Ecovillages and Urban Change in the US:
A comparison of urban and suburban ecovillages

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Introduction

Upon formation of our group, all of our members were interested in one basic question: in what ways do ecovillage principles apply to urban contexts? Put differently, what does the ecovillage “movement” mean to the vast majority of the population that lives in cities. Besides the intriguing and laudable architectural design of ecovillages in general, which we describe, a core motivation for our research is the contrast between urban and suburban (or rural; Ithaca happens to be a suburban example) efforts to create more sustainable living arrangements. Our assumption is that there would be significant differences between the way “ecovillages” operate, or succeed, in urban, as opposed to rural settings.

In our research, we take a case-study approach to address a range of questions, from green building practices, efficient living densities and social investment in renewable energy, to appropriate forms of decision-making structures, inclusiveness across racial and socioeconomic lines, political activism and lifestyle choices. Some of our guiding questions are below:

1. Should we expect people in urban areas to replicate the many rural and suburban communities that dominate the ecovillage movement by resettling outside of the city; in other words, eventually breaking down the urban-rural dichotomy in physical as well as mental space? Is this the only path to sustainability? If not, what seem to be the most important characteristics of the rural ecovillage movement that urban ecovillagers can adopt?

2. Assuming significant modifications to the built environment, do cities not have the potential to be more efficient than suburban and rural ecovillages for the vast majority of humans (UNHCS 1996)? Further, if large numbers of people proceed to move to suburban and rural environments, is it possible to reduce consumption in “the northern hemisphere by 90%” (Jackson and Jackson 2002:131), as many people agree is necessary (Daly, Cobb, and Cobb 1994; Trainer 2000; Trainer
1995). Also, would this not mean largely abandoning the highly efficient, and potentially sustainable industrial processes already active in urban areas (Here we are thinking of some of the points raised by Peter Reppe speaking about Lost Valley)?

3. To the extent that ecovillages actually represent a “movement,” how are ecovillages participating in local and national politics to influence broader-level change (Fotopoulos 2000)?

4. Are decision-making structures utilized by ecovillagers applicable to communities with higher population density? What are the disadvantages of consensus decision-making structures to minorities, i.e. people of color, ethnic minorities, working class persons, etc.? (We must not be so naïve as to assume that a hidden consensus of racism – or a variety of other forms of prejudice - is impossible as ecovillages grow in number.)

Researching only two communities in depth makes it difficult to answer the broader questions alluded to above, however, we do attempt to address some of these issues by focusing on two particularly active ecovillage communities: EcoVillage at Ithaca, NY (EVI) and Los Angeles EcoVillage in California (LAEV). Since LAEV is in a highly urbanized area, we expect salient differences in the demographics, structure, outreach, political influence, efficiency, building techniques, and economic structure. Indeed, the latter are characteristics we hope to investigate in depth.

Instead of brushing the broader questions about the ecovillage movement aside, however, we use the conclusion to delve into several broader issues, such as city-level sustainability, conspicuous consumption, social movements, and social inequality by picking through the characteristics of each ecovillage. While preliminary research indicates that several of the latter issues are (tangentially) addressed by both LAEV and EVI, the concluding discussion will be primarily theoretical, as it is difficult to make general conclusions about broader questions with such a small sample. Throughout the paper, however, we compare and contrast the architectural, social, economic, and
educational aspects of each of the community with these questions in mind. The conclusion, then, serves as a summary, returning to some of the questions listed above.

Aside from the intro and conclusion, the paper is separated into four sections: (1) architectural characteristics of EVI (2) architectural characteristics of LAEV, (3) a comparison of the social organization of EVI and LAEV, and, lastly (4) a comparison of the economic and outreach aspects of EVI and LAEV.
Case Study Introduction: Erin Giles

EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI)
Ithaca, NY

PROJECT BIOGRAPHY

The “Ecovillage at Ithaca” is a co-housing community located a couple of miles from the small town of Ithaca, New York. Ithaca is a college town which is known for fostering environmental ideals which embrace innovative communities such as EVI (Striney 2000). The idea of the ecovillage came to founding member, Joan Boaker, after she organized and participated in a cross-country “Global Walk for a Livable World”. A year later, in 1991, Joan invited another walk participant, Liz Walker to join her to co-directing the beginnings of the Ecovillage at Ithaca (Jackson 2004).

Over the next year they raised funds to purchase 176 acres of land, as well as facilitated numerous planning meetings. In 1992 EVI received non-profit status from the IRS, and had attracted 50 dedicated residents. After working on various site issues with students from Cornell, the first resident community (a.k.a. FROG) chose to hire Jerry and Claudia Weisburd as architects and development consultants. By
1994 house plans and the common house were designed and approved by the community. It took another couple of months to have the site approved for Special Land Use District (SLUD) zoning, and an additional 11 months to have the site plan approved by the Town of Ithaca Planning Board. Ground was broken fall of 1995, and the first residents moved in a year later (Jackson & Svensson 2002).

EVI got past many hurdles, such as financing, and a huge construction fire, to achieve nationwide and worldwide recognition through NPR, TV, countless national and international newspaper and magazine articles. In addition, EVI received the 1996 national award from HUD for “Building Innovation for Home Ownership Program” (Striney 2000). By 2002, EVI built a second community SONG (for Second Neighborhood Group), similar in size to the first. This made EVI the first cohousing group in the nation to build a second community. Plans for a future development are in place for a third development to the north (Jackson & Svensson 2002).

It is imperative founding members of a cohousing community have a strong mission statement, otherwise they might not stand the test of time. The mission statement for FROG is to, “to explore and model innovative approaches to ecological and social sustainability.” EVI has been able to achieve this ecological goal by conserving resources as well as lessening auto dependence. Social sustainability is aided by the narrow street site plan, as well as communal gathering at the common house. The EVI community is a diverse group, with people of all ages, single and married (Jackson & Svensson 2002). On the other hand, EVI does not appear to be as economically diverse, since the majority of the village population consists of two-salary professional families (Jackson 2004).
ARCHITECTURAL ATTRIBUTES

As mentioned earlier, the EcoVillage at Ithaca is located on 174 acres of land. Most remarkably, 90% of the land remains undeveloped for open/natural space. The village and organic farm takes up the remaining 34 acres (10%) (Striney 2000).

The preservation of 90 percent space was one of the main goals to the ecovillage members. This land is reserved for woods, meadows and wetlands. 50 acres was established as a permanent conservation easement, and is administered by a local land trust (Jackson 2004).

The First Residents Group consists of 15 duplex houses, or 30 units total. These duplexes are configured in two rows about 40 feet apart from each other. This “street” configuration is highly recommended by, the co-housing guru, Kathryn McCamant to aid neighborly interactions.

The FROG main street is a pedestrian pathway lined with gardens, benches, and play areas. Small paths branch off the main “street” and connect to the front doors. Each home measures between 900 and 1,700 square feet and costs $90,000 to $170,000 respectively (Jackson 2004). Each unit ranges from one to four bedrooms, in order to attract a broad spectrum of incomes and age groups (Striney 2000). The houses
are attached to each other to create a lighter footprint on the land, as well as provide more opportunity to encounter neighbors.

The residents are able to get away with a smaller amount of square footage in their units, because they share amenities at the common house. The common house acts as the heart of the community, providing a focal point to share and connect. The FROG Common House is located at the main entrance, so that residents are encouraged to drop in to socialize on their way from the off-site parking lot. The FROG residents gather at the common house often, up to several times a week, for meals. There is a laundry room, which many residents use, as well as a sound-proofed “teen” room. The FROG common house also provides a children’s playroom, which is also used for yoga, meditation, and meetings (Jackson 2004).

While the Second Neighborhood Group, SONG, was developing their new community they were able to use FROG as a guinea pig. The new community opted to have the same number of homes as FROG, but stretched the facades farther apart. The reasoning for this bigger central courtyard was because the residents wanted to keep a better eye on children playing, as well as creating a central focus garden. Some feel the courtyard is too open, but hope that future landscaping may add more complexity to the space. There were 4 stock floor plans for the residents to choose from. The homes adjoin each other in rows that step inward towards the edge of the site. The densely packed streetfront creates a look of a town from the
The common house has not been built, but is planned to be constructed in 2005, with sweat equity. EVI hopes to add 3 more communities, to create a total of 500 people (Striney 2000). The third and forth villages have already started the design process, involving students from local universities in design charettes. Each subsequent community appears to evolve from lessons learned from the prior communities.

**Environmental Attributes/Sustainable Features on Site:**

FROG found numerous ways to reduce energy consumption and promote sustainability. In addition to sharing common facilities, promoting recycling, and using alternative transportation, FROG designed their infrastructure and buildings to incorporate more sustainable practices. The individual units employ passive solar design, with each unit having ample south facing light. Trellises were built to the south to allow for winter sun to pass through, while having grape vines to shade from the summer sun (Hurrelbrinck 2005). Homes are nearly airtight, constructed with densely packed cellulose insulation, vapor barrier and triple glazed windows. Efforts were also made to reduce energy consumption with energy-efficient appliances, as well as an innovative shared hot-water system, installing only one gas boiler per eight-home cluster. The common house has its own climate system, featuring heat exchange piping in a pond (instead of the earth) as well as a radiant floor heating system. Residents also strive to “close the loop” through composting. Food scraps and other biodegradable waste are sent to the composting facility, then used all over the property, including the farms. Water is conserved through 1 1/2-gallon toilets and low-flow faucets, as well as by watering their mulched gardens during the coolest part of the day (Jackson 2004).
With the above energy conservation measures, EVI residents consume just 39 percent of the electric power, 41 percent of the natural gas and 22 percent of the water used by the average household in the northeastern United States. The community still uses city gas and sewer, but there are plans to remedy this outside consumption in the future. EVI hopes to decrease their reliance on “the grid” through more extensive use of solar panels, wind generators, sewage treatment facilities, and alternative heating sources (Striney 2000). Efforts were made to design units to be easily converted to new ‘green’ systems, such as installing dual drain piping for future greywater reuse, and angling south roofs at just the correct angle for future photovoltaic panels.

SONG chose to implement many of FROG’s sustainable features, as well as add a few more. Like FROG, SONG units were designed for passive solar, as well as tightly constructed. The new green building elements include composting toilets, rainwater catchment, solar water heating, and greywater recovery (Jackson & Svensson 2005). Since New York state offers incentives for photovoltaic modules, and the residents of the SONG neighborhood greatly embraced solar electricity. Many of the new houses have PV panels sized to meet the residents’ full annual needs (PSC 2005).

SONG had the opportunity to witness FROG staining their exterior walls every 5 years (costing $20,000 each time) so they opted to sheath their exterior walls with hemlock siding, since it does not
need paint, and gains beauty as it ages (Jackson & Svensson 2005). After a cost analysis of FROG the residents found it was hard to justify the extra cost of triple-pane, so the windows are low-e glass double-pane (PSC 2005). Wall construction of SONG housing units varies from ICF (Insulated Concrete Forms), SIP (Structural Insulated Panels), stick-frame construction with damp-spray cellulose or fiberglass insulation, and straw-bale. Unlike the first neighborhood, the SONG went with smaller boilers and moved them inside the thermal envelope, in order to cut down on the heat loss. Instead of distributing the heat through ducts, the new buildings use radiant floors and fin-tube baseboard units. From the above examples it is clear that the new community was able achieve their goal of selecting building materials that were ”the least toxic, least polluting, most local and most recycled materials whenever possible and practical” (PSC 2005).

SONG & FROG: LESSONS LEARNED

It is admirable that both SONG and FROG were able to break loose from the conventions of suburban design, and strive towards utilizing green building practices. Both villages were able to drastically decrease their energy consumption. But, even though SONG had learned many lessons form FROG, it appears that the new residents chose to creep back to some suburban creature comforts. While FROG tried to make their houses as close as possible, to take up as little space as they could, SONG appeared to drop some of these land-saving principles, by designing a more spaced out plan. Another decision from SONG was that many residents opted to have washers and dryers in their individual units, while
FROG members had agreed to use shared washer dryer facilities in the common house. Some FROG residents are saddened by SONG’s choices and feel that EVI is being transformed into a “technologically advanced suburb” (Janiga 2005). But in any case, this community has received an impressive amount of press and has been very successful at communicating its green ideas to the general public.
Case Study Introduction: Dana Stutzman

Los Angeles Eco-Village (LAEV)
117 Bimini Place
Los Angeles, CA 90004

PROJECT BIOGRAPHY

The Los Angeles Eco-Village is an intentional community that has been in existence since January of 1993. LAEV, as it is more commonly known, is located in the existing Wilshire Center/Koreatown area of Los Angeles, only 3 miles west of the city’s main downtown development. The architect and founder of the L.A. Eco-village is a woman named Lois Arkin, a longtime community resident, and founding member of the CRSP. The site of 117 Bimini Place is currently in process of being transferred from CRSP ownership (CRSP has been in ownership of the site since 1980) into a Community Land Trust, which is being headed by an active 6-person committee consisting of 2 members each from CRSP, Mundo Iximche (MI)*, and the LA Eco-Village community (LAEV 2005). The Land Trust for LAEV has been initiated in response to the need for affordable housing within the LA community (300,000 households in LA pay out 50% of their monthly income for housing

* Mundo Iximche, or MI, is a nonprofit organization promoting local and international sustainable development, focusing mainly on renewable food and energy systems and permaculture. Two members, Angel Orozco and Jill Sourial, live at the LA Eco-Village.
LAEV, 2005), the need for sustainable living in an environmentally unfriendly city, and the desire to separate land and building ownership between the non-profit organization and the LAEV community.

The project creators hope to retrofit the existing buildings and grounds so that a cooperative situation will not only allow for internal economic balances, but also for reducing long-term negative impact of the community on the environment, and reducing the consumption of external power and water sources resulting in reduced cost of living within the project.

LAEV began the community project hoping to inspire their surrounding neighborhood with their model existence, however, despite LAEV’s accomplishments and community relationship, the idea of Eco-village remains centralized to the individual project. There is no real growth pattern within the community, as reuse occurs as the opportunity arises.

The LA Eco-village has thus far rehabilitated 35 of the 40 individual units of the larger building, and has future plans to develop another 7 state-of-the-art live/work loft spaces on the property (LAEV 2005).
LAEV MISSION STATEMENT

The initial main concerns of the creators of the LAEV project embraced many levels of community problems spanning from community relationships to sustainable living. Creating affordable housing was the first concern of Arkin and her CRSP colleagues, as the residents of the Wilshire district were predominantly low-income individuals and families. However, the fact that this low-income community was located in downtown L.A., one of the most polluted and car-dependent cities in the world, made the need for a sustainable community equally important to the monetary cost of living in the neighborhood. The LAEV project has a community focus on moving away from reliance on individual automobile usage, and the Eco-Village offers a $20 rent deduction and transportation alternatives to those who choose to live car-less lives. Aside from this economic benefit to living with LAEV, the project leaders also began to teach interested neighbors and members how to lower their personal energy and water consumption through sponsored workshops offered in their community center. Unfortunately, needed system upgrades and sustainable materials to renovate the individual living units cost money, and so this aspect of the project was designated as a long-term project that would be up to the tenants to complete whenever possible. “I feel - as do my colleagues involved with Los Angeles Eco-Village - that we must work for transformation wherever we are and with whatever we have. We want to help build a culture, right here in Los Angeles, in which decisions are based on environmental harmony, and rewards come from a healthy and spontaneous spirit - and practice - of cooperation. We are people with
hope and a desire to heal the wounds in ourselves, one another, and the great Gaia. Our city - all cities - beg for this healing” (Arkin 1991; LAEV 2005)

**LAEV SITE INFORMATION**

The low-income L.A. neighborhood that LAEV resides in envelopes 2 city blocks between 1st and 2nd streets, and Bimini Place and White House Avenue, includes approximately 13 buildings and has a total of about 500 residents. The intentional community as a separate entity consists of 2 buildings (both built in the 1920’s, and totaling 48 living units), a series of rented houses throughout the neighborhood, and 40 residents (Coulter 2004). The site of this neighborhood has an interesting and rocky history. “Bimini” literally means “a place of healing” and was originally named as such due to the natural hot mineral springs located 2,000 feet below street level (Coulter 2004). This spa was historically a very popular place for the rich and the famous of the early 20th century, and was a major economic draw for the area. The downfall of the community came with the closure of the springs due to public protests of white clientele to the spa becoming integrated in the 1950’s. The area continued to loose its status and sense of community over the span of a century, with the community’s downfall culminating in the
beating of Rodney King in 1994. Multicultural divisions have been a source of anger and fear within this downtown Los Angeles community, and were the major spark to ignite the LAEV movement. Lois Arkin, along with other concerned community and CRSP members, began to work towards healing the neighborhood’s relationships before any cooperative efforts could be made towards rejuvenating the site and returning the community to being “a place of healing”. The Los Angeles Eco-Village has been a continued project of spiritual, educational, and environmental growth (Arkin 2001).

As the site stands now, the Los Angeles Eco-Village is still embedded in the low-income neighborhood it started in – having been unsuccessful in persuading all of their immediate neighbors towards the way of life LAEV supports. However, over the past 12 years of the intentional community’s existence, there have been many accomplishments - both architectural and spiritual - on the site. Firstly, the intentional community has completed several projects to support the LAEV’s desire for its members to move away from a life revolving around cars, as over 85% of the land in L.A. is dedicated to automobile needs. The LAEV does not make off-street parking available for Eco-villagers, and being car-less is emphasized as being a freedom from something tying residents (and human beings in general) down, versus the loss meaning giving up a commodity residents of L.A. “need”. Instead, LAEV promotes bike usage by creating more secure bike parking on site, and plan in the future to initiate a co-op electric car program to be shared by Eco-Villagers as alternatives to gas cars. The CLT committee also plans to implement a “slow street plan,” making the streets in their neighborhood more bike-conducive by restricting car usage (LAEV 2005). This in turn would create the
opportunity for more growing and living space, as the need for wide roads and sidewalks would be eliminated, or at least minimized. Aside from actively altering the site to promote bicycle usage by residents, public transportation is available to residents in the form of 20 nearby bus lines and 2 subways stops within walking distance of the site. The LAEV also supports on-site livelihoods by creating jobs in the neighborhood with continued site improvement projects and opportunities in the Bicycle Kitchen, lessening resident’s transportation needs.

Another goal of the Los Angeles Eco-Village concerning the over-usage of cars and their negative impact on the environment is the reclaiming of valuable space that has been dedicated to cars – the “grey” areas, like streets and parking lots – and converting those harmful spaces into “green lungs” by tearing up the concrete and planting trees and other greenery. Not only does this act to rejuvenate the community by enabling open spaces for interaction, but it also lessens air and noise pollution by 65% (Arkin 1991). LAEV has already reclaimed a large portion of its community’s space by turning a portion of 2nd street into a 20,000 square foot eco-park that includes a stream bed and permaculture installation, and reintroduces native plants to the area. The Eco-
Park acts not only as a community healing tool, but also as a natural filter for rain water that would otherwise be introduced into the L.A. sewer system directly off of the street surfaces (Arkin 2005).

Along with the Eco-park, innumerous yard and alleyway areas have been usurped by the LAEV group for private and public garden and orchard spaces. The multitude of greenways that have been reused for necessary food growth for the community, and the over 100 fruit trees which were planted by community children, now provide over 20% of organically grown food for at least 20 people in the community, and is projected to increase each year as neighborhood involvement grows (LAEV 2005). In all, the reclaiming of the spaces surrounding the architectural developments of LAEV are aimed not only towards community reconnection, but also towards self-sufficiency within the neighborhood.

Future hopes for the site mainly revolve around reuniting the neighborhood with its past. Since historically the site was associated with a positive environmental attitude, it is only natural for the current Eco-Villagers to wish to reclaim what made this site unique – namely the return of the Bimini Baths natural hot mineral springs. LAEV not only hopes to reopen the baths, but also to return the site to its original ecosystem, which includes the Sacatela Creek. Unfortunately these goals have more than a small roadblock to overcome if LAEV is to be successful in returning the Bimini neighborhood to its original environment. Bimini Baths is now buried deep below an automotive repair shop, and White House place runs where Sacatela Creek once flowed.
LAEV ARCHITECTURAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In regards to architectural renovations that have already occurred on the site, the projects that have been completed are as diverse as the community members, mainly due to the projects evolving as residents find the time and money to make them happen. For example, one tenant – T.H. Culhane, an Iraqi American – requested to be cut off from L.A.’s power grid, and then personally installed solar paneling as the main source of energy for his unit. Culhane’s retrofits were some of the most innovative, if not extreme, of the community. His television, for example, is powered by a generator connected to an exercise bike, making it possible for him to enjoy the comforts of technology without tapping the resources of the city.

Other Green amenities that Culhane opted for include an odorless composting toilet, and the grey water from biological living system – which is located in his shower – is used to water the gardens outside his apartment (Blair 2001).

In the larger scheme of things, the cumulative improvements of the individual units revolve around eliminating harmful material already in the buildings, and renovating with sustainable, local products instead. After the 1994 earthquake, the Eco-Village voluntarily helped the city of Los Angeles dispose of rubble from fallen buildings by...
gathering thirty tons of red clay brick which was later used in LAEV beautification projects. Broken tiles were used in much needed street repairs instead of using harmful asphalt patches, which not only eliminated the need for environmentally unfriendly material to be brought in by trucks, but added a certain character to the community streets. “Our policies on building materials are to select the least toxic, least polluting, most local and most recycled materials whenever possible and practical” (Coulter 2004). Other examples of this ideal in LAEV renovation projects include using low VOC paint in all projects, and using products that have low long-term impact on the environment. For instance, many of the units’ floors are covered with donated Interface carpet tiles, which have a longer life-span than traditional carpet installation, on top of being made by an environmentally conscious company.

LAEV has one future project that they have high hopes for completing within this year – to eco-retrofit the 40 unit building with a solar hot water system which will feed each of the individual units and lower electricity bills drastically. Over time, they hope to implement other system replacements to lower water and energy usages within the whole Eco-Village, and expand their community to other buildings in the two-block neighborhood, but the continuation of improvements, again, are a matter of money and other resources. The community remains optimistic that their achievements, both architectural and social, will not only continue in their depth and number, but “serve as a beacon of hope for many” (LAEV 2005).
Comparing the Social Activities of social activities

Jessica Neff

Ithaca EcoVillage

Decision Making Processes and Social Organizations: The Eco-Village at Ithaca makes their decisions through a consensus-based decision-making process, calling on all of their community members to participate in the process. There is no identified community leader, nor a leadership core group. There are many committees at EVI, ranging from the “Aging and Accessibility Committee,” which is exploring ways to make Eco Village more livable for all ages and ability levels, to the committee that runs their farm, West Haven Farm (EVI 2003 Winter).

EVI has regular work teams, such as the cook team, the outdoor team, Common House cleaning crew, and more. Additionally, there are regular business meetings for FROG, SONG, and the Village Association (EVI 2005).

Activities and Outreach Programs: An abundance of groups and activities exist at EVI. Some of those include: sustainable living circles, men's and women's groups, parenting groups, deepening relationships groups, meditation circles, political discussion evenings and film club (EVI 2005). Future plans are to create a village center for dances, classes, performances and sports, as well as establish a U-pick organic berry farm and orchards, education/visitor center, organic orchards, agroforestry, on-site biological wastewater treatment, greywater recycling, wind energy, willow/poplar energy crops, onsite bio-diesel production, and a non-toxic village cemetery (EVI 2005).
EVI is very interested in tying in their living experience into an educational opportunity for others outside of the eco-village. “EVI is involved with linking college students with a variety of eco-villages around the US and world. Called, Living Routes: EcoVillage Education Consortium, the budding group aims to provide in-depth, multi-disciplinary, participatory approaches to education for cultural and environmental sustainability, while enhancing eco-villages which host students” (EVI 2000 Spring). Living Routes teamed up with an already existing program, the Community Studies Program (CSP--which gives college credit) in order to provide students with intensive study abroad semesters at eco-villages around the world. (EVI 2000 Spring)

In addition, EVI is involved with other Eco-Village networks. They are members of the ENA (EcoVillage Network of the Americas), who are part of the Global EcoVillage Network (GEN), which is affiliated with the United Nations. “The mission of ENA is to engage the people of the Americas in a common effort to join the global transformation towards ecologically, economically and culturally sustainable human settlement” (EVI 2000 Spring). For children living at EVI, they receive their education from home schooling at EVI, as well as attending private and public schools off the property.

**Shared Resources:** Members of the eco-village share ownership of their common facilities. They carpool extensively, participate in car-sharing and ride the bus, having successfully lobbied the local bus company to make a stop by their entry road. The large, two-story common house sits at the entrance to the village. Here, residents gather together to cook and dine several nights a week. Some also wash their clothes in the
shared laundry room, and let their teens socialize in a sound-proofed hangout room
enhanced by a music system. A children's playroom with tumbling mats and large pillows
also is used for yoga, meditation, meetings and classes (EVI 2005).

Food Systems: EVI has a nine-acre organic farm, called West Haven Farm. Residents
have also established a 3-acre meadow area designated for chickens and sheep to live.
With the organic farm, several members have established an organic community
supported agriculture (CSA) farm, producing a wide variety of food for the community. It
is estimated at between 6-20% of the community’s food is grown on the farm. The
residents of the community can buy shares in the organic farm. From these shares they
are entitled to a certain amount of locally grown organic produce, which is fertilized
using compost produced by the residents of Eco Village (EVI 2005).

Diversity of Members: There are 54 adult members and 36 children in SONG at EVI,
with 41% male and 59% female. There is co-housing, with currently 16 residents. The
community is omnivorous, with seldom alcohol and tobacco use. The community is open
to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgenders as well (Strirney 2000).

Philosophy on the Structure of the Community – housing and demographics: EVI
provides cohousing for their residents. There are presently two tightly clustered
cohousing neighborhoods, each on 3 ½ acres and consisting of 45 households total. The
first neighborhood (FROG) was completed in 1997 and the homes of the second
neighborhood (SONG) were completed in 2004. The neighborhoods will surround a
shared common house, which they plan to build this year. Future residential development of 30+ homes is anticipated, but no active plans exist at present (EVI 2005).

In the first neighborhood, known as FRoG (First Residents Group), a short pedestrian walkway winds among the flowers, herbs, small fruit trees and shady trellises nestled between two rows of russet-colored two-story duplexes (Strirney 2000). In regards to affordable housing, the newer development, SONG, tried to get subsidies for building affordable housing but ran into trouble. “Prospects looked very good for a collaborative effort with a local affordable housing agency which planned to use tax credits to help fund construction of units which would be available to people with 80% or less of median income” (EVI 2000 Spring). Unfortunately, after five months of planning sessions, the collaboration fell apart when the agency determined they could not help EVI because it is located outside the city limits (by about half a mile). SONG had similar results with another local housing agency. Therefore, EVI decided to use various strategies to lower the costs of housing: “simple home designs, stack units, studios and one bedrooms for those with less money, and keeping open the possibility for residents to finish their own homes through ‘sweat equity’” (EVI 2000 Spring). In addition, SONG members are researching other agencies who may be able to help. In regards to the Common House, members are considering the possibility of building it themselves (EVI 2000 Spring).

One of the primary goals of the EcoVillage is to be open to individuals of all economic classes. Although, the homes at EcoVillage range from $100,000 to $200,000 in price, and rentals are available (Strirney 2000). The price of housing in EVI differs greatly from that of the following eco-village, Los Angeles EcoVillage. In keeping with the idea of
cohousing and higher density living, the houses are attached, one to another, which provides for a more neighborhood friendly sense of space. Other unusual aspects of the community include the use of the Common House. The Common House contains a community kitchen and dining room, a reading room, enclosed children’s play room, teen room, laundry facilities, and attached office space for residents (Strirney 2000).

The intent of the Common House is to serve as a connecting point for the entire community. The ninety residents of the FRG are requested to eat several meals a week communally in the common kitchen, and are actively encouraged to participate in the activities of the Common House and EVCC (EcoVillage Community Co-op) meetings. This is meant to create a higher sense of community than is found in the modern day suburban development.

The community keeps in contact with the world through high-speed internet connections, which allow several residents to telecommute from offices located in the Common House. The EcoVillage is also linked globally to a network of other EcoVillages through an internet site and educational program at Cornell University (Strirney 2000).

**Los Angeles EcoVillage**

**Decision Making Processes and Social Organizations:** Los Angeles Eco-Village neighbors meet weekly to make consensus-based decisions about their community, similar to EVI. As well, the community leader (Lois Arkin) makes decisions on behalf of the community at times. There are voluntary community meetings for those who want to participate in making community decisions.
Activities and Outreach Programs: LAEV is known as a public demonstration of sustainable community development, “sharing our processes, strategies and techniques with others through tours, talks, workshops, conferences, public advocacy and the media” (LAEV 2005). The ecovillage has numerous programs and resources. There are workshops on permaculture approaches to sustainable urban living, and a variety of public services to the neighborhood and the city at large on a broad range of sustainability areas. Some include the Community Land Trust Formation Committee, a library, Community Outreach, Tours, many events (i.e., conferences and speakers), LETSystem, LAEV food co-op, and CRSP.

An alcohol and drug recovery home serves approximately 100 persons and is also located on the block, along with two auto repair shops, a K-2 public school, the Bresee Foundation, the Mijoo Peace Church and a public adult school for English as a Second Language (LAEV 2005). As is evident from the above list, LAEV provides an array of community outreach programs and education, both within and outside the community.

Shared Resources: In cohousing, people often provide themselves with a variety of other services such as childcare, education, voluntary common dining facilities, car co-op, loan fund, community gardens, workshops spaces, etc. LAEV is a perfect example of this type of community. Many of their resources are shared, trading services with each other, which in turn saves money and can be beneficial for the environment. An example of sharing resources, LAEV has applied for a grant from the automotive company
Daimler-Chrysler for 10 small electric vehicles, with which they plan to organize a neighborhood car co-op (LAEV 2005).

**Food Systems:** Residents have established several small organic gardens, planted 100 fruit trees in their neighborhood, and set up shared compost and recycling facilities. The residents’ desire was, “to reclaim and rebuild soil in and near their neighborhood to grow organic food for local consumption, return organic wastes to the soil in and near the neighborhood for composting, completing the local cycles of nature” (LAEV 2005). They also created small worker owned organic farms using nearby lawns and other open spaces, including rooftops. As well, the members have plant-based diets to enhance health and conserve land.

**Diversity of Members:** Approximately 500 persons live in the two-block area. About 75 now participate in some Eco-Village activities (LAEV 2005). There are around 15 ethnic groups. Incomes are primarily very low to moderate with some middle-income households. Household composition is diverse, including singles, couples, single parents, nuclear families, roommates, and extended families. Ages range from infancy to the elderly.

**Philosophy on the Structure of the Community: housing and demographics:** LAEV is a two-block mixed-use working class neighborhood. The 500-strong residents live in 13 historically significant apartment buildings consisting of 164 units of housing. Being in a large city, LAEV is very diverse, racially and economically (LAEV 2005).
Approximately 35 neighbors have moved to Eco-Village intentionally, and the other residents are pre-existing neighbors. They gather for Sunday potlucks and spontaneous midweek meals in the courtyard garden or lobby. “The residents have regular voluntary community dinners, dialogue and problem solving groups, special educational events, neighborhood work parties, and opportunities for recreation” (LAEV 2005). They also encourage neighbors from all ethnic groups to get training in dispute resolution techniques and to practice helping others in dispute. As well, the residents encourage mentoring of children and adults of all ages to emphasize life-long learning about how to care for one another and the neighborhood (LAEV 2005).

Affordable housing is a problem in L.A., where 300,000 households pay more than 50% of their income for housing. Overpriced housing promotes overcrowding. Overcrowding is further blighted by inadequate open space and services. Their goal was to create permanently affordable cooperative ownership. They also wanted to create a demonstration community land trust in which ownership of the land is separated from ownership of the buildings (LAEV2005).
EcoVillage Economics and the Sustainable Livelihood of Intentional Communities

An important part of every ecovillage is the livelihood of its residents. Without it, the livelihood of the ecovillage itself would be endangered. The financial models of LAEV and EVI differ, as do many of their economic habits and job creation. However, they share a common vision for their livelihood: that they may tread lighter on the earth in order to make a living for themselves and their families. Paul Antonelli, of Somerville EcoVillage, Perth, Australia, has done extensive research on ecovillage economics. His extensive research and findings on the many intentional communities he has visited around the world has contributed much to the background research of this section. Antonelli contends that the evolution of ecovillage economics is tied directly to the social aspect of the community. There are clear links between the functionality and social well being of a community and its economic prosperity levels.

“One of the key foundations of any ecovillage economics model is to develop a collaborative strategy as to how an ecovillage can develop a solid and sustainable enterprise base. This model must be able to support not only enterprises owned by individuals but also community based/owned enterprises” (Antonelli 2005). How can this be accomplished; furthermore, how is it embodied in LAEV and EVI? Any economic model must fully support the founders’/residents’ vision for the ecovillage. During the beginning phases of startup, or any point in time for an established community, an appropriate process for economic enterprise should be created. This is different for every community, and dependant on location, size, resident needs, and the community’s vision.
“What our research has found is that in the area of ecovillages, in fact sustainable developments, there is a high awareness and engagement of people in two of the three components of sustainable development. The social and environmental aspects have a high awareness and correspondingly there is a lot of effort and engagement of people involved in these facets. However with regards to the economic aspect there is surprisingly a lack of engagement both from the startup aspect of any project and the ongoing establishment of a project” (Antonelli 2005).

**From Startup to Sustaining Their Livelihood - LAEV**

The Los Angeles Eco-Village is working toward becoming a demonstration of healthy urban community through their whole-systems approach to community development. Residents attempt high-fulfillment, low-impact living patterns that increase neighborhood self-reliance in a variety of areas such as livelihood, food production, energy and water use, affordable housing, transit, recreation, waste reduction and education. LAEV is sponsored by CRSP (Cooperative Resources and Services Project). Located in the Bimini and White House Place neighborhood since 1980, CRSP provides a variety of resources on small cooperative ecological communities both locally and nationally. After the Civil Unrest of 1992, CRSP decided to put its resources to work in its own problematic neighborhood in a way that could benefit the city at large (LAEV 2005).

CRSP raised startup money to purchase its first residential building using *ecological revolving loan funds* (ELF Loans). ELF accepts loans from those interested in socially and environmentally responsible investments. ELF monies are also being used for basic rehabilitation and ecological retrofitting of the buildings. The *ecological revolving loan fund* is a system of borrowing money
that does not involve large banks/corporations. Instead of having to abide by extraneous stipulations mandated by banks wanting to protect their own investments (such as hiring an outside contractor, performing full abatement, etc), ELF loans allow individuals to invest money in a way that will enrich their community and have no negative effects on the environment.

Members of the CRSP sought out friends with discretionary savings, and set up a personal loan system that gave the lender control of the terms. ELF payback periods range from 18 months to 5 years. Interest rates, as selected by the lender, are from 0% to 5% simple-interest. Interest is paid quarterly. Loan amounts start at $5,000. Los Angeles EcoVillage continues to use ELF loans for the livelihood and beautification of the community. The resources are allocated toward eco-retrofitting of existing CRSP owned properties within L.A. Ecovillage, acquisition of new properties, and new green business development to provide livelihood opportunities for people who live in LAEV. Loans are repaid from rents, future mortgages, new loans coming into the ELF, or some combination of the above. (LAEV website 2003)

Financial Model- LAEV
The non profit (CRSP) still owns the land and buildings while residents continue to pay rent to this organization. At the conception of LAEV, CRSP developed a rental model of ownership, with the goal that the community would become a cooperative model when residents were ready to take ownership. The community land trust is working out a deal in which CRSP will most likely donate the land that the buildings are on, and sell the buildings to the CLT for cooperative ownership. Once the community owns the buildings, in-house maintenance may change. Rather than contracting out all housekeeping and building management duties, they may choose to hire some residents as full time employees of the ecovillage. This transition has already begun, with the recent hiring of a part time in-house building manager. All the while, the land trust continues
to try to acquire other pieces of land within LAEV boundaries, around the city, which, in turn, could become separate intentional communities.

**From Startup to Sustaining Their Livelihood –*EcoVillage Ithaca***

EcoVillage Ithaca was started as an educational project in 1991. It was meant to be a living example of a more sustainable way of life that would demonstrate both social and ecological alternatives to the status quo. Although it would provide housing and a strong sense of community to the future residents, it was also meant to be a working model that could serve as an inspiration for others interested in alternative development.

From the beginning, EVI has been connected with Cornell University through CRESP, the Center for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy. Having an office at Cornell, and working with professors and students has been an excellent foundation for educational work. However, the connection with Cornell is just a start. Over the years EVI has also created strong institutional links with Ithaca College, and more recently with Wells College.

Over the past twelve years EVI has developed a wide array of educational opportunities, despite very little available funding. In the last year (2003-2004 school year), educational efforts took an enormous leap in partnership with the Ithaca College Environmental Studies Program. A three-year grant from the National Science Foundation has allowed the offering of jointly-taught courses on the "science of sustainability." To date, dozens of students have participated in two courses taught by EVI faculty: "Sustainable Communities" and "Energy Efficiency and Sustainable Energy". In addition, numerous independent study projects taught by additional faculty members have led to such diverse projects as designing a "green" bus shelter, designing
applications for solar electric panels, and mapping EVI land using GIS and GPS equipment. This unique collaboration between a college and an ecovillage has allowed the students from Cornell, Ithaca College, and Wells to find real-life ways to address issues of environmental and social sustainability.

**Financial Model - EcoVillage Ithaca**

FROG is legally structured as a housing cooperative (EcoVillage Cohousing Cooperative), in which members purchase shares that are associated with their unit through a proprietary lease. The group acted as the developer, while Housecraft Builders, Inc. was hired as architect, builder, and development consultant. FROG received an award for "**Excellence in Innovative Housing**" from the National Association of Homebuilders in 1996. (EVI 2005)

Community work is accomplished through a voluntary Work Team system, where residents apply themselves to whichever task areas they have most enthusiasm for. There are teams for cooking, dishes, outdoors, maintenance, Common House, finance, and process/steering. FROG has reached a more mature phase, following a pattern of one Sunday afternoon business meeting per month, plus one work party or other community building event.

The SONG ownership model is based on FROG’s cohousing cooperative. This community aims to share common maintenance/improvement costs through a flexible approach, including the consideration of the number of people in a household, house size, annual household income, etc. The SONG residents also share responsibilities. They recognize “that many hands make light work and that every individual has a unique contribution to make. Residents feel that working together can be a joyful experience, enhanced by the satisfaction of shared accomplishments.” (EVI 2003). Members uphold a commitment to the basic maintenance and well-being of the community by actively participating in consensus decision-making and 2-4 hours a week per
adult of shared work. Young people’s contributions to community are valued, and they are encouraged to join in at appropriate levels.

**Maintaining Ecovillage Economics - LAEV**

“The LAEV intentional community is in the process of creating a new legal entity to acquire the buildings from CRSP for permanently affordable cooperative ownership. Rental cash flow from the buildings is sufficient to maintain the properties. The buildings are being ecologically retrofitted.” (Arkin 2005)

The intention of the LAEV has always been to become a co-housing community. CRSP purchased the land and buildings with the hope that someday, the co-op would buy them out and the land would be community owned. “The LAEV intentional community [has created] a new legal entity to acquire the buildings from CRSP for permanent affordable cooperative ownership.” (Arkin 2005) A community land trust now works with the agenda to purchase the LAEV and other pieces of land within a 5 mile radius for urban redevelopment. These lands will be maintained as affordable housing with environmental options.

“As of this writing, 15 Eco-Villagers receive some aspect of their livelihood from working directly with the Eco-Village community or CRSP. Ecological rehabilitation of [the] two apartment buildings is the source of much of the livelihood. Others are engaged in providing janitorial services and yard and garden maintenance and/or administrative support to CRSP. No one receives 100% of their livelihood this way, but perhaps between 10 to 80% of their monthly income. Several Eco-Villagers have learned their building rehab skills on the job here, and may soon be ready to start marketing their skills in the broader local neighborhood. [Instead of directly hiring employees for these jobs, or expecting villagers to contribute labor toward their
completion, people are engaged as independent contractors with CRSP and/or the Building Committee.” (Arkin 2005)

Livelihood of LAEV residents

Being in an urban setting leaves fewer lucrative agricultural opportunities than that of EVI. While small gardens provide enough produce for an organic food buyers club and small farmers market, most of their income as an establishment comes from educational aspects and community maintenance. Tours, seminars and workshops are conducted onsite for a sliding scale of fees. Material resources, i.e. books, videos, literature on ecovillages, cohousing and other relevant topics are free to CRSP members, and available to others for a fee. Several community members own or attend to neighbor-owned local flea market kiosks. A part time energy coordinator position is in development to manage the neighborhood energy and water conservation co-op, which is switching the neighborhood over to energy-saving devices. A number of years ago, one very creative individual started a bicycle repair shop in one of the empty units used for bicycle storage. While this service was free at first and only available to residents, it has since grown into a group of dedicated employees and its own storefront, servicing all of the surrounding neighborhoods. Their successful enterprise charges for its services by donation, and involves itself in many volunteer projects. The Bicycle Kitchen, as it is called, has done much to support and enrich bicycle culture in downtown L.A. (LAEV 2005; Coulter 2004).

Los Angeles Eco-Village is also home to a number of live/work spaces. One gentleman runs a weaving studio, provides computer consultation, and performs a number of other odd tasks out of one apartment! Another resident is a full time artist out of her home. Yet another resident owns
the coffee concession of a local café and is considering a satellite coffee station on LAEV grounds. Also in residence is a wholesaler of natural food products, who sometimes contracts her marketing and distribution out to other LAEV residents. While some people get anywhere from 10-25% of their food from onsite gardens, no for-profit farming ventures exist. Los Angeles Ecovillagers share a vision of hiring a fulltime person to run a Community Supported Agriculture project (CSA). Such a person might receive the land for free, as well as some subsidized labor and supplies in exchange for providing food to the community.

And, as mentioned above, a number of people make their livelihood from the maintenance and rehabilitation of LAEV lands. About 12 residents derive 5% - 80% of their livelihood from contractual work with non profit. 2% receive the higher amount of their livelihood. LAEV regularly contracts one person for on-site maintenance and repairs, one person for vacuuming and dusting, one person to manage waste and recycling, and one individual to clean the common spaces and keep the grounds. Just recently, an additional resident was contracted to do full time building management, as the community transitions into the cohousing cooperative (Arkin 2005).

**Maintaining Ecovillage Economics – EcoVillage Ithaca**

EVI’s economic viability was destined to be successful for a number of reasons. Firstly, they began with an educational goal in mind, and prior to building and residing on the land, they developed it for capital. The West Haven Farm celebrated their first harvest two years before the opening of FROG residences. Educational lecture series and programs in conjunction with local universities built the foundation for strong economic relationships. The founders and future residents were involved at the core of the community’s mission, taking full advantage of their
talents, and materializing their vision. This is further exemplified in the involvement of Performance Systems Contracting (and their sister business Performance Systems Development) which were heavily utilized in the construction and development of EVI buildings and site. They learned to keep the money that they had local, thereby sustaining their neighbors from the start. This is not to say that EVI didn’t have its share of problems. Had it not been for the forgiveness of many generous lenders, EVI may not be in existence today. Following the long period of acquisition and development of the EcoVillage, and then a devastating construction fire that burnt FROG to the ground, a number of EVI’s financial backers generously forgave their debts, making FROG’s existence feasible. Further development of small internal business continues to keep the money local. Crescent Moon Communications, run out of a resident’s home, designs web pages and generates other digital media creations commercially. Incidentally, this company has designed the websites for most of the small businesses owned by EVI members. The Frog’s Way Bed and Breakfast, run by the Shapiro’s, often hosts the frequent guests to the area. A few other residents also own businesses that are not local, managing them from home when they can. Just as FROG has done, SONG hopes to evolve a range of on-site enterprises that would reduce auto use, create more integrated lifestyles, and add to the economic viability of the community.

Additionally, the lucrative (and controversial) venture of building a large water tank for the city of Ithaca on EVI property became a reality. In exchange for allowing the “eye sore” to be built on their land, the City of Ithaca paid $20,000 to EVI, and agreed to maintain the road into the community, amounting to tens of thousands of additional funds every year. EVI also nearly entered into deal with Future Farms, Inc. for the leasing of a piece of their land for a composting facility. While negotiations fell through, EVI looks forward to business with this organization in the future.
Other goals for Ithaca’s future include: developing a strong funding base to hire more staff; creating an on-site Education Center, developing housing options for interns and graduate students, expanding the sustainability focus to work with the broader Ithaca and Tompkins County community, and establishing a resource and archive center.

Following are a few highlighted educational accomplishments that keep (and have kept) the community economically and socially viable. (Taken from the EVI Website, accessed 2005)

External Education

- Co-organized the Third International EcoCity and EcoVillage Conference in Senegal, West Africa, in 1996, with attendees from 45 countries.
- Partnered with Ithaca College Environmental Studies Program to create curriculum and teach courses on "sustainability science" under the auspices of a National Science Foundation grant.
- Brought in nationally known speakers in the fields of architecture, cohousing, community design, and environmental education to speak to audiences at Cornell, Ithaca College and downtown Ithaca.
- Helped to create a new non-profit organization, "Living Routes", which takes students to ecovillages around the world. A two week Summer Institute in Sustainable Living was hosted in partnership with this program in 2000.
- Worked with interns from eight different colleges around the country to organize conferences, set up a speaker series, assistant-teach courses, and create brochures.
- Offered two three-day Permaculture Design workshops, which created edible landscaping and erosion control applications.
- Offered tours to hundreds of visitors and students every year.
- Worked closely with professors who taught semester long courses focused on EVI from various Cornell departments, and Roger Williams University (RI).
• Served as adjunct faculty who team-taught a course in Environmental Management in the Rural Sociology Department at Cornell.

• Worked closely with media to "get the message out" about EVI. Television programs about EVI have been aired in Japan and Spain, as well as on PBS, Nickelodeon, CNN "Earth Matters" and more. National Public Radio has highlighted EVI in several shows, and EVI has appeared in prominent articles in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Popular Science, American Demographics, American Architect, Utne Reader, Communities Magazine, and the Cohousing Journal, among other print media.

Internal Education

• Ongoing study and support groups, including:
  Sustainable Living Circles
  Men's and Women's groups
  Parenting groups
  Deepening Relationships groups
  Meditation Circles
  Political Discussion evenings
  Film Club
• Classes in several kinds of yoga, swing dance, manage your money, etc.
• Cooperative home-schooling, including soccer, art classes, and more.
• Workshops in consensus and meeting facilitation
• Learning by Doing: All the legal, real estate, marketing, group development, town approval, financing, green building, energy efficiency, and more that goes into building a cohousing neighborhood. Once a neighborhood is built, further classes about cooking for groups, gardening, maintaining physical plants, and organizing events are held.

Livelihood of EVI residents

As mentioned, a number of residents at EVI make their living by owning their own business. While no figure is given on the number of individuals that actually work out of their home, the property at EcoVillage Ithaca is important to many of them.

1. West Haven Farm, run by residents Jen and John Bokaer-Smith is a 10 acre community supported agriculture (CSA) site. The land is leased from EVI and protected by a permanent conservation easement through the Fingerlakes Land Trust, so they are unthreatened by other
development. West Haven grows only organic produce, providing a multitude of greens to special varieties. Shareholders purchase a share of the farm every season for $360, which entitles them to a full growing season of produce, usually enough for 1-3 people for the entire growing season. West Haven also conducts tours to groups of all ages for a $45/hr fee. WH pays wages, health benefits, workers compensation insurance and vegetables to all full time, full season employees. It is further assisted by its shareholders and other community volunteers.

2. Frog’s Way Bed and Breakfast is owned by residents Elan and Rachael Shapiro. They use two of the rooms in their EVI house as a B&B retreat. Frog’s Way is not their sole livelihood, as the Shapiro’s are involved in a number of other organizations.

3. Performance Systems Contracting, and its sister business Performance Systems Development are companies started by EVI residents. This contracting company provides quality installation services and helps home and business owners establish and maintain environmentally responsible high performance buildings and energy systems that are healthy, comfortable and durable. These companies, owned by resident Rod Lambert, got their start with construction projects at Frog and Song.

4. Other businesses owned by residents include Katie Creeger’s U-Pick CSA Berry Farm, Choice Computing, a custom software-writing establishment, Crescent Moon Communications-video, photograph and website design, and ChemSW. By perusing various websites of resident EVI entrepreneurs, it is evident that Crescent Moon has been entrusted with creating many of their website designs. In recent months, the Bokaer-Smiths, owners of West Haven, have taken to raising organic turkeys, chickens, and sheep for food, eggs, wool and manure. Several other ecovillagers share the tasks of raising goats and chickens for their eggs, milk and companionship. “Long-term plans for the village include more office and studio space (FROG’s common house offers office space available for purchase) and a store in the village center. One member of the community's outdoors team (all Ecovillagers donate several hours per week to a work team of their choosing), has created systems for a smooth-running composting program at EcoVillage, including providing education to community members.
Conclusion

After comparing various aspects of the EVI and LAEV, there are several important differences we can identify to help answer some of our initial questions.

1. Ownership structure and funding:
   - Implications for lower income residents, i.e. affordable housing
   - Implications for decision-making, tax status, and maintenance of facilities
   - Ecological Revolving Loan Fund (ELF)
   - Retrofitting as opposed to new construction; also regeneration of degraded habitats as opposed to new construction

2. The demographic composition of the residents and what this means for:
   - Growth of the community
   - Diversity of solutions
   - Issues of autonomy

3. The implications for social change
   - Diffusion of values to local neighborhood residents, as well as the larger political community
   - Conversely, the issue of insularity, and thus social movements
   - Exposure in local and national media (as measured by the amount of articles existing outside of alternative publications)

Ownership structure and funding: Ownership of LAEV is organized through a community land trust (CLT), while EVI utilizes a condominium ownership structure, as with many cohousing communities. (EVI does have a land trust, which does not cover structures and is therefore very different than a CLT.) This is quite an important difference because the land trust itself holds title to the land (which is a large part of the value) while individuals purchase the physical apartment or house from the trust. This allows for a significant reduction in the price of the structure because it is not subject to fluctuations in market value; in other words, it is immune to “market forces,” resulting in between 20 and 30 percent reductions in price. When the structure is sold, the sellers receive appreciated value for improvements, as well as a percentage of the increases in land value. The trust has a democratic structure, with every homeowner (or lessee)
becoming an automatic member, thus allowing them to vote for board members who are themselves members of the trust (PCLT 2005). There are several important implications:

1. Members of LAEV can rent or buy at low rates, much lower than EVI, and still be members. Since ownership is much more feasible and rents are low, it opens the door to poor and minority residents, creating more diversity while simultaneously easing the burden of inflated rental prices in L.A. Also, homeowners can receive a federal income tax deduction, which is quite important for low income urbanites.

2. While condominium rules require voting, most work by consensus. With CLT’s, consensus is an option, but if there are many members, which is quite likely, a representative democratic structure can be (and is in CLT’s across the U.S.) used to facilitate decisions. Board members can then work by consensus, if members choose to work by this method, and work is essentially done by committees of members (as pointed out by Tree Bressen with regards to abnormally large cohousing and ecovillage communities).

3. CLT’s are not-for-profits institutions, and members must reside within the community. The staying power of the institution is increased by its tax status, and the conditions under which it is created promotes local control, and hence community values. In addition, CLT’s can receive local development grants from the municipality, as well as from many other granting institutions.

An essential addition to the CLT ownership structure is the Ecological Revolving Loan Fund (ELF), which assists members in making green improvements to their structures. With amounts of up to five thousand dollars and interest rates between zero and five percent, ELF loans provide an excellent opportunity for LAEV to move in a more sustainable direction. The are very few conditions on the loan but individuals are encouraged to use the money to make green retrofitting improvements or start green businesses. On a similar note, we initially assumed that technologies developed in suburban/rural ecovillages might serve as examples for urban areas, but it is quite difficult to retrofit sustainable technologies, with the exception of improving insulation, creating south facing windows and possible moving to some form of radiant heat (though these all require considerable expenditure). Further, the idea is that community living in itself leads to significant efficiency and sustainability because it causes changes in
peoples habits in terms of transportation, activity patterns, dietary changes, improvement of local confines, etc. In fact, LAEV promotes the latter lifestyle changes, and since urban dwellers are more used to living in smaller spaces, it is easier for them to change. In addition, the possible growth and diffusion of values from a revitalized urban community has much more potential for diffusion (for basic geographic reasons) than suburban ecovillages. This gets at the critical question of the need to change our expectations about the way we live, as opposed to relying on technologies to make our existing patterns of living moderately more sustainable.

This example shows illustrates a significant difference of intentions concerning affordable housing, democratic structure, diversity and growth of the community. This is not to say that EVI does not have the same intentions; the purpose here is to make a relative comparison and, critically, to acknowledge what does and does not work in urban contexts (returning the first question we posed in the introduction).

**Demographic composition and implications for social change:** As discussed in section three, there is a huge difference in diversity between LAEV and EVI. Clearly, demographic factors are at work here—historically speaking, Ithaca is nowhere near as diverse as L.A. However, one of the core values of ecovillages is to build community, and not just for ecological reasons, but to bridge social divides. This country has a history of racial, class and ethnic divisions, and while Ithaca is surely open to members of all types, its isolation, cost, and structure make minority involvement quite unlikely. We can understand the basic issue with a concise a quote from blackboard: “How many people
enjoy being converted to a new religion? Even though I have a great fondness for religion I hate being converted... it could be that hard-core villagers are repelling non-villagers, essentially building walls around their habitats.” “Religion” can be construed as any particular groups conception of how they want their communities to work. While there is consensus, for instance, it is unlikely that a critical mass of lower income residents would survive in this community (not to mention the fact that they would probably not be able to afford a place). If there were a critical mass, lower income residents might opt for more autonomy and less demands on times for meetings because they may have to work more hours than most other residents (especially considering commute times). The basic problem is that consensus can be essentialized (or reified), when other processes may work just as well for democratic principals to work. This is especially true for LAEV considering its size and price range. (Of course, you find the opposite problem there, where there is often very little participation, and hence much more autonomy).

Another issue is isolation and the (in)ability to grow the community through interactions with local people who have typically been raised according to decidedly non-communal values. Not only is LAEV in a better position—geographically—to spread their values, they also already exemplify diverse, communal and ecological living arrangements, and engage in broader social issues, such as programs for drug and alcohol issues. (However, we must give EVI credit for its outreach, even if it is primarily within the academic realm). Clearly, LAEV has its work cut out, yet the following excerpt illustrates some of the issues of rural isolation in relation to the current cultural climate and infrastructure of the U.S.:
We were on good speaking terms with all our neighbors, but never found much common ground with them. Local parties began with watery beer and often ended in drunken fights, and neither was to our taste.

Slowly a mild paranoia set in. I started to wonder whether, if the Big Crash came, was I really in the right place. We had the best garden for miles around, and everyone knew it. If law broke down, wasn’t there more than a chance that my next door neighbor, a gun-selling meth dealer and felon, might just shoot me for all that food? How about the right-wing fundamentalists past him, who shot Stellar’s jays for fun and clearcut their land when they suspected spotted owls lived there? Or the two feuding families beyond them—one had fired a pistol during an argument, and neither would give way when their cars met on the road. I began to sense the outlines of a pattern that replicated one in society at large. We have the technical means to feed, clothe, and house all humanity. But legions starve because we have not learned to tolerate and support one another. People’s real problems are not technical, they are social and political.

…I’d solved most of the technical problems for our own personal survival, but the social hurdles to true security were staring me in the face. Our isolation also meant we were burning a lot of gas. A simple drive for groceries was a 40-minute round trip. Fortunately we both worked at home and had no children, so we could go for days without using the car. But the odometer was whirling to higher numbers than it ever had in the city. A couple of families had moved off our hill because they were exhausted by two to four round trips each day down our steep, potholed gravel road to work, school, soccer practice, music lessons, and shopping (Hemenway 2004:1-2).

Put succinctly: when do forming ecovillages in relative isolation constitute running away from the social problems that clearly exist in the country and internationally?

Understandably, people want to live their lives in positive and healthy ways now, but is separating oneself from the larger human community, especially a separation between people that have the means to create a rural or suburban “ecovillage,” an effective way to deal with the ravages of our current economic system? (Similar issues are raised by Chiras and Christian, 2003.)

Not engaging directly with urban issue areas raises many other issues with regards to sustainability, nicely captured by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements:

Cities have the potential to combine safe and healthy living conditions and culturally rich and enjoyable lifestyles with remarkably low levels of energy consumption, resource-use and wastes; [...] high densities mean much lower cost per household and per enterprise for the provision of piped, treated water supplies, the collection and disposal [sic] of household and human wastes,

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1 I do not intend to say that rural ecovillages are totally useless, but if we conceive of something as a ‘movement’ for change, we have to consider broader implications and not be critical of ‘wonderful’ ideas.
[etc.]; […] a much higher population concentration in cities means a reduced demand for land relative to population; […] a much greater potential for limiting the use of motor vehicles…” (UNCHS 1996:56-57)

As LAEV demonstrates, urban change also results in the revitalization of degraded ecosystems, redesigned to deal with urban pollution issues such as runoff. The basic point is that green cities are possible.

This conclusion has focused on the negative aspects of ecovillages in suburban/rural areas, but it is not an effort to avoid or minimize the many positive things they have taught us. The central point, however, is that there are many difficulties in applying the structures common in rural examples to urban contexts; not to mention the advantages of urban projects more generally. Clearly, community building within small groups, the institution of alternative building practices, reduction of ecological footprints (though this is questionable), and working hard to spread alternative messages (all of which are exemplified by EVI), are all critical to changing our current unsustainable path: let’s just not forget our urban areas and the potential hopes that they provide for social change. 😊
Works Cited


—. 2005. Interview with Lois Arkin. Conducted by Gina Livingston on February 1, 3:38pm – 4:35 pm.


(www.calmax.org)


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