



## ECOLOGICAL DESIGN

### Origins of the EcoVillage project

*The organizational process of an ecovillage project is as important as the environmentally friendly technologies employed. The Cleveland EcoVillage features an interesting partnership between an environmental organization and a neighborhood-based development organization. Here is how the project evolved.*

The original motivation was simple enough. By the mid-1990s Cleveland was starting to experience significant redevelopment, but little of that development was taking the environment into account.

It was mostly conventional development—conventional construction methods, conventional styles of housing and stores. Sure, a few projects incorporated better-than-normal insulation to save energy. Another project featured houses with front porches set close to the street to create an attractive public space for pedestrians. But no project had taken all the available ideas for environmentally-friendly development and put them together in one place. And that was a missed opportunity to develop in a more thoughtful, sustainable way.

It seemed like the neighborhood development groups—who were doing heroic work to stabilize communities and turn them around—might want to incorporate ecological designs into their projects, but they were constrained by time and resources. Given the city's tremendous needs, the groups were under pressure to crank out the new housing units as fast as possible.

Perhaps, then, environmental groups, who have lots of ideas and information, could become partners with the neighborhood groups, who have nuts-and-bolts development experience. Together, perhaps they could garner the additional resources to change the nature of development in the city.

If a comprehensive "ecovillage" development could happen in Cleveland, it would be noteworthy indeed. It could help show the world how older, industrial cities could become more sustainable. It could become a model for urban regeneration.

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*It might even give Cleveland a new reputation as a green city—a city that takes less from the earth and gives more to people.*



## Getting started

That was the thinking of the staff of a number of Cleveland-area environmental and citizen groups in late 1995. We had been meeting to talk about the Regional Environmental Priorities Project (REPP), an initiative out of Case Western Reserve University to rank the most serious environmental problems facing Northeast Ohio. We looked at the REPP's top priorities—suburban sprawl and outmigration from the urban core—and wondered how we could help address such issues.

The discussion gravitated toward the idea of promoting an ecological development in the city—an "ecovillage." To reduce sprawl and attract people back into the city, it was essential to create healthy, attractive, urban neighborhoods. And an ecovillage could demonstrate many of the ideas that the environmental groups promoted.

So we began to research the potential for an ecovillage development in Cleveland. With funding from the George Gund Foundation, we hired Dr. Wendy Kellogg from Cleveland State University's College of Urban Affairs to conduct a feasibility study. The study was managed by EcoCity Cleveland, with Environmental Health Watch acting as fiscal agent.

Starting in mid-1996, Kellogg surveyed the literature on urban sustainability and ecovillage projects around the world, identified the potential design features that could be incorporated into a Cleveland EcoVillage, and compiled lists of technical resources and possible funders.

## Site selection

Kellogg also began working with EcoCity Cleveland and CSU's Center for Neighborhood Development to begin the complex process of site selection. The goal was to find the development site in Cleveland that had the most potential for ecovillage development, both in terms of the physical and demographic characteristics of the site and the level of interest in the surrounding community. At that point, we didn't know exactly how large a site we were looking for. We only knew that it had to be large enough to offer multiple opportunities (i.e., at least several square blocks) and small enough for a project to have impact and have a special identity (i.e., smaller than a neighborhood).

Kellogg and staff from the other organizations spent months interviewing people who knew about development opportunities in Cleveland neighborhoods. We met with staff of nonprofit housing organizations, staff of the city's departments of Community Development and Planning, the funding organizations for neighborhood development, architects, transit advocates and many others. In addition, Kellogg developed statistical profiles of Cleveland

neighborhoods. And she helped the Center for Neighborhood Development and the Cleveland Neighborhood Development Corporation create a written survey that was sent out to all the neighborhood-based development groups in the city. The survey invited groups to nominate sites in their neighborhood.



Visions of green development: Conceptual drawing of the EcoVillage area.

We ended up with a long list of suggested sites and neighborhood partners. To whittle down the possibilities, we evaluated each site according to a number of criteria, including (not in order of importance):

- Proximity to transit (presence of Regional Transit Authority Rapid station or bus lines, or potential for bike/pedestrian facilities).
- Presence of vacant land for development.
- Diversity of population (percent minority, income levels, education levels).
- Neighborhood economic status (moderate income, need for employment, small business/commercial areas).
- Existing community resources (presence of active organizations and churches, health services, recreational programs, funding for programs like the federal Empowerment Zone).
- Physical characteristics (condition of housing stock, affordability of housing, presence of brownfields needing environmental remediation).
- Environmental activities (for example, participation in lead-abatement programs, urban gardening, green space planning).
- Community development organization (technical capacity, including quality of past projects and the ability to be a partner in an ecovillage project).
- Interest in an ecovillage among the community development organization, other neighborhood institutions, and residents.

This analysis led us to focus on sites in the Broadway, Cudell, Detroit-Shoreway, Fairfax, and Tremont neighborhoods. After additional interviews and site visits, we made the difficult decision to recommend a site in the Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood-the area around the W. 65th Street Rapid station.

The selection was based on our belief that this site near W. 65th and Lorain Avenue possessed unique potential for transit-oriented development, a vibrant mix of residential and commercial uses, and a combination of new development and rehab of existing buildings. We were also impressed with the diversity of the neighborhood and the potential for partnering with the Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization, one of the most capable nonprofit development groups in the city.

### **Rooting the project in the neighborhood**

Of course, just because some environmental groups and consultants thought it would be nice to do an ecovillage at a particular site didn't mean the project could happen. The most important task remained: gaining broad-based neighborhood acceptance for the ecovillage idea.

Over the next few months, we worked with staff of Detroit Shoreway to introduce the project to block clubs, Ward 17 Councilman Timothy Melena, local church leaders, and other neighborhood organizations. We told them about the potential opportunities. We asked them if they thought an ecovillage would be good for the neighborhood. And we solicited their

support.

Although the "ecovillage" idea was a novel one, most residents agreed that their neighborhood needed redevelopment help. They could see the benefits of new housing opportunities, better transit facilities, and programs to help people cut energy bills. And they were willing to pitch in to help improve their community.

Based on the positive response, EcoCity Cleveland and Detroit Shoreway decided to move ahead with the project. The two organizations signed a formal partnership agreement and began to raise funds for more detailed planning. EcoCity obtained a grant from the Katherine and Lee Chilcote Foundation to support the development of a concept plan. Detroit Shoreway obtained a grant from the city's Cityworks program for additional planning assistance and community involvement.

### **Conceptual plan**

The funds enabled the partners to hire City Architecture, a local architecture/urban planning firm that specializes in sensitive designs for urban neighborhoods. City Architecture staff began turning our ideas into drawings.

Centering on the area within a quarter-mile radius of the Rapid station (a quarter mile being convenient walking distance to a transit stop), they made base maps of the current land uses and parcels available for development. The base maps allowed us to begin thinking about locations for new housing, commercial development, bike and pedestrian linkages to the Rapid station, and opportunities to improve green space.

Most of all, we began to see how the Rapid station (which was deteriorated, dangerous and a detriment to the neighborhood) could become the focal point for the neighborhood. RTA was planning to rebuild the station. If a new station could be surrounded by stores and housing, it could become a lively activity center. Transit could be the catalyst for other development.

We realized that before such planning went too far we had to obtain more public input. So in December 1997 we invited neighborhood residents and interested design professionals from around the region to an all-day brainstorming workshop. More than 60 people gave up a Saturday to help us imagine what an ecovillage could look like. Drawing with markers on

the base plans provided by our architects, they created new visions for the neighborhood.

City Architecture then took all the workshop suggestions and created conceptual plan drawings. Included are ideas for more than 250 units of new housing, mixed-use commercial development clustered near the Rapid station, the possibility of building over the Rapid tracks, and places for habitat restoration and community gardens.

It should be understood that these drawings are not a formal neighborhood plan. Rather they are concepts that we hope will stimulate the imagination about what might be possible to

will stimulate the imagination about what might be possible to do at this site. It also should be emphasized that the drawings only show physical development, not the programs that might be part of an ecovillage. We also have lots of ideas for programs, from environmental education to job creation.

### **Next steps**

By early 1998, the Cleveland EcoVillage project was primed to take off. We had a promising site, support from the community and city officials, a strong partnership between an environmental group and an experienced neighborhood development organization, and an exciting concept plan.

All of the above work was organized by staff of EcoCity Cleveland and Detroit Shoreway who volunteered their time to the project. In order to carry the work beyond the conceptual planning phase, we realized that we needed to have full-time, paid staff. Therefore, the two organizations collaborated on a grant proposal to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for funding to hire an ecovillage project manager. After a competitive, national review process, we were fortunate to be one of 42 groups to receive funding (out of nearly 1,000 applicants). The grant went to Detroit Shoreway, and in 1999 the organization hired an EcoVillage project manager.

In 2000 and 2001, planning accelerated on physical development projects in the EcoVillage. In early 2002, construction will begin on a 20-unit town home development and a new Rapid Transit station. Both will be catalysts for additional green development in the neighborhood.

### **A home for new ideas**

We believe that the Cleveland EcoVillage project has tremendous potential. It can become an interdisciplinary place where many new ideas—and many partners—can find a home. It can demonstrate the best thinking about neighborhood redevelopment, ecological design, and sustainable communities.

It might even give Cleveland a new reputation as a green city—a city that takes less from the earth and gives more to people.

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