

A Home-Grown Ecovillage on Our Street

By Jim Schenk 1885 words

The seeds of Enright Ridge Eco-Village actually began 31 years ago as a compromise between my wife Eileen, who was city born, and myself, a native of a small rural town. We struggled to find a home that would nourish both of our souls. I wanted a neighborhood that valued green living, with protected land, organic food, resource conservation, alternative energy, and cooperative relationships with happy children and older people. Eileen supported these same values, but insisted that the urban neighborhood she lived in was the perfect location. She pointed out an urban environment offered the best chance for creating a village like community because of the numbers of people there with their proximity to each other, public transportation and options for employment. So we moved to a dead-end street in Cincinnati's Price Hill neighborhood. While Enright Avenue is a half-mile street on a ridge surrounded by 200-plus acres of woods, it's only minutes from downtown Cincinnati and our places of work.

Price Hill, an inner-ring neighborhood in Cincinnati built in the early part of the 20th century, was one of the last areas of local farmland to become urban, but once building began, soon reached a population of 40,000. Price Hill was the last of the neighborhoods in Cincinnati in which houses began to age and deteriorate, followed by speculators buying them up and renting them out. The real estate practices of predatory lending, lease-options to buy, and ramped property foreclosures further degraded the housing and quality of life in the neighborhood.

In 1978 Eileen and I founded, Imago, a nonprofit educational organization in Price Hill. Our idea was to look at how we would live if we held the Earth and its people as sacred, and offer workshops and conferences about sustainability. Imago eventually purchased eight acres of wooded area about a quarter mile down the street from our house on Enright Avenue, and began an outdoor Earth center which helps 10,000 school children annually connect with the natural world.

In 1993, 15 residents of Price Hill came together to look at how Imago might take a step toward actually walking its talk. We decided to develop a model for revitalizing a transitioning neighborhood into an ecological neighborhood. With suburban sprawl

destroying huge tracks of land, we concluded that the human population would be more beneficially located in urban areas. For this to happen, urban areas needed to become very livable places. An ecological neighborhood would be that type of place.

Through brochures, a video, and community presentations, this group of neighbors started promoting this concept throughout Price Hill. We received a six-year grant in 1998 to work to develop the Seminary Square Ecovillage in Price Hill, a 50-block area at the entrance-way to the neighborhood. The concept was that developing an ecovillage in this 50-block area would serve as a model for the rest of the community.

Over a six-year period much was accomplished in the Seminary Square project—block clubs were formed, street trees planted, parks improved, the facades of many businesses improved, and six houses and three offices buildings eco-rehabilitated.

However, despite the many improvements, the ecovillage never came to fruition. A study of the project concluded that it didn't happen for four reasons:

- The project began in the most deteriorated area of Price Hill.
- There was a huge influx of relatively transient renters into the neighborhood during this time.
- The 50-block area was too large.
- The project began without a large group of residents in the area being committed to the ecovillage concept.

After reviewing these conclusions it became obvious that the ideal place to begin an urban Ecovillage project would be in the very area where Imago began and where its Earth Center was located. Along with the extensive woods, 25 of the 90 households on this street have ecological values. The housing is stable, moderately priced, with the majority of houses owned by their inhabitants. Through a program that Imago initiated in the early 1990s, two-thirds of the houses were insulated; many also with installation of energy-efficient, double-glazed windows, low-watt florescent light bulbs, and energy-efficient furnaces. Most households on our street recycle. Two bus lines run within a few minutes walk from the street. A solid business district is nearby and downtown Cincinnati is a seven-minute drive or fifteen-minute bus ride away.

In June of 2004, after Eileen and I had lived on the street for 30 years, we and 17 other residents met, and using a process called Appreciative Inquiry, began looking at what we liked about our street, and from this assessment, brainstormed what we would “like to see more of” in our lives on the street. After coming up with a list of 38 items we prioritized them into four areas, and set up working committees to accomplish these goals. The four areas were:

1. An improved image of the street both among residents and those off the street.
2. A walking trail through the woods around the street.
3. Shared meals with residents on the street.
4. A better relationship between children and adults.

A professional photographer and a graphic artist, both of whom are involved with the project, developed a brochure for our retrofit community, which we decided to call Enright Ridge Eco-Village. We wrote “Enright Ridge” on large street planters and placed them at the entrance to the street to slow traffic into this dead-end street and help define the area. We created a two-mile walking trail through the woods behind houses on both sides of the street and encircling the ridge. We began hosting monthly meals, inviting all residents on the street. The Imago Earth Center, with funds collected from residents on the street, provided a staff person to offer after-school and summer, outdoor programs for children on the street. We wrote a mission statement: “Enright Ridge Eco-Village, a community inspiring Earth-friendly living, nurtures an intimate and prosperous neighborhood within its uniquely forested urban setting in Price Hill in Cincinnati, Ohio.”

Soon afterwards we decided we needed to bring together the other people in the Enright Ridge area to support the ecovillage concept. One of our members had been studying with Peter Block, a national organizational consultant located in Cincinnati. Peter Block’s underlying principle is “Contact comes before content.” In other words, people need to know each other before they can start working together. We began with a series of dialogues that brought an average of 15 people from the street together to get to know each other better, both as neighbors and in their relationship to the street neighborhood.

After four meetings with this group the content began to emerge. One of the difficulties with an urban ecovillage project with people who already live in an area is how to involve all residents in the process. We started to involve others by distributing four issues of an Enright Ridge Eco-village newsletter and the Eco-village brochure to all residents. People welcomed these efforts. People were open to this mainly because homeowners feared a major decline in housing values if our neighborhood didn’t do something to reverse the trend of decline. We decided to further involve the neighborhood through a process called Treasure Mapping, in which residents would reveal the treasures of our neighborhood by making a collage together. We built a box with four sides, each four feet by four feet. Each side had a focus: Our Homes, Our People Our Children, Greening Our Neighborhood, and Promoting Our Neighborhood. We divided our street into 10 sections. We recruited two host families from each section

to invite and draw people to participate in the collage. On a Saturday in September, 2005, starting at 10 am, the collage box, loaded on a truck, began its move through the neighborhood. At every section along the street we unloaded the collage box off the truck onto a table so people could reach all four sides. We laid out a stack of old magazines, markers, and scissors along with food and drinks. The host households drew people out of their homes and invited them to visually express their dreams for the neighborhood by cutting out images from the magazines to paste on the four sides of the collage or draw or write on it. As the collage evolved, moving along the street throughout the day, an incredible array of ideas and thoughts emerged on the four sides of the box.

We consider the collage the jumping-off point for the next level of involvement in further developing our street as a retrofit urban ecovillage.

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Pull quotes:

More than a fourth of the households on this street have ecological values.

People need to know each other before they can start working together.

We decided to develop a model for revitalizing a transitioning neighborhood into an ecological neighborhood.

Sidebar

Why Urban?

We're frequently asked why we're going to this effort to create an urban ecovillage in an existing street with existing neighbors, given the good reasons for creating a rural ecovillage as a whole new project. It's so much easier to develop sustainable homes, alternative energy systems, constructed wetlands, and so on from scratch on raw land.

Rural areas often have fewer zoning regulations and building codes than urban areas where many alternative materials or waste-water systems are illegal or at least frowned upon. And the site plan of a new ecovillage can encourage and support human interaction and a sense of connection along paths and in common areas where people will naturally congregate. Ecovillage projects which develop from scratch and have shared property ownership and membership criteria can also make sure that residents are like-minded and committed to the community's common vision, purpose, values, and goals.

In an "urban retrofit" ecovillage with existing neighbors, however:

- Usually the houses were built many years previously with unsustainable materials and no awareness of energy- or resource-conservation.
- Streets are laid out in such a way that encourages car use and anonymity and reduces the likelihood of meeting or conversing with neighbors, so it's difficult to get to know everyone.
- Because any resident can sell or rent their house to any buyer or tenant of their choice, there is little to no control over who will live in the neighborhood.

On the positive side, however:

- It is not necessary to begin building on raw land using newly harvested or manufactured materials – the dwellings are already here.
- For that reason, no time is spent struggling to agree on a site plan, design and build buildings and alternative systems, etc. The focus is on improving the present situation.
- Retrofitting existing buildings costs far less than building from the ground up.
- The neighborhood is located minutes from a business district and close to job opportunities.

Possibly the most important reason for developing an urban retrofit-neighborhood ecovillage is that the majority of people in our country and in the world now live in urban areas. Urban sprawl and the destruction of habitat, excessive energy consumption, and loss of community can be reversed if we can make our urban neighborhoods life-sustaining. We can change the face of our cities and our countryside if we are successful. This is the dream of Enright Ridge Eco-Village.

—J.S.