

# EcoVillage at Ithaca

## *Model for Mainstream Development?*

by Liz Walker

**I**N ONE OF LIFE'S CURIOUS COINCIDENCES the phone rings just as I sit down to write this article. It is someone from Merrill-Lynch in Germany. "We're researching ecovillages around the world. Tell me about what you're doing. How does your financing look? How many homes? Is it profitable?" I want to laugh. We have operated on a shoestring budget for the last four and a half years, and we are currently restructuring the loans that enabled us to buy a \$400,000, 176-acre parcel of land four years ago. However, we are turning an important corner as our first out of five projected neighborhoods is under construction. Our risky financial picture is beginning to stabilize after years of hard work. What perks my interest in this phone call is the implication that the ecovillage concept is catching on in unexpected places.

The man at Merrill-Lynch has a client who would like to invest in starting one or more ecovillages from scratch. He wants to uphold the ideology of community and ecology while making a profit. I wonder: Is it possible to make a profit building ecovillages? Does the profit motive compromise the affordability or the commitment of the future residents? Or would having a large investor in fact make it vastly easier to finance alternative development and provide more examples of the way we could be living on Earth?

In EcoVillage at Ithaca we have tried from the very beginning to create an educational model—one that will inspire and teach the principles of a saner way to live on the planet. While far from perfect, we have begun to develop a community that, before it is even built, has attracted national and sometimes international attention. We are choosing to build something that is far more than a pretty and satisfying place to live. Instead our goal is to have a small part in influencing patterns of development in this country, and even around the world. This call from Merrill-Lynch convinces me that we are on track—we are beginning to have an impact



While the buildings are not constructed yet at EcoVillage at Ithaca, the gardens are in place, irrigated by this pond (also home to ducks, frogs, and fish).

on the mainstream even as we struggle with our day-to-day realities.

### Model for Change

Why would the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Popular Science* also follow our progress? I believe that we have touched a deep nerve in the human psyche. The time is ripe to address two related major problems in our society: ecological devastation (global warming, alarming rate of species extinction, dying of the oceans, and more) and social isolation (family breakdown, violent crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and extreme loneliness). As we near the end of the millennium, our collective unconscious begins to stir.

There was a time, not too long ago, that we can dimly remember when people felt connected to neighbors and family, when the land was cared for, when the cycle of

life meant something profound. In the Ecovillage model we are finding ways to integrate the traditional ways that made good common sense (which in fact lasted for centuries) with the latest appropriate technologies and social models. We are learning to communicate and share ideas on the Internet while teaching our children the rudiments of organic gardening. We are building super-energy-efficient houses but on a village-scale.

So what is this model? Our 176 acres includes rolling meadows that were once farmed, 25 acres of woods, a natural pond and several intermittent streams. The land is nestled on the top of West Hill in Ithaca, New York, and has commanding views of Cornell University to the east, and lush countryside around it. It is within the town borders, and has access to city schools, water, sewer, and other amenities. While there



Marketing the EcoVillage garden's organic produce at a local farmer's market.

are people working on creating ecological city design and plenty of small rural communities, I can speak most knowledgeably about our own EcoVillage at Ithaca—built on the edge of a city. There are several reasons for the appeal in working on an edge-city design:

- This is where the majority of new development takes place. A replicable model can therefore have much influence

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- It offers an alternative to suburban sprawl and can save large tracts of natural areas and farmland.
- It can integrate organic agriculture, wetlands, woods, orchards, etc.
- There is plenty of economic and cultural interface with the nearby population center, minimizing the insular effect of a rural community.

**Planning Process**

Soon after we purchased the land in June, 1992, we initiated a democratic process to plan how the land could best be developed. The group that started EcoVillage began with two assumptions: 1) we would preserve a minimum of 80 percent of the site as open space; and 2) we would use the cohousing model as the means to develop neighborhoods which could eventually house about 500 people.

I want to emphasize here that EcoVillage bought the land from a previous developer who went bankrupt. This developer had planned a typical suburban development of 150 homes (the same number EcoVillage is planning) which would have completely covered the site with roads, garages and houses. He left 10 percent of the site for open space, as mandated by the Town of Ithaca. Thus by developing EcoVillage we were in effect preserving green space and farmland that would otherwise have been paved over.

We spent nine months on the land-use planning process. I chaired a planning committee that met for three hours weekly to research and discuss the options regarding the site. We looked at water, soil types, wind patterns, agricultural potential, alternative waste treatment, and more. There were often five to six subcommittees that presented their findings to us. Next we brought in the broader community and the experts. We held a land-use planning forum that brought 60 people together for an intensive weekend experience. Among the participants were planners, architects, landscape architects, ecologists, students, future residents, and others. We walked the site in small groups, focusing on the best location for a village of five to six neighborhoods, the

best location for organic gardens, the place to put a visitor's center. By the end of the weekend we pooled our findings and came to consensus on two important items: 1) the best agricultural soils were to be preserved for gardens; and 2) existing water on the site would be preserved and enhanced through constructed wetlands, ponds, and recharging the aquifer.

Hardly the way a normal developer would proceed. The site we chose to develop for the village ended up on the worst soils, set far back from the road. It was on the highest point of land to enable an eventual biological waste treatment system to be gravity-fed. The fields we chose had enough room for neighborhoods to cluster around a village green.

Another three planning forums later, we had all that we needed to create our own

"Guidelines for Development," which spelled out everything from how densely clustered neighborhoods should be (30 homes on no more than three acres) to our goal for energy efficiency. Meanwhile, in a parallel process, a local ecologist teamed up with a local architect to create a beautiful map of this vision which remains as our icon today. This colorful "envisioning plan" is to our group what the blue and white Earth image is to environmentalists: it helps us to remember the whole picture of where we are going and gives us the zest to continue when the going gets rough.

Now, three years after that initial planning process, we are grappling with implementation. Our ecological development guidelines have pressed us to develop a 2,700-ft. road and related infrastructure that is more costly than we would like. We have had to go through a lengthy process to get town approvals because of our innovative design. Choices such as densely clustering the houses in order to preserve more open space made us wade through the creation of a "Special Land Use District." Although the Town Planning Board was sympathetic to our goals, the net result was to lose the 1995 building season, and push off construction for another nine months. Despite how many hurdles we've had to cross, I think people in EcoVillage would agree it's been worth it.

**Advice to ecovillage builders**

To Merrill-Lynch's client and other developers, our EcoVillage message is basically this:

1. Create a site plan based on balancing the needs of the natural environment with the people who will live there.
2. Preserve 80 percent to 90 percent of the site as open space.
3. Integrate organic agriculture into the plan.
4. Build passive solar and/or very energy-efficient homes.
5. Create pedestrian streets where children can play and adults can chat.
6. Create common houses or community centers where people can interact. Integrate small businesses and encourage home offices.
7. Build near a public transit line.

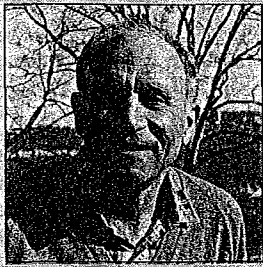
By far the toughest part of the work is to build a sense of community. In Denmark it has been found that cohousing communities built by developers without resident participation are not as likely to work. People tend not to gather in the common house. There seems to be a crucial element of bonding in the arduous process of designing, getting approvals and building a cohousing community.

I think the biggest single challenge to making this into a mainstream movement is to figure out how to streamline the process of creating community. We need a hybrid model between the way cohousing groups are currently organized and the way that standard development takes place. A typical cohousing community takes four years from beginning to move-in date and requires a super-human effort in meeting attendance and often in up-front financial costs. I surmise that there are plenty of people who would love to be involved in making the largest decisions of designing a community with-

out getting involved in the thousands of technical and legal details that crop up in a large project. This might translate to once-a-month meetings. A good organizer should be able to work with the group to identify concerns and to serve as an interface with the developer. In addition community work days on the site can be a powerful bonding experience. At EcoVillage we have work days to plant trees, harvest stones for stone walls, dig potatoes, clear the garden, and so forth. There are plenty of ways in which people can begin to know each other without attending endless meetings.

We hold a certain pride in beginning to create one of the first ecovillages in this country. We hope that our steady stream of visitors will only increase and come away feeling that yes, there is something that we can do to make a difference. Ω

*Liz Walker is co-director and co-founder of EcoVillage at Ithaca. She also serves as a consultant for the first cohousing neighborhood. For information about a waiting list for the first neighborhood or to find out about plans for a second neighborhood, call: 607-255-8276.*



## "Why I'm Doing It"

*Elissa Wolfson interviews EcoVillage member Jay Jacobson.*

**Elissa Wolfson:** *Tell me about your current life.*

**Jay Jacobson:** I do research on the effect of air pollution on agricultural crops and trees. The pollutant causing the most damage, surprisingly, is ground level ozone, and I'm now researching its effects on sugar maple trees.

**Elissa:** *How do you expect your life to change when you move into EcoVillage at Ithaca?*

**Jay:** Right now I live by myself, so I get involved with EcoVillage and other people—but then I have to leave! In EcoVillage, it will be a lot easier to work and socialize with a whole bunch of other people, with interests similar to mine. I'm really looking forward to that.

**Elissa:** *I understand it took you a long time to decide to join the First Residents Group. Why?*

**Jay:** The level of risk was the most difficult part. I like to be in charge of what I'm doing and know what I'm going to get for my investment of time, effort, and money. Dependence upon a whole group of diverse people getting along well enough to plan and build a multi-million-dollar real estate development was a risk way beyond my previous experiences. After much agonizing, I finally decided that this was too exciting an opportunity to miss. I woke up one morning and the decision was made! It wasn't a rational decision, and I'm not used to making decisions like that. But the goal of improving the way we live on the Earth is so worthwhile that I just had to be a part of it.

**Elissa:** *Does the level of risk still bother you?*

**Jay:** Not as much. Despite many difficulties and conflicts, we've managed to make all our decisions by consensus. We've gotten through so much this past year, and done it so well, I've developed a level of trust in our ability to work together, that I wouldn't have believed possible. I'm feeling quite enthusiastic and positive about the whole thing.

**Elissa:** *What effect has EcoVillage had on you?*

**Jay:** I went to meetings of the different committees of the First Residents Group and found that I was interested in both content (tasks) and process (the means by which we operate). I joined the Personal Growth group to work on things like how I react to people and how I participate in groups. I also joined the Process Committee where I became one of the facilitators who lead meetings and help to build trust within the community. I'm also involved with negotiating contracts, planting trees, and growing vegetables. I've found that, along with the richness of being part of a community, come additional obligations, like being responsible for how I act in the group. It was somewhat scary, because there were certain things I didn't want to find out about myself! I've had to do a better job of managing my anger and frustration when they arise. EcoVillage has been a learning and growing experience for me.

**Elissa:** *Do you have any concerns about EcoVillage?*

**Jay:** Plenty—and I'm sure I always will. One is whether we can live up to our mission and goals which are so very ambitious. I suspect we'll only get part of the way. But that's okay, because I believe others will take our efforts many steps further toward developing a sustainable way of living on the Earth. Ω

*Jay Jacobson is a plant physiologist with degrees from Cornell and Columbia Universities. He has lived in Ithaca since 1979.*

*Elissa Wolfson, a former staff writer for E Magazine is a freelance environmental reporter. She lives in Ithaca.*

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