

Green & Intentional

by John Herberg

Jan Spencer lives off River Road in a ranch-style house converted into what he calls a "living boycott" of the economic system: The house uses less energy and makes more use of "what's already onsite: water, soil and sun." Spencer has no lawn. Instead he uses that space as a garden to grow much of his food. Instead of purchasing non-local, petroleum-based fertilizers, he composts his waste, which also makes for less waste to be hauled away. Instead of depending entirely on water being pumped in from the city, he catches rainwater from his roof into two 1,600-gallon drums. Instead of depending on imported power to heat his water tank, he has a solar hot water heater. Instead of depending on an imported-fuel consuming automobile, he rides a bike.

Spencer and his like-minded neighbors participate in a neighborhood co-op. He defines it as a "network of people who want to develop more neighborhood-oriented activities, so you don't have to go driving off into town." For example, they have regular work parties in which members meet at someone's house and help that person with a project, such as gardening. But Spencer says, "It goes way beyond work parties." They share tools and knowledge, watch each other's children, and have gatherings, fun, and conversation. Even the kids get involved by having their own work parties where they help each other with chores. The neighborhood co-op contributes to what Jan calls "local culture," which fits in with his philosophy of satisfying needs closer to home.

Similar to many intentional communities, part of the purpose of this suburban renewal project is to act as a model for the future. Spencer believes, "Over time the political, economic system will lead to more people doing similar things...As the political, economic system becomes more unpleasant, intentional communities will be considered as germinations." He would like to see his neighborhood move toward a retrofitted co-housing system in which existing houses would be gradually added, fences removed, and more resources shared.

Maitreya

If you've traveled along Broadway east of Chambers, you may have noticed a meandering earthen wall embedded with mailboxes, stained glass and glass bottle bottoms. Beyond the wall are several houses — among them a triplex, a greenhouse and a bike garage — all surrounding a large community garden. This is Maitreya EcoVillage, and it isn't what owners Rob Bolman and his mother had in mind when they bought the property. They were thinking more about a retirement investment.

But over time Bolman learned more about green and natural building, appropriate

technologies, and permaculture (a design philosophy that focuses on sustainability and integration of landscape). For Bolman "the natural thing was to put all those together into a whole integrated package that would be more than the sum of its parts. The EcoVillage would be a microcosm of the larger world that I'd like to live in." The houses at Maitreya have been built using a variety of techniques and materials: There are cob and straw bale buildings, as well as a triplex built with natural building materials and techniques; the bike garage has a "living roof" with vegetation growing on top.

As an intentional community, Maitreya could be considered a hybrid. The land is owned by an individual, as opposed to a land trust, and most people generate their incomes offsite. But Maitreya does promote sharing and community more than the conventional American neighborhood. A share list is being created to list possessions residents would be willing to share with others; residents get together regularly for potlucks and parties; and there are weekly work parties from spring through fall in the garden.

Where Maitreya fits on the intentional community spectrum is in transition. According to Melanie Rios, one of the community's 15 to 20 residents, it is still in its "nascent phase." Residents are exploring the idea of a land trust, and Bolman's vision for the

future includes income generation onsite through a café and furniture-building business.

Similar to Spencer's River Road neighborhood, Maitreya also acts as a model. According to Bolman, "Models like this will grow, thrive and spread. Eventually they'll serve as a structure that exists to replace the dominant paradigm when it begins to fall apart of its own dead weight." In the future, he would like to see other houses in the neighborhood become part of the community, and to see the community spread beyond. He talks of having people with a similar vision moving into "dysfunctional communities" where they can be "bold pioneers to tame the urban wilderness."

Sugar Fisk, another resident, chooses to live this way because she's drawn by the social, close, family environment in which people play together and support each other. She says, "It's life-giving to live here. ... Living in this system increases my energy level to interact with my neighbors in a joyful, loving way... I've grown more as a person than I ever would have without it." Rios describes it as, "Synergistic. I like helping each other out."

One of the biggest obstacles for intentional communities is the misunderstanding that the rest of society has about them. Fisk says, "Although Maitreya's surrounding neighborhood is accepting, generally intentional communities are isolated and therefore there are lots of misconceptions about them. You can hear people asking, 'What is it they do over there anyway?'" She would like to see intentional communities "integrate into mainstream culture and for people to see it as a viable option for an alternative way to live and see how simple it is."

EW

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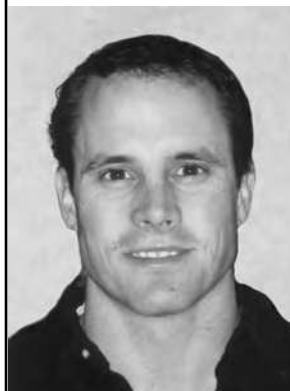
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