

## An Urban Ecovillage of the Near-Future

*By Lois Arkin 1590 words*

As you stroll down this former city street, now a long, narrow mini-park, you spot a small boy on a ladder harvesting guavas from a guava tree. He carries the guavas a hundred feet away to a beautifully designed wooden kiosk that serves as a fruit stand. An elderly woman in the kiosk enthusiastically greets him as she takes the basket and starts displaying the guavas. A young mother helps her sell these and other locally harvested fruit to the many people passing through the neighborhood, who often pay in a colorful local currency. Nearby you spot a long “grape-arbor/electric vehicle shed” with rooftop solar panels in the former parking lane outside a co-op apartment building. Tiny one-person and two-person electric vehicles belonging to co-op residents are plugged into batteries connected to the solar panels; grapevines laded with luscious purple grapes twine up trellises covering the back and sides of this open shed-roof structure. Beyond the arbor/shed, two retired gentlemen play chess on a handmade curved mosaic-encrusted cob bench in the mini-park, while further on a group of teenage boys and girls shoot baskets on a basketball court. People pass through the park on all kinds of human-powered vehicles: bicycles, tandem bikes, unicycles, and lightweight scooters. Older people pedal slowly on three-wheeled bikes; the young whiz by on skateboards. The street life is rich and interactive with pedestrians too. Most people here seem to know each other. They offer a welcoming energy to newcomers passing through their home-grown ecovillage.

“Aha!” you say as you observe people in relation to each other, to the landscape, and to the architecture. “So this is what it’s like to live in a healthy, sustainable neighborhood.”

Passing between two buildings, you find a long narrow greenhouse running down the center of the block. It’s a biological “living machine,” containing a series of large, connected water tanks filled with aquatic plants and animals, surrounded by an exquisite array of

hydroponic vegetables. Graywater from houses and apartments on the block is solar pumped into the tanks at one end, and by the time it emerges from the other end, is clean and drinkable again, pumped to a bubbler at the end of the block and recycled to the houses and apartments it emerged from. Passersby can read a small plaque describing how this biological water-purification works. You look up and see an orchard and garden 1000 feet long by 10 feet wide, a former parking lane for cars. Children from the grammar school across the street are busy working in the garden to prepare for their organic farmers' market this weekend.

You notice a tiny, elegant structure with an opaque window-wall on the south side and a rooftop turbine fan emerging from a vent stack—one of the neighborhood's solar moldering composting toilets. A peek inside reveals no odor at all and a pair of comfortable wooden toilet seats next to a stack of recent *Communities* magazines. There are no individual gas-powered cars in sight, but around the corner you'll find stops for buses and the subway.

Everywhere you see small wooden plaques explaining various biological systems or appropriate technologies, and how each is connected to or supported by other systems in the neighborhood—the biological graywater recycling plant; a particular species of native fruit tree; the small electric vehicles; an array of quiet wind generators on a nearby roof; green building materials, the garden mulch; how chickens, ducks, and rabbits are integrated into the nutrient cycle of the gardens; and the many ways the neighborhood recycles its wastes. You even find an information kiosk posted with the latest local ecovillage educational and meeting events, including the location of neighborhood meetings, how decisions are made, and items on the upcoming agenda. This complex set of interactive processes integrating social, economic, and ecological aspects of community life come alive as you walk and look and read and feel and talk to people in this ecovillage neighborhood.

Many of the people you see live right here in several apartment buildings on the block; others attend schools in the neighborhood or nearby; still others pass to and from markets and shops within or adjacent to the neighborhood. Some are tourists, in that this ecovillage project is listed in the local Convention Center's tourist guide and its primary visitors' magazine, and is now a registered tourist attraction with a variety of travel agencies. People can take guided tours that leave every two hours on Saturdays at the entrance of the neighborhood, or purchase maps to self-guided walking tours, or just stroll through on their own and read the signs and observe. The

ecotourism business has become a significant source of income to the small group of ecovillage residents who own and manage the tour business.

If you'd like to follow ongoing developments in this ecovillage or learn what steps you and your neighbors could take to retrofit your own urban neighborhood, tune in to the "Daily Ecovillage Hour" on the local listener-supported radio station. Or take one of the many workshops held in the ecovillage and around the city on sustainable urban living, permaculture design, composting, solar and wind-power installation, organizing for permanently affordable housing or commercial spaces, local currencies, green business development, participatory decision-making processes, neighborhood conflict resolution, and much more. Many of these workshops are free, co-sponsored by the city and many of the Neighborhood Councils throughout the city along with the many community organizations offering expertise in these topics. The Mayor and the City Council believe that the more responsibility neighbors take for going sustainable in their own neighborhoods, the less strain there will be on the budget for city services. They also know that education for sustainably retrofitting urban neighborhoods is just common sense, and if the people don't do it on their own, the local government will be forced to require it. Supporting sustainable education is an investment in the health of the city and in getting themselves re-elected!

Ecovillage residents meet regularly with writers and directors in the film industry to help them research new storylines for commercial films with an ecovillage or urban sustainability theme. Several daily newspapers now include a syndicated weekly "Ecovillage Living" column, bursting with information and resources so readers can apply ideals and methods of sustainable living wherever they live.

Because cities are home to dozens of colleges and universities, our emerging networks of ecovillages get dozens of requests every week to host student research projects and offer hands-on work. Students organize on-campus classes on retrofitting neighborhoods for sustainable community living, based on their broad experience visiting ecovillages in various stages of development around the city.

This not-all-that-fanciful scenario is a composite of a variety of sustainable activities already taking place in various cities worldwide—just not all in the same place yet!

As I see it, the challenge of an urban ecovillage is to bring a broad range of interconnected eco-living processes together in the same place, which raises the quality of neighborhood life, significantly reduces its environmental impact or ecological footprint, and inspires visionary change in others. Yet the concept of creating our own ecovillages can be daunting. Robert Gilman, former *In Context* magazine publisher and co-originator of a well-known definition of an ecovillage, says, “We need to broaden our scope without losing our focus. We need to let go of ‘ecovillage’ as a defining concept and replace it with the term ‘sustainable living in community.’” I agree that we need to lower the thresholds for people to become involved. Retrofitting the neighborhoods where we live now makes it easier for more people to participate. When “regular” people are able to visit and interact with ecovillages or “sustainable living in community” in dense, highly accessible urban neighborhoods like the one described above, far greater numbers of people can consider shifting to a more sustainable lifestyle. Rural ecovillages are certainly also needed, but mainstream city dwellers rarely see them. And even if they did, most need tangible urban examples to imagine how they, too, could live more sustainably, and without leaving home. This is reason enough to support urban ecovillages, but even more so if you are called to be an agent of social change and you love the vitality, diversity, and sensuality of cities.

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*Lois Arkin, co-founder of Los Angeles Eco-Village, is an Ecovillage Network of the Americas (ENA) representative for the Western U.S., a board member of Global Village Institute, and Executive Director of CRSP, the nonprofit sponsor of Los Angeles Eco-Village, where she lives and works. Crsp at [igc.org](http://igc.org). L.A. Eco-Villagers Lara Morrison and Esfandiar Abbassi also contributed to this article.*

Pull quotes:

**“Aha! So this is what it’s like to live in a healthy, sustainable neighborhood.”**

**Chickens, ducks, and rabbits are integrated into the nutrient cycle of the gardens.**

SIDEBAR

## Urban Ecovillage Resources

- Urban ecovillage resources and discussion: [www.urban.ecovillage.org/](http://www.urban.ecovillage.org/).
- Google “urban ecovillages” or “eco cities” to find thousands of initiatives worldwide.
- For a list of urban ecovillages, go to [www.ic.org](http://www.ic.org), select “Communities Directory,” and search for “urban ecovillage.”
- For tips on how to organize an ecovillage in your neighborhood, see *Superbia!* by Dan Chiras and Dave Wann (New Society Publishers, 2005).
- For a legislative or funding proposal you can adapt for your local needs, email author Lois Arkin at [crsp@igc.org](mailto:crsp@igc.org).
- If you live in a megacity (over five million people: e.g., New York, Los Angeles, Mexico City, London, Tokyo), and are part of an on-the-ground ecovillage core group, and you’d like to participate in an emerging self-help network of ecovillage retrofits in megacities, email a description of your project to [crsp@igc.org](mailto:crsp@igc.org).

—L.A.