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THE INTERNATIONAL
ECOLOGICAL CITY
CONFERENCE

Bekeley — Imagine what environmental-
activists would say about this: in the
middle of a national forest, next to a
private mountain lake, a new town
with homes and jobs for 2,500 people
is being built on what used to be a
1,000-acre ranch.

It's not quite as restrictive as it seems. The project (Cerro Goedo, outside Eugene, Oregon) was praised last March at the
International Ecological City Confere-
ence as an example of how cities
should be built. The project was a
gathering of activists, designers, plan-
ners and public officials interested in
building “ecocities,” or cities that
strive for a better balance with nature.

The ecocity movement stems 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 Regis-
ter, president of Berkeley-based Urban
Ecology, a conference sponsor.

But this is no back-to-nature idea;
cities are recognized as essential to hu-
man 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 uni-
verse, together. Cities serve this soci-
bility and may well be ‘natural’ to us."

Cities may be natural, but the con-
ference made clear that the ecocity
would demand a fundamental restruc-
turing 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 sup-
porters rightly pointed out, give us
remarkable mobility but exact an enor-
mous 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 fledging first
steps towards building ecocities. Most
have resulted from grassroots political
action, of which ecocity supporters are
justifiably proud, but has not triggered
fundamental changes in suburban
sprawl or urban overbuilding. More-
over, significant environmental victo-
ries like tougher air and water quality
standards and recycling amount to lit-
tle 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 gov-
ernments, businesses and individuals
—decisions that range from zoning
to planning approvals to ren-
ing 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 de-
velopment, 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 ecos-
ty design into a concrete vision of how familiar neighborhoods and streets could be transformed—vision 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. Bresi

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 3,000 acres appears too fantastic. Why import a surrogate American Main Street, a reproduction Mississippi riverboat, or animated version 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-N-E-Y”

The numbers are incredible: Proceeded 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

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 Minnie “slow street” discourage auto use.