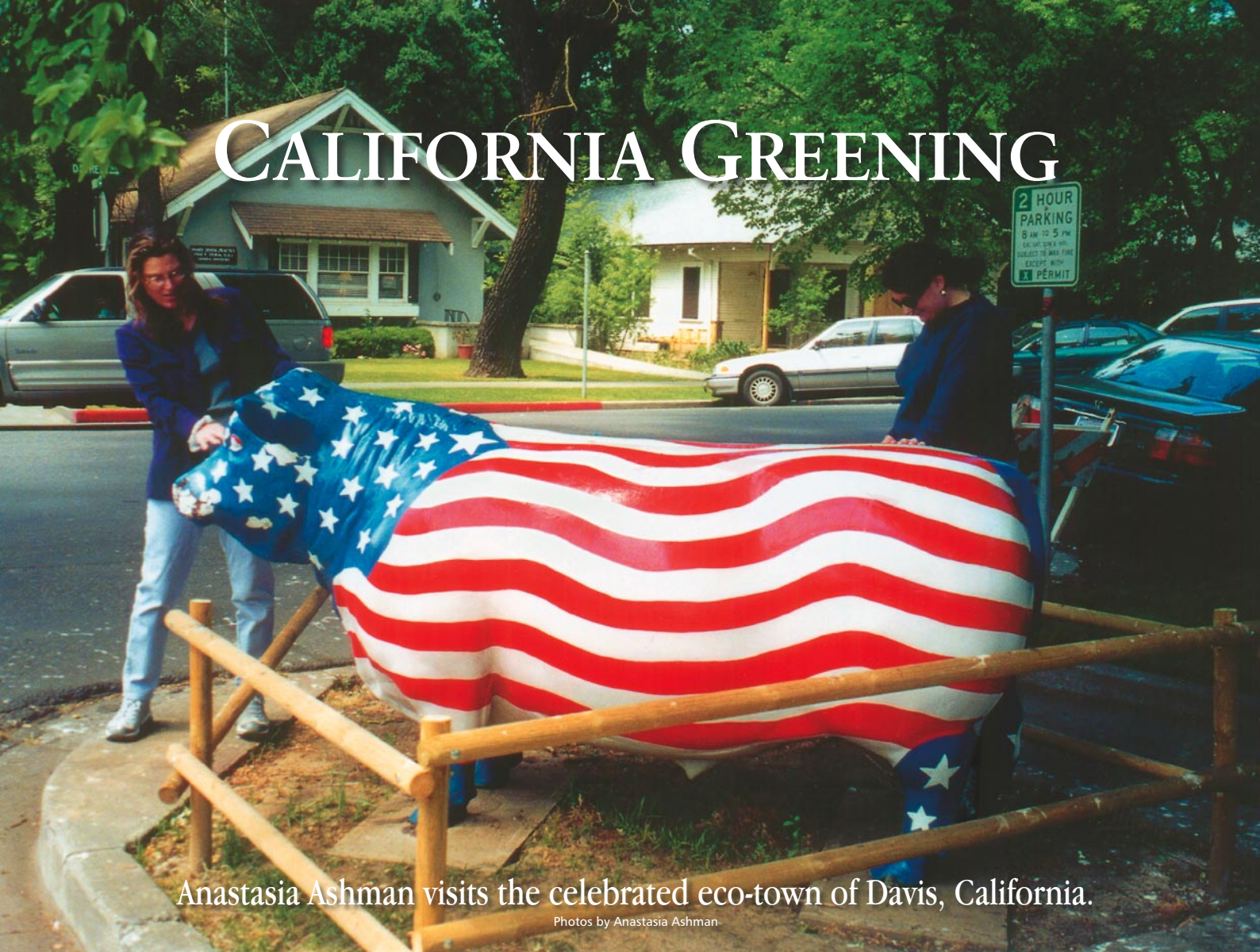


# CALIFORNIA GREENING



Anastasia Ashman visits the celebrated eco-town of Davis, California.

Photos by Anastasia Ashman

Most definitions of Utopia don't include submitting to grass police. Yet in one Northern California hamlet, residents are lining up for the privilege of having their lawns monitored for eco-incorrect sproutings. "They send people round to check for Bermuda grass and they fine you if they see it growing," admits Paul Teller, a University of California professor and long-time resident at the exclusive, communal Village Homes housing scheme in Davis. When questioned if this kind of scrub-scrutiny is a small price to pay for being part of a forward-looking community, the philosophy teacher is passionate in the affirmative. "I paid extra to secure a spot here and now I'm never leaving!"

Due to its unique concept, the professor's vaunted neigh-

borhood – a 240 home, 60 acre (24ha) development in an agricultural town 16 miles (26km) outside the State Capital of Sacramento – has been the subject of national and international television documentaries on environmentally sustainable living. Conceived at the height of the unsettling Ford-era gasoline crisis and economic recession and built in 1975, Village Homes attempted to recreate a traditional sense of community while conserving energy and water in the most efficient way possible. Solar water heating and passive space heating designs are incorporated into each home's design. Neighbors share not only the unfenced yards around each home, they also meet on the large village green, entrust their children to a community day care center, hold performances at the

**Above:**  
The unofficial mascot of a life science/ agriculture-based school and of Davis, its town.

**Below:**  
Anastasia Ashman.



village amphitheatre, and relax in the community-run pool.

Yet this environmentally-conscious sanctuary need not build high walls to shut out a cruel world, since the surrounding town of Davis is similarly dedicated to an excellent quality of life, clean living and sustainability – and in fact was named one of the healthiest U.S. communities in which to live and retire. With an approach combining innovation, education, recreation and social awareness, Davis is brimming with unique community aspects. In addition to its community-built Art Center, more than \$200,000-worth of publicly-owned *objets d'art* are exhibited throughout the charming pedestrian-friendly town for the residents' strolling pleasure. The numerous cafes are equipped with modems for easy



**Above:**  
Fruit-bearing trees line the streets of Davis.

laptop internet access, the morning Farmers' Market is an institution of fresh produce and down-home cooking, and neighbors volunteer their time to run the Co-op, a popular communal health-food and natural supplies market. The wholesome-looking students in the well-tended public school system consistently get the best test scores of the entire region. Down at City Hall, citizen committees advise 30 boards and commissions on issues ranging from natural resource conservation to child care.

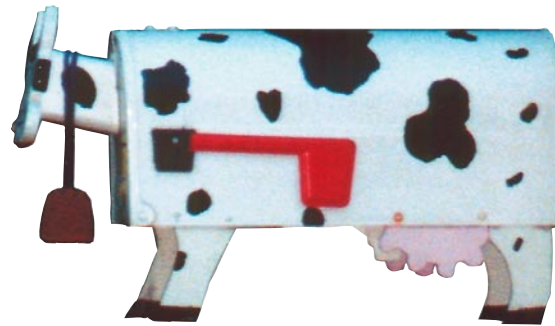
**TREE & BIKE CITY**

If pioneering California often fulfils the most progressive of its nation's dreams, then Davis must surely fulfil the most progressive dreams of its state. With its emphasis on recreational opportunities and greenery, including 25 miles (40km) of greenbelts winding through town, the City's budget for parks and community services unusually exceeds the combined public safety (police and fire) budget. Recognized since 1977 by the National Arbor Day Foundation as a 'Tree City', Davis boasts 18,000 trees – from flowering crab apple and apricot, to oak, eucalyptus and redwood – lining its streets and parks, with species chosen for both drought resistance and their evergreen and flowering aspects.

Meanwhile, wheelchair ramps, audible traffic lights and Braille signs for the seeing-impaired round out the politically-correct public services to aid

independent living. As for the impact of 25,000 University students on the relaxed township, resident Colleen Stanturf proclaims, "They're not a problem, they all ride." Bicycles, that is. Also known as the bicycle capital of the U.S., Davis sports a renowned system of bikeways that cover 40 miles-worth (64km) of parks, greenbelts and roadway bike-lanes.

Distinguished by its commitment to utilize non-traditional approaches to traditional problems, Davis owes a great debt to its occupant world-class university.



**Right:**  
A Davis mailbox.

One of the ten University of California campuses, this largest and northernmost one was founded the 'University Farm' in 1908 and its focus on life sciences has led to an international reputation in agricultural, biological, biotechnological and environmental sciences. With students and faculty making up nearly half the total population

of 62,000, Davis is one of the last 'college towns' in California – and its residents boast the highest level of education per capita in the state, and rank second in the nation.

Many of the university's ground-breaking research programs are understandably conducted in and around Davis, influencing the way the town works. For instance, the city is on the national forefront of multipurpose storm drainage facilities with its drainage ponds also serving as wildlife habitats. The school researches

commercial farming practices it describes as 'more sustainable, ecologically sound, economically profitable and socially just'. Meanwhile organic compost

material, a staple of clean agricultural practices, is derived from the collected yard waste of Davis residents and redistributed free-of-charge by the City 'while supplies last'. Roses as large as salad plates were fed off this rarefied city-issue compost.

Davis has been recycling on a city-wide basis since 1970

**Below:**  
The Arboretum at University of California, Davis – an outdoor classroom and laboratory.



and now diverts from its landfills 50% of its waste-stream (including mixed papers, glass, cans, plastics and yard waste). The curbside recycling program also accommodates hazardous waste (like car engine oil and batteries), which the city will pick up and safely dispose of. City Hall places a priority on the purchase of products made with recycled materials as well.

**BIODIVERSITY**

Throughout neighborhoods visited by jackrabbits, woodpeckers, deer, bluejays and hummingbirds, community gardens which protect rare and endangered species are sponsored and maintained by the University and residents alike. In a state beset



by drought, native scrub and water-hardy plants are not only encouraged by the authorities, they're readily available at local nurseries. Private greenhouses can be spotted all over town, along with agricultural humor cow-shaped mailboxes, rain-water cisterns, windmills,

solar panels and innovative wildflower rock gardens.

As a leading recipient of research funding, the university's roster of programs naturally extend beyond the confines of Davis, and are often collaborations with state, federal and global agencies. In an important stewardship, the school administers more than 30 nature reserves that represent the spectrum of California's ecological biodiversity. A study with the U.S. Department of Energy focuses on the global environment and

climate change, while the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency funds a center to understand how multiple stresses affect biological processes in aquatic and terrestrial systems. The school's Center for Design Research meanwhile tackles issues of ecologically appropriate design (including




*Above:* Energy efficient building at University of California, Davis, designed to reduce the need for heating and cooling.

*Left:* Standard & Pacific Railroad stop.

*Below:* Roses at City Hall fed on compost made from residents' collected yard waste.

resource and nature conservation) and socially responsible design (that is, environmental design emphasizing user needs and participation). Yet another institute works on improving the scientific basis for making decisions on environmental issues, both natural and human.

With heady stuff like this going on, it's no wonder even the heavens aren't beyond Davis' utopian reproach. In 1999, mayor Julie Partansky's pet project unanimously passed into a city ordinance: to reduce 'sky glow' (otherwise known as light pollution) so residents can see the stars again. From now on, all new outdoor lighting will be shielded and pointed downward. "We needn't light this place up like an airport," Partansky declared as she conceded victory. "We're not San Jose, after all," the mayor added, taking a swipe at the state's fastest growing, soulless, highway-laced city in the heart of high-tech Silicon Valley. In the face of continuing expansion San Jose was bidding *adieu* at that same time to its last remaining fruit orchard, the principle produce of its fertile valley for much of the past century. For agriculturally-based Davis and environs, the march of progress has very different plans 



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