

# Ecovillages in the Rust Belt

## What is an ecovillage?

Political scientist Karen Litfin defines an ecovillage as “a gathering of individuals into a cohesive unit large enough to be self-contained—that’s why it’s a village—and dedicated to living by ecologically sound precepts,”<sup>1</sup> through practices like building green housing, starting farms and community gardens, and using renewable energy and water catchment systems. Ecovillages as a distinct concept began with the founding of the Findhorn Ecovillage in Scotland and the creation of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN); today they are located all around the world. GEN describes an ecovillage as “an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designing its pathway through locally owned, participatory processes...Ecovillages are living laboratories pioneering beautiful alternatives and innovative solutions. They are rural or urban settlements with vibrant social structures, vastly diverse, yet united in their actions towards low-impact, high-quality lifestyles.”<sup>2</sup> Ecovillages range from city neighborhoods to rural farms, but they all focus on **four forms of sustainability**: ecological, social, economic, and cultural.

Ecovillages are not just about living in a green world—they actively try to create a more equitable and caring world, too. **Ecovillages can address many inequalities in varying ways by greening vacant lots; returning ownership of vacant lots to the community; building green and sustainable communities; promoting economic development; increasing quality of life; and providing residents with access to public transit, food, job training, and child care.** Ecovillages are specific to where they are located, and they feature a wide range of different approaches and practices. Organizers typically take a bottom-up approach and include public debate during the planning process.

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Through the planning process, ecovillagers reimagine civic life while also building on already existing assets of a neighborhood.

Ecovillages are intentional, and successful ecovillages carefully plan the development process by breaking it down into achievable phases. Successful ecovillages never end the process of creation; they are constantly creating and recreating their community based on the current moment.<sup>3</sup> Running an ecovillage requires everyone’s constant commitment to each other. This commitment and mutualism allows ecovillages to react and adapt to changes in the community, and this commitment is rooted in their directly democratic nature. Putting community control in the hands of members is one of many reasons that ecovillages provide an excellent model for sustainable and community-based development in Buffalo and elsewhere.

### Characteristics of ecovillages:

- All ecovillages incorporate environmentally friendly practices. These practices are varied, but examples are community gardens, renewable energy, water catchment systems, green housing and urban agriculture.
- Many ecovillages use ownership models with a cooperative element, such as co-housing. However, in some ecovillages, ownership of homes is private, but there are communal spaces such as gardens, workshops, dining halls, classrooms, or hostels.
- Many ecovillages incorporate an educational mission for members or non-members, such as vocational training, primary and secondary education, and trainings in things such as nonviolent communication and grassroots organizing.



## Ecovillage Examples in the Rust Belt

Over the course of 2021, I interacted directly with four ecovillages and traveled to three of them. These ecovillages take various approaches and represent a heterogenous group. All four ecovillages are located in the Rust Belt—Cleveland OH, Highland Park MI, Ithaca NY, and Gibsonia PA. Like Buffalo, these are all areas where coping with post-industrial decline has proved a challenge, and these ecovillages tackle Rust Belt problems in varying ways.

### Cleveland EcoVillage<sup>4, 5</sup>

Cleveland EcoVillage (CEV) was founded in the early 2000s through a partnership of several stakeholders, including City of Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Detroit-Shoreway Community Development Organization, EcoCity Cleveland, and Cleveland State University.<sup>6</sup> Collaboration amongst these stakeholders and community members was crucial in the creation and success of CEV.

CEV was created after community members rallied around the possible loss of a public transit hub and creation of a thruway that would have cut the Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood in half. The CEV ecovillage is somewhat unusual, in that it is dispersed throughout the neighborhood. There are several models for housing in CEV. For example, CEV does lease-purchase housing—after 15 years of leasing, the lessee has the option to buy the home based on equity accrued in lease payments. CEV also features a multi-use apartment complex and townhomes. There's no governing structure that is led by the ecovillagers—operations are managed by Detroit-Shoreway Community Development Organization (DSCDO). DSCDO consults ecovillagers and community members whenever taking on projects and expansions. DSCDO also manages business properties in the Gordon Square Arts District, which is an area of focused economic



Example of a tiny home at CEV.



Pocket-park maintained by CEV at Bridge Ave. and W 58<sup>th</sup> St.

revival close to CEV. In the ecovillage there are several “tiny homes” included in a mix of new infill housing, older rehabs, and townhomes. CEV’s models for green building have become LEED certified<sup>7</sup> and follow the standards that the City of Cleveland uses. Much of the housing in CEV is subsidized by Cleveland to encourage developers to build affordable housing.

**The Avalon Village (Highland Park, MI)<sup>8</sup>**

The Avalon Village was founded by Shamayim ‘Shu’ Harris, and sits in Highland Park, Michigan, which is a small municipality contained within the City of Detroit. Harris’, “dream of building this urban oasis was manifested after the tragic loss of her son, Jakobi Ra, who was killed by a hit and run driver in 2007 at the age of two. Rather than fall into despair, Shu chose to heal and honor Jakobi’s memory by transforming blight to beauty and creating something wonderful for the people of Highland Park. She assembled a team of engineers, futurists, artists, urban farmers, volunteers and donors from around the world who are helping to build Avalon Village, a sustainable eco-village on Avalon Street between Woodward and Second.”<sup>9</sup>

While the Avalon may be exceptional in terms of how the ecovillage was formed, its four-fold approach to sustainability and focus on empowering marginalized citizens makes the Avalon an example of how ecovillage development begins at the grassroots level. The current focus of the Avalon is on revitalizing the local economy, beautifying the neighborhood, and supporting local youth.

Parcel by parcel, Harris and her neighbors have been able to change the narrative regarding their blighted block. Harris has appeared on the Ellen Show and led a Kickstarter campaign that raised over \$240,000 in a month with donors from over 90 countries. Harris has a background in education, and youth are a focus; the Avalon features a homework house, which services youth in the area,



*Above: The Avalon’s Homework House, which is a refurbished, formerly blighted property.*

*Below: Vacant lot owned by the Avalon. The site of a former gas station, the State of Michigan helped remediate the land. The Avalon aims to open a community café here.*



*One of the street lights at the Avalon. Community partners and stakeholders sponsored the installation of lights, along with the Highland Park nonprofit Soulardarity.*

providing food, shelter, and a space to do school work. The Avalon is currently working on building a STEM lab for students out of an old cargo container. There is an outdoor space with a stage—Harris is an ordained minister—where weddings and other community events can be held. The Avalon plans to build an urban garden and community café, as well as refurbish some older vacant homes on the block.

In 2011, Highland Park’s street lights were repossessed and scrapped to settle a debt the city had to an energy provider. Partnering with local nonprofit Soulardarity and various community backers, several green and WIFI-capable street lights have been installed at the Avalon.<sup>10</sup> The Avalon uses shipping containers and rehabs them; they currently use this for the Goddess Marketplace, which promotes women entrepreneurs every Saturday. The Avalon is also currently working on creating a STEM learning lab for kids using a refurbished shipping container. There are five houses in the Avalon. They were all there prior to the creation of the ecovillage and weren’t built to any green standards; these homes were the only properties on the block that were not blighted. The homes are not owned by the Avalon, but residents are all part of the burgeoning ecovillage community. There are two abandoned homes that the Avalon has acquired that will be torn down or renovated. The Avalon has slowly expanded outwards, and one problem the Avalon has faced is speculative real estate purchasing by out-of-town buyers.

**Ecovillage Ithaca<sup>11</sup>**

As per location, Ithaca is an outlier in the group. While not traditionally considered a Rust Belt city due to its smaller size and rural location, the college town is home to Ecovillage Ithaca (EVI), which is one of the largest cohousing communities in the world and was founded 1991. In terms of ecovillages, EVI is a global leader and is currently a member ecovillage of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). EVI features permaculture designing and five large farms that feed residents of EVI and Ithaca. EVI, Inc., the



**Above:** Homes in the SONG neighborhood of EVI. Instead of mowed lawns they have native wildflower patches that are low maintenance and attract pollinators.

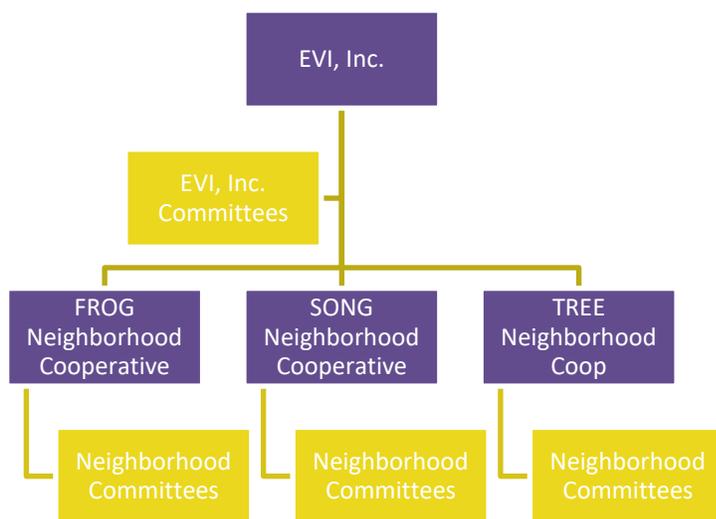
**Below:** The SONG Neighborhood common house, which includes a community kitchen and dining space, a game room, and a community library.



ecovillage’s nonprofit organization, operates the Thrive Education Center, which is a fiscally sponsored project of the Center for Transformative Action at Cornell University. Thrive leads local, national, and international educational programming on topics including community sustainability practices, personal wellness, social action, climate resilience and ecovillage design.<sup>12</sup>

EVI has a cooperative model for ownership and governance of the ecovillage: there's one overall cooperative that runs the entirety of EVI, and there are three smaller coops for each of the three neighborhoods/developments. There are various committees that ecovillagers can join, and each committee takes care of different facets of the ecovillage (e.g. membership, cook team, maintenance, gardening, etc.). EVI uses a consensus model for governing the coops with elected boards and a unanimous decision-making process.

All the buildings in EVI are built to green standards and LEED certified. EVI features three neighborhoods—FROG, SONG, and TREE—each of which has a common house. Ecovillagers are expected to contribute 2-4 hours of labor per week in the common areas; EVI is a very tight knit community. All the neighborhoods are built for pedestrians; there are parking lots, and ecovillagers walk to their homes. This contributes to community-building—



### Benefits of ecovillages:

- **Cohesion**—The intentional nature of ecovillages encourages community members to work together to create a living unit based on shared interests and common goals. All ecovillages have shared spaces, and many have community houses that help further foster and grow community.
  - **Healthier and happier communities**—A physically healthier and greener space can help grow healthier relationships among community members, and the creation and maintenance of shared spaces continues to reinforce all four types of sustainability.
- Addressing Inequality**—Ecovillages address spatial inequality by greening vacant lots and returning ownership of lots to the community. Ecovillages can provide residents with access to food, job training, and green, affordable housing. Many ecovillages incorporate social justice initiatives within their mission.
- **Ecovillages are focused on people**—Ecovillages empower people by providing an inclusive framework for social and natural regeneration. Ecovillages strengthen communities by providing the tools for the success of individuals, and ultimately, the whole community.

interactions amongst ecovillagers are very spontaneous and occur regularly at EVI. Interaction also helps reinforce the resiliency of the ecovillage—everyone knows and can lean on one another. EVI is privately financed, and most of the residences are owned, however, some owners rent out their properties. Over 80% of EVI’s 175 acres are dedicated public green space, and 50 acres are held in a conservation easement with the Finger Lakes Land Trust.

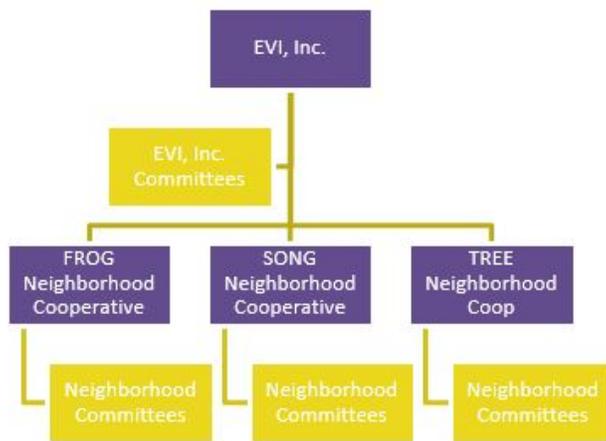
**Rachel Carson Ecovillage** (Gibsonia, PA)<sup>13</sup>

Rachel Carson Ecovillage (RCEV) will be located at Chatham University’s Eden Campus in Gibsonia, PA (20 miles north of Pittsburgh). RCEV is still in the planning phase and yet to break ground, but they are currently expecting to be done with construction in 2022. RCEV has a homeownership model, and will feature 30-35 private units ranging in sizes, as well as a community house. The development of RCEV has been divided into phases with certain expectations set before development moves to the next phase. Those expectations are guided by the gradual recruitment of future ecovillagers and the process of raising money to privately finance construction of RCEV. RCEV has a “sociocracy” governing structure that is based on consensus governing. What RCEV should and will look like is debated openly, and by doing this, all ecovillagers at RCEV arrive at the same conclusion through mutual agreement via the sociocratic process. This sense of empowerment through sociocracy and shared governance is something RCEV tries to sell future ecovillagers on.



**Above:** Newly built community garden and gathering space at the Avalon.

**Below:** Public transit stop at CEV with a community board and pantry.



Organizational chart for EVI, Inc.

## Ecovillages and Buffalo

Haluza-Delay and Berezan define a distributed ecovillage as a community network that reinforces and produces lifestyle practices and institutional forms that are ecologically sound.<sup>14</sup> Buffalo has a wealth of community-based organizations, block clubs, community gardens, nonprofits, and other similar organizations, as well as active citizens, who can provide this type of community network. There is a great amount of intersection between ecovillages and work already being done in Buffalo because ecovillages are one possible way to address climate and environmental justice, both of which intersect with addressing all inequalities. Local organizations such as PUSH Buffalo, Massachusetts Avenue Project, Grassroots Gardens WNY, and Fruit Belt Community Land Trust are already committed, and have had success, in tackling a variety of local issues. The Green Development Zone on Buffalo's West Side can in fact be thought of as a distributed ecovillage network.

Elsewhere, CEV and the Avalon have taken the approach of collaboration with a variety of community stakeholders. Building upon already existing community relationships makes the project more feasible, thus helping ensure the ecovillages are well supported in their missions and are successful. Ecovillages reinforce already existing civic infrastructures—especially those structures and organizations that run adjacent to government and help fill in the gaps. A core part of an ecovillage, distributed or otherwise, is reciprocity and mutual aid amongst a variety of actors and stakeholders.

Like other Rust Belt cities, Buffalo faces the problem of having vast swaths of vacant land and yet a severe shortage of affordable, sustainable housing. There are over 16,000 vacant lots in Buffalo,<sup>15</sup> and ecovillages offer a model for developing and utilizing vacant land—turning a detriment to the city into an asset. Ecovillages are often mixed-use and combine a variety of functions—residential, commercial, public, and agricultural. Developing vacant land and building affordable homes draws in residents, and in the process, helps rebuild the city's tax base and revitalize neighborhoods. Buffalo also has a great need for affordable housing, as “more than

half of Buffalo households (50.6 percent) cannot afford their rent,” and 23% of households have severe housing cost burdens.<sup>16</sup> Areas of Buffalo with inadequate access to public transportation, supermarkets, healthcare and pharmacies, banking, and green space will benefit from having more residents, and ecovillages can play a role in expanding access to basic services. In turn, all of Buffalo can reap the rewards that an ecovillage can begin to sow.

## Conclusions

The first step in the creation of any ecovillage will be consulting community members in order to build from the ground up. This is evidenced by the recently announced and carbon-neutral Niagara Ecovillage in Lockport, NY.<sup>17</sup> Ecogreen Development LLC will be seeking community input and holding public meetings in the belief that, “it’s better for us to have something they’ve [community members] invested in and something they want.”<sup>18</sup> In order for community input to be sought, public and private funds should be made available to community groups and nonprofits in Buffalo with a plan to explore the ecovillage concept. Since the ecovillage concept is malleable, it’s less a question of ‘does an ecovillage fit here?’ and more a question of ‘what does an ecovillage look like to the people that live here currently?’

The success of many ecovillages is founded on the collaboration of a variety of stakeholders, as each stakeholder or community partner brings their own assets to the table. The coalition of partners that created CEV was successful because they remained focused and committed to realizing the vision of community members. Working together in the Buffalo nonprofit sector is the norm, but support from municipal government has been a weakness—CEV wouldn’t have happened and succeeded without the City of Cleveland’s support. Local governments are starting points, but they are also end points when they choose not to act. Too often the City of Buffalo is an end point in efforts of community-based development.



**Above:** A multi-use apartment building with commercial space at CEV.

**Below:** A blighted property near the Avalon that was recently purchased by an out-of-town landlord.



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