Movements, 1860-1914*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Gilchrist, Allison. “Design for Living: The Challenge of Sustainable Communities.” In *Sustainable Communities: The Potential for Eco-Neighbourhoods*, edited by Hugh Barton. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 2000.
- Gilman, Robert. “The Eco-village Challenge.” *In Context Magazine*. Summer 1991.
- Global Green USA. *Blueprint for Green Affordable Housing*. USA: Island Press, 2006.
- Goldrich, Daniel. *A Community-Controlled Economic Development Enterprise; and the Politics of Transition to Economic Democracy*. 1981.
- Goodman, Jeanne. Personal interview. Cambridge, MA. 21 October 2007.
- “Green Page.” *Jamaica Plain Cohousing*. <<http://jpcohousing.org/Green.htm>> (12 November 2007).
- Greenwood, Stephanie. E-mail to the author. 19 November 2007.
- Hess, David J. *Alternative Pathways in Science and Industry*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007.
- “How it works.” *Flexcar*. <<http://www.flexcar.com/HowItWorks/tabid/53/Default.aspx>> (19 November 2007).
- “Intentional Communities Website.” *The Fellowship for Intentional Community*. <<http://www.ic.org/>> (15 November 2007).

- Jackson, Hildur. "Self-sufficient Food Production: A Veteran's Advice." In *Ecovillage Living: Restoring the Earth and Her People*, edited by Hildur Jackson and Karen Svensson. Foxhole, Dartington: Chelsea Green, 2002.
- Jackson, Hildur and Karen Svensson. *Ecovillage Living: Restoring the Earth and Her People*. Foxhole, Dartington: Chelsea Green, 2002.
- Jackson, Ross. "The Ecovillage Movement." *Permaculture Magazine*, 25-30.
- James, Sarah and Torbjorn Lahti. *The Natural Step for Communities*. British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2004.
- Joseph, Linda and Albert Bates. "What is and Ecovillage?" *Communities Magazine*. January 2003.
- Kuhlman, Hilke. *Living Walden Two: B.F. Skinner's Behaviorist Utopia and Experimental Communities*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005.
- "LAEV Food Co-op Wiki Page." <http://urbansoil.net/wiki.cgi/More_Food_Coop_Specifics> (8 November 2007).
- Metcalf, Mandy. "The EcoVillage and the virtues of urban interdependence." *Ecocity Cleveland*. <http://www.ecocitycleveland.org/ecologicaldesign/ecovillage/urban_interdep.html> (8 November 2007).
- Miller, Timothy. *The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth Century America*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998.
- "New report documents world urbanization trends and impacts." *World Resources Institute*. 18 April 1996
<http://archive.wri.org/item_detail.cfm?id=111§ion=biodiv&page=newsrelease_text&z=?> (8 November 2007).
- Orr, David W. "Four Challenges of Sustainability." *Spring Seminar Series, University of Vermont*. 2003.
- "Our Goals: Mission Statement." *Interface Carpet*.
<<http://www.interfaceinc.com/goals/mission.html>> (6 November 2007).
- Owen, David. "Green Manhattan: Why New York is the greenest city in the U.S." *The New Yorker*. 16 October 2004.
- "Permaculture." *Wikipedia*. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permaculture>> (18 November 2007).

- Sams, Henry W. *Autobiography of Brook Farm*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1958.
- Simpson, Diane. Personal interview. Cambridge, MA. 21 October 2007.
- Svensson, Karen. "From *What is an Ecovillage?*" In *Ecovillage Living: Restoring the Earth and Her People*, edited by Hildur Jackson and Karen Svensson. Foxhole, Dartington: Chelsea Green, 2002.
- Taylor, Nigel. "Eco-villages: Dream and Reality." In *Sustainable Communities*, edited by Hugh Barton. London, England: Earthscan Publications, Ltd., 2000.
- "Twin Oaks Intentional Community Homepage." <<http://www.twinoaks.org>> (9 October 2007).
- "Understanding Sustainability." *The Natural Step*. 2004.
- Veysey, Lawrence. *The Perfectionists: Radical Social Thought in the North, 1815-1860*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1973.
- Walker, Liz. *Ecovillage at Ithaca*. British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2005.
- Walker, Liz. "History of the Project: The First 11 Years." <http://www.ecovillage.ithaca.ny.us/evis_history.html> (24 October 2007).
- Walters, Ronald. *American Reformers: 1815-1860*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.
- "What is a community garden?" *Urban Community Gardens*. <<http://www.mindspring.com/~communitygardens/>> (18 November 2007).
- "What is an EV?" <<http://www.gaia.org/gaia/ecovillage/whatis>> (22 October 2007).
- "What's True About Intentional Communities: Dispelling the Myths." *Fellowship for Intentional Communities*. October 1996. <<http://www.ic.org/pnp/myths.php>> (5 November 2007).