

Creating Community Where You Are

Prescott’s Sustainable “EcoHood”

By Susan DeFreitas 2171 words

“EcoHood” – permaculture retrofit of a mid- to low-income neighborhood with a high potential for ecological sustainability.

I remember how much I enjoyed coming home to the Lincoln-Dameron neighborhood as a college student, riding a bike beneath the huge cottonwoods and splashing through the creek that floods the main access to this part of Prescott, Arizona, during monsoon season and winter storms. This mid- to low-income neighborhood encompasses roughly two blocks, two apartment buildings, and 30 houses. Walking down the street on a summer day, you’ll see residents living in small wood-frame, stucco houses, most built in the 1930s, their large yards shaded by cottonwoods, along with fruit trees, and flowers. You might hear the amplified roar of “The World’s Oldest Rodeo” to the west, intermingled with Mexican ranchero music and top-forty hip-hop piped in from car speakers and stereos. Kids ride bikes in the streets; motorists defer. Hispanic teenagers throw impromptu parties centered around their cars and trucks. Mothers stand talking across fences with babes balanced expertly on hips. Seniors move slowly about yard or garden projects with no obvious urgency. The aromas of hamburgers mix with those of enchiladas and stir-fry in the high desert air.

This place struck me then as it strikes me now: an unpretentious, diverse neighborhood where folks aren’t afraid to tell it like it is. It’s the section of town where dreadlocked students fly Tibetan prayer flags from front porches and Hispanic grandmothers plant artificial flowers in the front yard. Where you can spot the closest McDonalds from the vantage point of a backyard chicken coop. It’s where the Tamale Lady comes to sell her hot tamales on regular trips up from Mexico. And it’s where the

seeds of Prescott's sustainability movement have lately fallen on fertile ground. Fifty percent Hispanic/Native American, and home to a significant number of retirees and college students, it's now also home to six graywater systems, five rainwater cisterns, five organic gardens, 25 heirloom fruit trees, three ducks, two turkeys, and (at last count), 66 chickens.

My friend Andrew Millison is helping to spearhead this community sustainability initiative in this neighborhood that's become increasingly known as "the EcoHood." I wasn't aware of Andrew's work on Dameron Street and the EcoHood until I came over one day and found him across the street helping his neighbor install a new graywater irrigation system in her backyard. As I got the tour of the place and the run down on other projects in progress throughout the neighborhood, a picture began to emerge. Here was the sustainable community we'd all been talking about for so long, and it wasn't out on some remote tract of land. It was growing—literally—out of peoples' backyards, right here in the low-rent section of town.

Andrew has an extensive background in permaculture, an undergraduate degree in Ecological Design and Sustainability, a Master's in Horticultural Preservation, and two years managing the organic farm at Paolo Soleri's Arcosanti Urban Laboratory in Dewey, Arizona. He has taught permaculture at Prescott College for the Liberal Arts and the Environment since 2001.

Andrew had been a Dameron Street resident on and off for the past eight years and always had the idea that the area would be prime location for an urban ecovillage. "But I still had this idea of a community out on the land somewhere," he told me. Living at Arcosanti had shown him the challenges involved with a traditional "back to the land" scenario. But it wasn't until he purchased a home 20 miles outside of Prescott that the concept for the EcoHood began to emerge.

"Here I was," Andrew said with a grin, "burning up a quarter to half tank of gas every day, getting introduced to the reality of Peak Oil through the work of David Holmgren." At the same time, three ecologically-minded friends moved to the Lincoln-Dameron district with the intention of getting more community-oriented and sustainable. "I could see the vision I'd had was starting to manifest," he said. "When there was an opportunity to move back to the neighborhood, I jumped at the chance."

Since that time, the EcoHood has grown to encompass seven area households. While Andrew has contributed expertise in areas such as graywater systems, rainwater catchment, and permaculture design, the process has unfolded organically, with neighbors swapping skills, information, tools, and, at times, even childcare, chickens, and compost.

Watching the EcoHood take shape has been an amazing process, and one of the most inspiring aspects has been simply the way life in this emerging ecovillage has helped to transform its residents' concepts of space. By modern standards, the houses in the Lincoln-Dameron district would be considered small: 750 to 1000 sq. ft. on average. But those who live in the area obviously don't feel limited by conventional standards of space. The other day, for example, Andrew and I had a meeting planned at his house on Dameron. In a regular neighborhood, we would have had no choice but to compete with the decibel level of a DVD his daughter was watching in the next room. But in the EcoHood, an alternate solution existed. "Hey," said Andrew, "Why don't we move across the street?"

Across the street, Leigh, a mutual friend and sometime EcoHood resident, was sitting with her baby in the living room of one of Andrew's neighbors, who was at work. When she found out what we were up to, Leigh smiled and said, "Hey, no problem." She took her baby and walked across the street to watch the DVD with his daughter — while Andrew and I conducted our meeting in his neighbor's living room.

Both the intangible and tangible aspects of the EcoHood seem to have caught the attention of at least some neighbors not directly involved with the project. The response has been, for the most part, either neutral or positive, says Andrew. He relates how his next door neighbor has commented on how friendly everyone is, how great it is that people in the area like to garden and "be outdoors." On the other hand, an elderly woman who's lived on Dameron for the past 35 years has been known to place calls to city officials regarding the legality of her neighbors' roosters and unsightly piles of woodchips.

One of the great strengths of Prescott's EcoHood is its diversity. While all the neighbors involved in the project have shared values, they've tended to approach the problem of sustainability from different angles.

Marcee Keller, one of the friends whose move to the EcoHood helped to spur Andrew's return, is building the infrastructure for increased sustainability in her household one piece at a time. The small artist's studio she's constructing in her backyard will be built with energy efficient, structurally insulated panels made without wood and with an R-value of 30. "I'm going to install an on-demand water heater, a metal roof to catch rain water, cisterns, and a graywater system to water plants from the clothes washer and shower," she explained. "Andrew and I will take down the fence between our back yards so we can share a garden, compost pile, common water system, children's play areas, and chickens."

Thomas Arnold and Jesse Pursely have tended to approach sustainability more from the angle of voluntary simplicity. "Before I moved to the EcoHood I'd been living off the grid in a teepee out in the mountains about 25 miles out of town," said Thomas. He now lives in the same teepee in the backyard of his longtime friend Jesse Pursley, an arrangement that's actually been approved by the City of Prescott. The three young residents of this property, Thomas, Jesse, and Jesse's girlfriend Kim, have made the radical decision not to drive or even ride in cars powered by fossil fuels. For that reason, the proximity of the EcoHood to downtown Prescott was the deciding factor in Jesse's purchase of a home there. While the household has a solar panel for the occasional session on a computer or use of an electric razor, these are people who normally do not consume electricity. A backyard well supplies water for drinking, bathing, and household chores. Likewise, wood heat has replaced natural gas in their household.

Despite the diversity of lifestyle and opinion in the neighborhood (or perhaps because of it) Prescott's EcoHood seems to be gaining ground. Last year, the local ECOSA Institute (a training program for sustainable architecture and design) purchased a plot of land in the area slated for development as green student housing. In the summer of 2006, ECOSA's permaculture design certification course, taught by Andrew and Brad Lancaster of Tucson, will center around designs for public space in the neighborhood as a whole. A presentation on the EcoHood last year at a local satellite of the Bioneers Conference succeeded in attracting the attention of two investors instrumental in a number of Phoenix-based permaculture developments; plans are now in the works for a permaculture apartment/condo complex centered around community gardens and

supported by graywater, rainwater, and solar energy systems.

All of which would probably be baffling to a real estate agent assessing the area, traditionally known as Prescott's "barrio." But while the EcoHood would hardly top the charts of the booming local real estate market, Andrew maintains that—from an ecological point of view—Lincoln-Dameron truly is the wealthiest neighborhood in town.

"These ritzy new houses up on the hills," he told me, "are situated high off the water table on solid rock. They're exposed to wind and wildfire, isolated from town, and they're huge—which means they're costly to heat and cool." The EcoHood, on the other hand, has water at 12 to 20 ft. (with old wells situated throughout the neighborhood), sits on an average eight feet of topsoil and is sheltered from wind by the surrounding topography as well as large, established cottonwood trees. The more modest size of the older homes also makes them accessible to a green retrofit.

"The native people of this area lived around the floodplains of the creeks," Andrew explained. "When the settlers arrived, they did too. In a lot of Western towns like Prescott, it's a similar scenario; the area was settled around some type of fertile pocket. Which means that some of the oldest and most affordable neighborhoods also have the greatest potential for sustainability."

The biggest hurdle faced by Andrew and his eco-minded neighbors? "Pollution," he said. "It goes along with the fact that we're not out on pristine land. We're downstream from the K-Mart parking lot—and wherever you dig around here, you find garbage. Bioremediation is a key challenge."

Still, Andrew maintains that the advantages of the EcoHood model of community sustainability are far-reaching and fundamental. "By working in a mid- to low-income neighborhood, you make the concept accessible. By working within the existing human footprint, you preserve wilderness, cut down on fuel consumption, and give yourself access to the waste stream of the city for recycled materials." Additionally, the EcoHood model doesn't require a large initial investment on the part of its participants or a shift from mainstream models of family and homeownership. "Really," says Andrew, "the concept is about bringing traditionally rural values like self-reliance, respect for the land, and community into the city."

As for those of us in Prescott, there's a mailing that goes out to a list of interested parties whenever a house in the EcoHood hits the market. Guess what? I'm on it.

Susan DeFreitas is a writer and poet with a passion for sustainability and community. She has lived in the high desert of Prescott, Arizona, since 1996. Prescott's EcoHood: www.millisonecological.com

Pull quotes:

“When there was an opportunity to move back to the neighborhood, I jumped at the chance.”

The EcoHood model doesn't require a large initial investment on the part of its participants or a shift from mainstream models of family and homeownership.

Sidebar #1

How To Spot A Potential EcoHood

First, identify an area in your city or town with existing ecological resources. These resources will vary from region to region—in the Southwest, for example, shade, topsoil, and water are important, while in the Northwest, being outside the floodplain and having access to seasonal sun might be deciding factors. Ecological resources are any and all conditions that increase the potential for sustainability in the neighborhood.

Next, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Could my eco-minded friends afford to move here?
2. Is this neighborhood within walking or biking distance from town/grocery/school/work?
3. What is the culture of the neighborhood? Would it be receptive to the concept of an EcoHood?
4. Does the area have an existing Homeowner's Association? Would the visual and structural changes involved in an EcoHood (i.e., rainwater cisterns, solar panels) be

acceptable under its terms?

5. Is this a place I (and my community) would like to call home?

If you answered ‘yes’ to all of these questions, you may have identified the next EcoHood —yours.

—S. D.

Sidebar #2

Resources for Creating an EcoHood

- *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*, David Holmgren, (Holmgren Design Services, 2002)
- *Superbia: 31 Ways to Create Sustainable Neighborhoods*, Dan Chiras, Dave Wann (New Society Publishers, 2004)
- *Permaculture Activist* magazine, Winter 2005-06 Issue, “*Urban Permaculture.*” pcactivist@mindspring.com.
- *Communities* magazine, Winter 2005, “*Urban Communities.*” store.ic.org.
- Portland City Repair Project. www.cityrepair.org.

—S. D.