

From the seeds of intention

Ecovillages offer residents the chance to live in shared community while tending to the earth.

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These days, everyone seems to be going green. But for thousands, living a green lifestyle is a choice they made long ago: to live in a way that was most healthy for themselves, their families and for the earth.

Some do what they can like recycling, carpooling and installing solar panels on their roofs.

Others might join a community known as an ecovillage where the goal is to live an ecologically sustainable lifestyle, leaving the smallest possible footprint on the earth.

Ecovillage at Ithaca (EVI), N.Y., is one of the largest and most enduring ecovillages operating in the United States

(www.ecovillage.ithaca.ny.us). A leader in sustainable living education, its puts on programs at nearby Cornell University and Ithaca College, which attract visitors from around the world. EVI residents also teach local schoolchildren and lead classes as part of a country-wide initiative to live in a more environmentally sensitive way.

Situated on 176 acres of rolling meadow and forest, EVI has been around since 1991. Two distinct neighborhoods comprise the community, each consisting of clustered housing of duplexes and triplexes, in order to use less land and share building materials and energy. A third neighborhood is in the planning stages, for which 10 families, of an eventual 30, have already signed up.

The homes, which face due south, are built of natural materials, some of hay bale construction. Large thermal windows allow in sun for light and heat. Many of the homes have composting toilets. Each community shares a laundry area and recycling and composting centers.

Sixty households of about 110 adults and 60 children live comfortably on about seven acres, which include organic gardens, a pond and two common houses where meals and free time are shared. Meetings and administrative work also happen here.

The homes are built around open, shared space, where cars are not allowed, creating a safe zone for pedestrians and children.

EVI is part of Ithaca's car share, with one of the program's six cars assigned to the community. Residents who own cars park them in long carpools that also act as storage areas for each household. Hand wagons are stationed in various small sheds to transport groceries and other items from carport to home.

Two organic farms provide fruits and vegetables for the residents that are sold at the local farmers market and through a 200-member CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). Many residents grow additional food in smaller community and private gardens.

From the visitor's perspective, EVI slows life's hectic pace, with time seeming to expand. As they stroll down pathways in the sunset, stop to talk with neighbors and play with the children, admire private gardens, or walk out some of the trails through the woods, people who live there, and even visitors, seem more relaxed.

The phrase intentional community is an umbrella term covering a diversity of people, beliefs and lifestyles. But each type of intentional community is formed by people who share something in common, whether it's a culture, a religion, a hobby or something else. In reality, individuals have chosen to live in groups with like-minded others for centuries.

In addition to ecovillages, cohousing is another term that generally means a neighborhood developed and managed with input by its residents, usually with the help of an architect and other professionals. These people are looking for a sense of community they've been unable to find elsewhere, such as in the impersonal suburbs.

Pioneered in the 1960s in Denmark, the cohousing concept was brought to the United States about 20 years later by Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant, husband-and-wife architects who popularized cohousing through their book "Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves" and helped start the first cohousing community in the U.S. in Davis, Calif.

While it hasn't exactly been a booming business, transforming the face of American life, cohousing has caught on steadily, with about 113 established communities and an additional 250 in various stages of planning and development, according to Diana Leafé Christian, an expert on intentional communities.

Christian says that cohousing neighborhoods are accessible and appealing to those in search of "neighborliness" and a sense of connection.

"When people are walking on the path, and you can share dinner in a common house, with a



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children's area and meeting rooms, and you really know your neighbors, you feel safe," she says.

Although cohousing communities don't generally have a mission to change the world, many do incorporate elements of environmentalism into their missions.

Ecovillages are more focused on environmental sustainability.

"People who live in ecovillages live out ecological values," says Christian.

Land is owned in common, and work around the community, as well as play, is a shared experience. It's wise to be sure you are the type of person who can do both well with others before considering such a living arrangement.

"People drawn to cohousing communities are often cutting-edge thinkers and doers — often quite interested in the 'eco' features," says Liz Walker, co-founder and a resident of EVI.

She also co-founded GATA Education, a group of international educators who teach courses in environmental sustainability and ecovillage living in 15 different countries utilizing lessons learned from ecovillages around the world.

In Christian's community, Earthaven in North Carolina (www.earthaven.org), potential residents apply to join the community and if everyone feels they're a good fit, they are accepted.

It's to everyone's advantage that only people considered a good match for the community

actually join.

Planning a cohousing community or an ecovillage is an effort at balancing privately owned homes — EVI's average in the neighborhood of \$250,000 — with lots of independence and a strong sense of community, according to Walker.

"It's quite different from communes of the '60s, where you shared your income," she says. "You buy or rent your own house, but there are wonderful aspects of community life woven into these communities. Site and house design are meant to encourage interaction."

Empirical evidence suggests cohousing communities offer a healthier way of life for residents, and scientific studies have proven the same can be said about their being healthier for the planet.

Research in Munkesogaard, the 100-household ecovillage near Copenhagen, Denmark, shows households there use 38 percent less water and 25 percent less electricity than the average Danish household. Research in Germany offers similar findings.

Graduate students' studies in Ithaca several years ago revealed that EVI has an approximately 60 percent smaller "energy footprint" than average households in the area, according to Walker.

The bottom line is that ecovillages use less water, electricity and heating fuel. Clustering homes that are highly insulated and energy efficient, using renewable energy, carpooling or working at home, and growing much of one's food obviously have the desired results.

In her 2005 book, "Ecovillage at Ithaca," Walker calls EVI a "living laboratory that draws from the best alternative practices in land use, organic agriculture, community living, green building, and energy conservation."

But ecovillage living is not for everyone. And conflicts do arise.

"You have to have a willingness to contribute to the well-being of the whole; the confidence to live in community, accepting its agreements and mission; and a willingness to work and pitch in with what needs to be done," says Christian.

Walker and others like her are living on their own terms.

"It's a very powerful thing to create your dream," she says. "Many people are attracted to the model we've created here. It's not perfect, but something compelling is going on. People here care passionately about the earth and about creating community."

"We've learned lots of lessons and it's important for us, as a country, to change our lifestyles. We're so consumption-oriented that anything we can do to have a lighter step on the land is very important. Learning how to do that — not in isolation, but in concert with others — is difficult and challenging, but immensely rewarding."