

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

The International Ecological City Conference [Dispatches]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/13m2f14z>

Journal

Places, 6(4)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Bressi, Todd

Publication Date

1990-07-01

Peer reviewed

THE INTERNATIONAL ECOLOGICAL CITY CONFERENCE

Berkeley—Imagine what environmental activists would say about this: in the middle of a national forest, next to a pristine mountain lake, a new town with homes and jobs for 2,500 people is being built on what used to be a 1,100-acre ranch.

Turns out they like it. In fact, the project (Cerro Gordo, outside Eugene, Oregon) was praised last March at the International Ecological City Conference as an example of how cities should be built. The Conference was a gathering of activists, designers, planners and public officials interested in building “ecocities,” or cities that strike a better balance with nature.

The ecocity movement starts from the premise that cities are “out of sync with healthy life systems on earth, and [are] functioning in nearly complete disregard of [their] long-term sources

of sustenance,” writes Richard Register, president of Berkeley-based Urban Ecology, a conference sponsor.

But this is no back-to-nature ideal; cities are recognized as essential to human culture. “Something is very right about our life in cities,” writes Register. “We are putting together amazing projects and creations, big institutions and small inventions, exploring arts and sciences, ourselves and our universe, together. Cities serve this sociability and may well be ‘natural’ to us.”

Cities may be natural, but the conference made clear that the ecocity would demand a fundamental restructuring of the way we arrange our homes, work places, shopping and leisure activities over space. This would be necessary if we curtailed the use of automobiles, which, ecocity supporters rightly pointed out, give us remarkable mobility but exact an enormous toll in wasted time and energy.

Such a restructuring would also be necessary if our hypermobile society were to respect local natural character and ecological constraints. We would need to forge closer connections to the sources of energy, food and water that sustain us and to the flora and fauna that surround us—connections that would demand new approaches to architecture and landscape design.

The difficulty has been translating this vision into real places. Cerro Gordo is an idealistic attempt. Cars, the scourge of any ecocity, are banned. A thousand acres of the site will be left undeveloped. The town center is situated to avoid wildlife migration

paths. The town will produce enough food to meet most of its needs. The first industry makes trailers for bicycles—an efficient, ecologically sensitive means of transport.

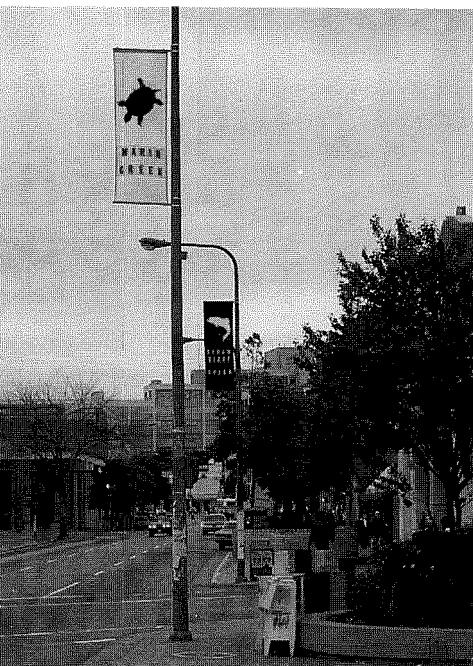
The conference reported on more modest efforts in existing cities; the degree to which ecological thinking has penetrated day-to-day design issues is impressive. Revolts against freeway construction are still alive. Community gardens can be found all over the country. Greenbelt and creek restoration projects are cropping up in older cities while newer cities are likely to preserve wetlands and include open space networks from the start.

But these are only fledgling first steps towards building ecocities. Most have resulted from grass-roots political action, of which ecocity supporters are justifiably proud, but has not triggered fundamental changes in suburban sprawl or urban overbuilding. Moreover, significant environmental victories like tougher air and water quality standards and recycling amount to little more than crisis management.

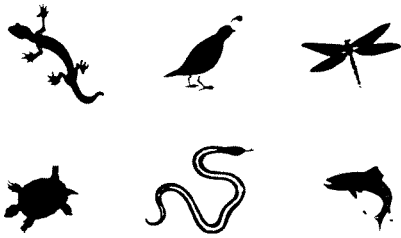
The problem, and the opportunity, lies in the fact that cities are shaped by an accumulation of unrelated decisions that are made every day by local governments, businesses and individuals—decisions that range from zoning changes to planning approvals to renting a new store or buying a new home.

To influence these decisions, the ecocity movement must focus on next steps, not ultimate products. It must help us answer questions such as, should vacant urban land be used for mixed housing and commercial development, or for community gardens? Will a skyscraper atop a transit station be a useful concentration of density, or a further isolation of the megalopolis from the resources that sustain it?

For the answers to be convincing, they must translate principles of ecoci-



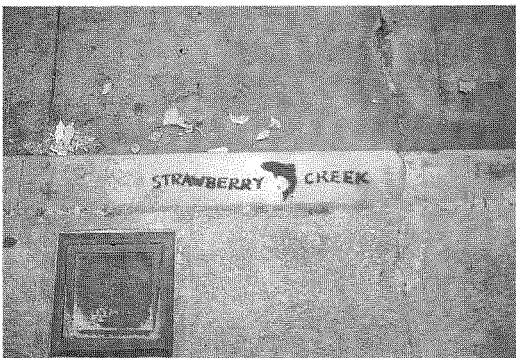
Banners in downtown Berkeley are one of the few reminders of the city's creeks, most of which have been buried in culverts.



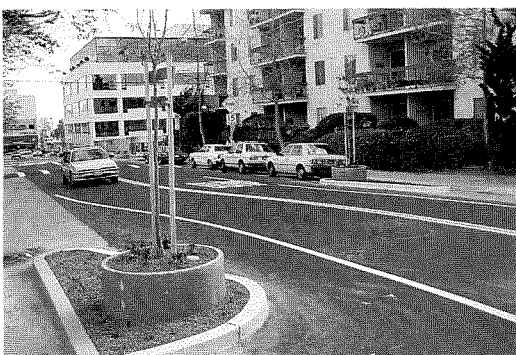
ty design into a concrete vision of how familiar neighborhoods and streets could be transformed—visions residents could embrace and act upon.

The ecocity conference suggested relationships among nature, resources, the economy and people that would be the foundation of new communities, and a new sense of place. But to engage people in its ultimate vision, the ecocity movement must speak the language of place in the most specific terms possible, and in communities that already exist today.

—Todd W. Bressi



Painted curb markers show the original routes of Berkeley's creeks. Each creek is assigned a unique logo (above).



Curves and speed bumps in the Milvia "slow street" discourage auto use.

WILL "LE MICKEY" PLAY IN PARIS?

Paris—At first the idea of a Disneyland located in France seems unlikely, if not downright unpatriotic. In a country whose cultural pride and self-assurance are unequaled, Mickey and Minnie's \$2.9 billion invasion spread across nearly 5,000 acres appears too fantastic. Why import a surrogate American Main Street, a reproduction Mississippi riverboat, or animated versions of Grimm's fairy tales to Europe? Isn't such fantasy the stuff of Hollywood? Don't people travel to Europe because it's *real*?

Euro Disneyland, planned to open in 1992 (coincident with further development of the European Common Market and the connection of Great Britain to mainland Europe by high-speed rail), is France's opening bid to become the recreation capital of Europe. An open expanse of countryside is being converted to support a new cash crop: tourists. Through clever financing and adroit operation, Disney, an entertainment giant made wealthy by theme parks, movies and allied product sales, stands to enhance profits greatly while teaching new generations of Europeans to sing: "M-I-C! K-E-Y! M-O-U-S-E...!"

The numbers are incredible. Proected attendance for the first year is 11 million. But this is for only the first theme park, a 500-room hotel and 595-visitor camping ground. When complete, Euro Disneyland will have two theme parks, a total of 18,200 hotel rooms, 2,100 camp sites, a 15-acre "entertainment center," 173 acres