

Green Technology and the Design of a Green Lifestyle

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Ecovillages are illustrative of a growing social and environmental trend. They bolster the view that adopting green technology is a promising and realistic resource on the road to sustainable living. These ecological cohousing neighborhoods and communities are being designed as places where residents can live in harmony with nature and with each other. Using green technology in the various forms it holds, these new communities are raising important questions about the role and importance of green technology in the local and global efforts to respond to an environmental crisis. Using anthropological methods to analyze the ways in which some residents of Ecovillage at Ithaca use green technology to create a green lifestyle, this paper describes the challenges and opportunities residents negotiate as they struggle to create a social and environmentally sustainable way to live.

Key words: green lifestyle, ecovillage, cohousing, consumption

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the October 2007 annual meeting of the Humanities and Technology Association in Terre Haute, Indiana. I am grateful to Matthias Beck for encouragement and Helen and Jim Smith for the space to write. Tendai Chitewere can be contacted at 415-405-2676 or tendai@sfsu.edu.

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Introduction

Global climate change and the social, environmental, and political impacts of these changes have finally become a generally accepted reality. Many countries, cities, and individuals are increasingly looking for ways to adapt to the expected changes and, at the same time, identify new technologies and design new commodities that will slow environmental degradation. Of these efforts, technology--and specifically green technology--is often suggested as a key ingredient in any solution to our current environmental crisis. Proponents of green technology often argue that capitalism and environmentalism are compatible, and that production and consumption of green technology is the most promising way to address global climate change and the ensuing environmental problems related to it (Brown, 2001). At the same time, some scholars and social activists are arguing that the current environmental crisis was caused by an economic model that has led to out-of-control consumption with little or no incentive to conserve (Foster, 2002; O'Connor, 1994; Smith, 1998). Central questions of the compatibility between environmentalism and capitalism have continued to be raised against an avalanche of economists who are convinced that such a marriage is viable and go so far as to suggest that it is, in fact, the best and most desirable way to respond to the environmental crisis (Brown, 2001; Hawken, Lovins and Lovins, 1999).

The current environmental crisis has spurred a plethora of innovative responses from individuals, nonprofit organizations, and entire cities. Going and being green has not only become a trend, it has become essential for creating a competitive marketing edge (Shrivastava, 1995). A basic keyword search on Google in July 2008 for "being green" presents over two million links to various newspaper articles, stores and advertisements, Kermit-the-Frog quotes, organizations, and academic papers that discuss whether it is

DESIGN OF A GREEN LIFESTYLE

or isn't easy being green. With the overwhelming number of messages from various trusted and not-so-trusted sources on how to behave, think, and shop to save the planet, it is difficult to know which advice is useful and which a product of greenwashing. Like the plethora of environmental studies programs that emerged in universities during the 1970s and 1980s, green business programs are offered at almost every major business school in the United States, advocating a business model that considers the interests of the people, the planet, and profits (Ellin, 2006; Hawken, 1993; Jamison, 2001; Rowell, 1996).

How have consumers generally responded to the environmental crisis and the messages they receive from public and private sources? What are some of the ways people have chosen to respond to the urgent need to alter the way we engage with the natural environment? Responding to environmental degradation in the United States means engaging in both social and environmental solutions, that is, addressing both how people live everyday and the impact that lifestyle has on the environment. The issue of consumption has come to play a major role in U.S. environmentalism because we consume a disproportionate amount of the world's resources; whether it is through land acquisition or consumer goods, U.S. Americans are mired in a culture of consumption (Guha, 2006). This national emphasis on consumption is itself becoming green (Jamison, 2001; Smith, 1998). Increasingly, some communities in the U.S. and around the world are working hard to respond to the environmental crisis by designing living spaces that include adapting and applying innovative technology to their homes and neighborhoods, and engaging in a green lifestyle that attempts to reduce individual consumption needs. Ecovillages are emerging as a powerful force in the search for a way to balance social and ecological sustainability. EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI) is an example of a community on the cusp of such an experiment.

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Designed as an ecological cohousing community or ecovillage, EVI is, according to the project director, attempting to pioneer a sustainable culture (L. Walker, 2005). In doing so, residents of the “green” community attempt to balance living in harmony with each other and living with nature, as a way to model sustainability. This model is not new. It does reflect, however, the ideas and efforts that some city planners and architects have been advocating for generations. Moreover, ecovillages take some of their inspiration from poor rural villages in nonwestern countries that often lack the advanced technology of the west and require a high degree of cooperation. What is new, however, is the adoption of this lifestyle by people who fall into what I call the *green class*. Specifically, the green class attempts to live sustainably by consuming green commodities and by engaging in activities and events that are explicitly and implicitly identified as being good for the environment. An example of this green class and the green lifestyle can be seen in a variety of aspects of the ecological cohousing movement in general and specifically in the EVI project.

In this paper I describe some of the green technology that EVI, as a model of an emerging green lifestyle, exhibits. I focus on the physical design of the homes and shared community spaces in the first EVI cohousing neighborhood that was completed in 1996. Although more than ten years have passed since the First Resident Group (FRoG as they prefer to be called) was designed and built, and a second neighborhood has been well established, I focus the analysis of this paper on FRoG because at the time that it was built, the green lifestyle was just beginning to emerge. I argue that the FRoG symbolizes the effort to be green by living green with the help of innovative green technology. Yet, this paper is not solely about green technology in an ecovillage. It is also, as the FRoG project demonstrates, about the ways communities can become effective locations for reducing our need for

DESIGN OF A GREEN LIFESTYLE

commodities in general, and that by reducing our consumption of commodities we can, in fact, be green.

Anthropology is well suited as a discipline to explore green lifestyles and the use of technology to address environmental changes. Investigating, through ethnographic research, the role of technology in influencing culture and the impact of culture on the adoption of technology is critical if we are to understand the challenges and opportunities offered by green lifestyles (Pfaffenberger, 1992). Jamison's view that "cultural critique and critical movements have often inspired a broad reexamination, or assessment, process that has...contributed to the formulation of new criteria for knowledge-making and new forms of scientific and technological practice" (Jamison, 2001, p. 8) suggests that an analysis of the green lifestyle trend might present the opportunity for local and global communities to shift the way we design not only our physical spaces but also our social infrastructure. Ethnographic research by the author conducted in EVI over fifteen months beginning in 2000 and ending in 2001 included in-depth, semi-formal interviews with 60 adults from both the FRoG, the first neighborhood group, and SoNG, the second neighborhood group. Because the SoNG was in the early stages of development, most of the interviews were conducted with FRoG residents. During the research period I attended planning meetings, weekly and biweekly community and committee meetings, various annual rituals and community celebrations, as well as a variety of social events including meals and dances. An important requirement for each adult member in both the FRoG and SoNG neighborhoods is to serve on a work-team and volunteer approximately three to four hours a week completing various community tasks. During the period of field research, from 2000-2001, there was a cook team, outdoor team, geek team, maintenance team, and a dish team. (I was an active member of the dish team.) This paper describes the efforts of an ecological cohousing community, a community made up of

CHITEWERE

individuals and families who are striving to create a living environment that marries both social and environmental sustainability. This effort is not simply motivated by convenience but represents a new way of addressing environmental sustainability specifically; ecological cohousing communities or ecovillages suggest that it is through creating a strong sense of community that we can affect environmental change. While residents value creating community, they stress and rely--perhaps too heavily--on innovative green technology as the major factor in modeling a social and environmentally sustainable community.

The Community

According to the Global Ecovillage Network, “ecovillages are urban or rural communities of people, who strive to integrate a supportive social environment with a low-impact way of life. To achieve this, they integrate various aspects of ecological design, permaculture, ecological building, green production, alternative energy, community building practices...” (Global Ecovillage Network, 2008, para 1). Ecovillage at Ithaca is one such project as one of a growing number of communities that are attempting to balance living a social and environmentally sustainable lifestyle.

EcoVillage at Ithaca is a semi-rural cohousing neighborhood project located approximately two miles outside of the city of Ithaca, New York. Nestled in the heart of the Finger Lakes, the nonprofit EVI project is unique in the ecovillage movement because it attempts to build a village of five neighborhoods, create ample opportunity for residents to live and work in the village, and offer resources to make the community as self sufficient as possible.

The physical location of EVI outside the city of Ithaca is not coincidental but was chosen as the best location to create the experiment in alternative living, precisely because of the

DESIGN OF A GREEN LIFESTYLE

social, political, and environmental leaning in the larger Ithaca community (Chitewere, 2006). In his recent book *The Country in the City: the Greening of the San Francisco Bay Area*, Walker reminds us of the importance of geography to environmental history (R. A. Walker, 2007). Like the San Francisco Bay Area, Ithaca has had its share of progressive green politics, including the establishment of a local currency designed to keep economic resources within the city (Herrmann, 2006). EVI is another chapter in the environmental history of a politically left and environmentally conscious Ithaca.

The EVI project is both a consortium of two cohousing neighborhoods as well as a nonprofit environmental education organization whose mission includes serving as a living laboratory for social and environmental sustainable living. EVI combines suburban living with access to urban amenities, embracing both a connection with the natural environment through preserving surrounding land in a land trust, and modeling urban density by clustering homes close together. There are 60 households living in the two completed neighborhoods; while only two neighborhoods are completed, a third is in the early planning and development stages.

In addition to the two completed neighborhoods, the project currently has an active education component. One of the arms of the EVI project is the nonprofit EcoVillage/CRESP (Center for Religion Education, and Social Policy) which created an educational partnership with Cornell University. The EcoVillage/CRESP relationship is “responsible for education, outreach and promotion of the EcoVillage concept through educational programs, partnerships, hosting visitors, and work with the media” (L. Walker, 2007, p. 8). Another feature of the EVI project is the organic community supported agriculture farm (CSA), an organic CSA berry farm that include a U-pick option (a program where farm visitors pick their own berries and pay for whatever they take home), and over fifty-five acres of land

CHITEWERE

that is held by the Finger Lakes Land Trust in a permanent conservation easement .

Ecological cohousing communities are modeled after the Danish *bofællesskaber*, a concept that was introduced to the United States in the mid 1980s by Katharine McCamant and Charles Durrett. The architect team coined the term “cohousing” after observing these new communities in Denmark and recognizing the benefits of engaging residents in the planning, design, and management of their neighborhood. Other principles that define cohousing include a common house (or space) that serves as an extension of the individual homes and a physical design of the neighborhood that is aimed to create a sense of community amongst the residents (McCamant, 1994).

The ecological cohousing community in Ithaca emphasizes the effort to create an environmentally sustainable community by explicitly incorporating green design features, such as passive solar heating and solar panels. Other energy-saving technology has been planned but is not yet in use, such as a gray-water-recycling infrastructure. The community uses the physical design to help enforce its commitment to green living and establishes social guidelines to promote social harmony and cooperation. As such, ecovillages present an opportunity to consider ways of balancing social and ecological sustainability. While at once designed to bring individuals socially together by including self governance and a physical space that results in frequent random encounters, they are also designed with environmental sustainability in mind. Creating a strong sense of community is equally important to adopting innovative green technology. As I will argue at the end of this paper, it is through the cooperative nature of the community that residents are able to reduce their need to consume green commodities, including new green technology.

DESIGN OF A GREEN LIFESTYLE

Green Neighborhood Designs

How can technology be incorporated into the design and functioning of a green community? There are two ways in which I will address this question, beginning first with a description of the various technology features of the EVI neighborhoods, with a focus on the green technology that helps to define EVI as an ecovillage. These details were often described to me when I asked resident what made their village “eco”. Second, the Ecovillage is green because of the technology--green and otherwise--that is lacking. That is, I will make the argument that sometimes being green can be best achieved by reducing what we consume.

The green technology features of EVI combine old and new ideas. Let us first recall the old ideas that influenced generations of city planners who try to combine the built and natural environments. City planners of the early twentieth century, like Ebenezer Howard, Lewis Mumford, and Patrick Geddes emphasized the importance of putting nature in cities and building the “garden city” (Howard, 1902; Mumford, 1946). Their work provides much of the inspiration for the importance of nature in the social well-being of people living in urban spaces. Building neighborhoods that are surrounded by trees, grass, meadows, and nature were seen as essential while modernization, and specifically the industrial revolution, was seen as facilitating the destruction of nature. As urbanization expanded, efforts were made to preserve natural green spaces. The results of their work are evident in places like New York City’s Central Park. As more cities attempt to respond to the environmental crisis, several are in many ways rebuilding the garden city, putting trees along urban streets, turning vacant lots into community gardens, and restoring urban creeks. Focusing on greening the urban space, early city planners were highly conscious of the impact of technology on the landscape. Mumford was critical of technology, “megatechnics”, and cautioned that the over-

CHITEWERE

reliance on technology helps to diminish our connections to each other and nature (Mumford, 1967).

Green Technology in the Community

In this section I focus on how ecovillages, and in particular EVI, are attempting to use technology as a means of creating stronger connections with nature and with other residents. I will first address how, in the ecological cohousing community, being green can be identified by the physical design of the neighborhood.

The founding residents of the FRoG designed and built their homes with the help of architects Jerry and Claudia Wiesburd of Housecraft Builders, Inc. Built with a uniform and coordinated design, the homes range in size from 900 square feet for a one-bedroom to 1650 square feet for the four-bedroom homes. To limit the ecological footprint, the homes are built vertically and include three or four levels of living space. All the homes in the first neighborhood of EVI are built as duplexes which hug a pedestrian-only walkway which meanders through the middle of the neighborhood. The duplexes, which allow walls to be shared and energy to be saved, also make it possible for thirty houses to sit on only 2.5 acres. The fifteen neighborhood duplexes are divided into clusters of eight households that share an energy center with a common hot-water heater and are fitted for future energy saving technologies.

The homes in the first neighborhood are not only designed with triple-paned windows and energy-star appliances, but they also incorporate stylish features like living curtains that grow on the outside awning. Connecting the outside space to the inside living and dining room are four tall, south facing double-pane windows. In the warm summer months, wooden trellises are covered with grape and kiwi vines or various crawling flowers. The lush green leaves provide a natural curtain against the hot summer sun, keeping

DESIGN OF A GREEN LIFESTYLE

the home cool and offering a light snack when the fruits ripen. In the winter, the foliage dies back and opens the window to intense winter sunlight that is low in the south sky. Passive solar heat from these windows can bring the inside temperatures to the mid 70s or higher. Such simple, beautiful, and useful designs do not necessarily require expensive green technology but rather make use of resources readily available, like orienting windows to maximize passive solar heat. Low-energy appliances were chosen by almost all residents and include small refrigerators and convection ovens. Overall, the relatively small size of the homes in the FRoG helps to minimize the space needed to heat and cool the home. This small individual footprint is balanced by a large community space that serves as an extension of the individual home.

Homes in the neighborhood of the FRoG were designed to maximize energy-efficiency and minimize social isolation. Large inward-facing windows allow residents to see who is home and survey the activities in the neighborhood. Although some neighbors use curtains to increase their sense of privacy, many families welcome the opportunity to informally connect with neighbors through open windows. A common house, one of the key features of a cohousing community, also serves as a way to incorporate green technology in the everyday life of residents as well as offers the opportunity for individuals to connect with each other.

The common house in the FRoG is designed to be an extension of one's personal living space and a gathering point for the neighborhood. Similar to a town hall, the common house is the heart of the neighborhood, hosting a variety of community needs and social events. For example, there are office spaces which are rented by residents, a yoga/recreation room, children's play room and teen room, guestroom, and sitting room with a small library. The heart of the common house is the dining space, which makes up the largest space in the common house and hosts weekly common meals where residents, and their guests, can choose to participate in a

CHITEWERE

community dinner prepared by the neighborhood cook team. The common house hosts different meetings and special events. The large kitchen with two large gas cook ranges and an industrial dishwasher is in contrast to the small kitchens of the individual homes, which often have smaller and simpler technology. The common-house laundry facility functions like a Laundromat would for a city neighborhood. Instead of owning thirty washing machines and dryers, the neighbors collectively own three energy-efficient machines, thus reducing their need to consume appliances that are not needed daily. Instead of using the available dryers, residents can use a clothesline if they want to save energy. Other energy-saving features include plenty of windows to allow for maximum natural lighting, and providing a space to purchase bulk items that avoid multiple trips to the store, thus saving fuel.

The common house in EVI represents a positive way that technology can be used to reduce our consumption. Designing spaces to save energy and adopting practices that reduce our need to travel is a positive step toward sustainability. Some residents in FRoG felt the green technology in the common house and in the community in general was nothing special; others focused on technology that would be included at an unknown future date. For example, although the neighborhood homes and the common house were designed to accommodate solar panels, no solar panels were installed in the first neighborhood, because the panels were too expensive. In the second neighborhood, residents designed their homes based on individual resources and as such were not limited by the financial constraints of the group. Several households, who could afford it, installed solar panels and incorporated more green technology such as straw bale insulation and a community water cistern. Yet, for a participating observer in the EVI project for fifteen months, what was most noticeable about the community and its efforts to be green was not the use of innovative green technology but EVI's ability to create a community that required less

DESIGN OF A GREEN LIFESTYLE

technology. Instead of buying material goods, the common house can model a way to live simply by sharing resources. This, I suggest, is perhaps one of the biggest contributions of the ecological cohousing community.

Being Green Without Technology

The use of technology and the absence of technology can be an important distinction in creating a green lifestyle. Specifically, Ecovillage offers a model of sustainability because it suggests a way to live that can reduce our overall consumption, including the need to buy innovative green technology. For example, features that make ecovillages green include the ability to live close to your neighbors and to get to know them well; this allows residents to borrow last-minute supplies rather than driving to the market. A community where homes are built close together means social interaction is accessible from your front door. The preservation of green spaces such as meadows, forests, and views enable families to connect with nature without driving to a national park or commuting to the local park. Growing food near the neighborhoods provides healthy organic food that is both local and accessible to families who live nearby. While solar panels offer a means to harness the sun's free energy, the simplicity of orienting homes southward provides a cheap and sensible way to use the resources that already exist (the window) to capture the sun's rays to heat the home.

Ecovillage helps to create a sustainable culture by establishing a supportive community where neighbors help each other reduce their energy consumption, but also their consumption of everyday commodities like clothing and plastic toys. Carpooling and informal car-sharing is one way to save on resources. It is not unusual for neighbors to remind each other to turn off lights and to share meals. In the FRoG common house residents can leave unwanted clothes and pick up clothing items in an informal exchange. Exercise is easy to

CHITEWERE

accomplish without traveling to a fitness center: walks in the woods, volunteering on the farm, or just picking up your mail a quarter mile from the homes provide wonderful ways to stay in shape, meditate, or connect with friends.

Technology of the Green Lifestyle

Ideal Bite offers bite-sized ideas for light green living.

We know that you would just love to ‘do the right thing’ for yourself and the planet if it were convenient, fun, inexpensive, and made you feel good. But until now you have lacked a good source of advice for real people leading busy lives.

Congrats. Now you have a **free** one. Easy eco-living tips are delivered in a short, sassy email each weekday. (*Ideal Bite*, 2008, bold is in the original)

Green living has become a popular trend that focuses more on the kinds of trendy green commodity one owns and less on ways to reduce our impact on the environment. In addition, it increasingly offers easy, convenient, and fun ways of responding to the environmental crisis. At the same time, a recent article in the *New York Times* suggests that the average consumer is suffering from “green noise” and that environmental groups are worried about a green backlash, where consumers simply stop listening to the ways they themselves can help to save the planet (Williams, 2008). A likely source of this confusion and frustration can be attributed to information overload and misinformation created through the many mixed messages from environmental groups and corporations, where the latter have historically been responsible for the worst ecological tragedies (Rowell, 1996). Lack of leadership and direction in the environmental

DESIGN OF A GREEN LIFESTYLE

movement has resulted in a multitude of ways people are responding to the crisis. Often, the response has been the path of least resistance—consumption of commodities that are familiar, only greener. This simple process of replacing incandescence light bulbs with fluorescent ones is a good thing, but turning off lights that are not necessary is even better. In the mid 1990s some scholars were warning of greenwashing, as companies rushed to offer consumers ways to continue their acquisition of commodities that protect the environment and at the same time, continued to market in ways that increased their financial profits (Athanasidou, 1996). New forms of technology focused on green features; whether those commodities were, in our culture of over-consumption, necessary was rarely discussed even amongst environmental groups, who themselves rushed to suggest green consumption as the best way to confront environmental degradation. Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* ended with a litany of ways to do something about global warming which included adopting green technology (Gore, 2006). Although reducing our consumption and decreasing the number of miles traveled by car are included in his book, the role of technology in supporting the green lifestyle is central.

A plethora of companies, books and magazines, and service providers are claiming to either use green technology to power their electricity or offer promises to help you become green by simply utilizing their products. It is therefore not surprising that EVI also identifies its use of green technology as part of the overall effort to be sustainable. As discussed in this paper, the applications of green technology in the design of the homes and the presence of green technology in the everyday lives of residents help them to identify with a sustainable way of living. Evidence of the importance of green technology for the green lifestyle was demonstrated when I asked residents what they felt was the “eco” component in ecovillage. The responses often include the prominence of hybrid vehicles and the solar panel capacity.

CHITEWERE

The green features of the homes offered some residents an immediate, visual response to energy-inefficient commodities. One resident admitted that she was able to reduce her energy consumption without doing anything special. Simply living in the community, in a home that was designed to be well insulated and take advantage of passive solar heat, made this informant feel that her life--and lifestyle--was more sustainable in EVI than in any other place she had previously lived.

Green technology in this ecovillage has thus come to represent both a simple way individuals and the community can reduce their environmental impact while continuing to engage in the same social and cultural practices that are comfortable and familiar to them. However, the emphasis on the technology of energy-efficient home designs, solar panels, and hybrid cars was over-rated and often overshadowed one of the primary contributions ecovillage made to the green lifestyle—the opportunity to reduce the overall technology that residents need to consume, because of the design of their community.

In conclusion, while the green lifestyle focuses on the acquisition of green technology to support the desires of individuals to live more sustainably, the green lifestyle can also be a vehicle to effect real social and ecological change. Instead of a focus on green commodities, ecovillages can demonstrate the value of community in facilitating the reduction of commodities. Again, it is not principally the use of new green technologies that is contributing to the green lifestyle, but the cooperation and sharing of communal resources.

A green lifestyle, as modeled in the ecological cohousing movement, is faced with a challenge to become more inclusive and look beyond the simple consumption of commodities and expand to include the reduction of consumption. The sharing of resources, cars, laundry facilities, meal preparation, childcare, and books are just a few

DESIGN OF A GREEN LIFESTYLE

of the ways that the green lifestyle can be defined and duplicated. Instead of being a marker of class distinction, the green lifestyle can become a model that denotes our collective shift away from consumption as a means to affect environmental change. If the environmental crisis has been created in part by the over-consumption of commodities in the West, a model that offers a shift away from consumption would be a first step in reversing the current crisis. Ecovillages have the potential to be models for this cultural shift if they focus more on the things they do not consume and widen their social circle to become more inclusive.

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CHITEWERE

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DESIGN OF A GREEN LIFESTYLE

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