



Ecocities

SETTING THE STANDARDS

By Kirstin Miller and Sven Eberlein

Google the word “ecocity” and you’ll get over a half million hits, ranging from “Ecocity Vehicles” to “Sex and the Ecocity.” Ecocity is fast becoming a buzzword among urban greenies, both on- and offline. With climate change front and center in our public discourse, this sudden interest in urban planning and development comes as no surprise: Home to over half of the world’s population on less than one percent of the earth’s surface, cities consume over two-thirds of the world’s energy and account for more than 70 percent of global CO₂ emissions. There is growing consensus that the path to reversing climate change must lead through cities.

In many ways, this is a welcome acknowledgment of the tremendous role urban design can and must play in changing our wasteful ways and reducing our global carbon footprint. However, as with the terms “green” and “sustainable,” the rising popularity and widespread use of “ecocity” has brought with it the need to define what it actually means and what it should be used for. Not unlike greenwashing, “ecocity” used as a feel-good word for any town with a bike lane or a recycling program can hurt the cause of building and reclaiming an integrated urban ecosystem more than it helps.

At what point then, does a city graduate from boasting a collection of “eco-scores” to becoming an actual ecocity?

Fortunately, a lot of footwork (pun intended) has already been done in answering this question: from when Ecocity Builders President Richard Register first coining the term in 1979 to the current development of International Ecocity Standards (www.ecocitybuilders.org/IESproject.html), the ecocity model is a well-

seasoned concept already being applied in cities around the world and is on its way to becoming a globally recognized metric. After twenty years of fine-tuning and eight international ecocity conferences, urban planners and governments worldwide are poised to submit their cities to an evaluation process comparable to the USGBC’s LEED ratings system for buildings.

But let’s back up just a bit...

What is an Ecocity?

“Eco” is derived from “Oikos,” the ancient Greek equivalent of a household or family, in which everyone works together to create a functioning unit. Similarly, eco *cities* are conditional upon a healthy *relationship* of a city’s parts and functions rather than just a laundry list of random “green features.” While there are single categories such as *transportation*, *buildings* or *industries* that play important roles in defining a city, ecocities’ complex living systems interact three-dimensionally and in relatively close proximity, not unlike our human bodies.

The key word here is proximity. If there is a single defining feature of a lean and functioning eco-city, it would be the ability of its residents to access most basic goods and services by foot, bicycle or public transportation, preferably in that order. While a complete phase-out is not realistic at this point, the staggering environmental costs associated with the automobile (ranging from the extraction

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of raw materials to production, road building, disposal, petroleum depletion, and CO₂ emissions) should keep driving at the very bottom of this inverted pyramid. Using the analogy of our human body, the automobile is like a 5000-calorie daily diet, a burden on the system that negatively impacts all other organs and our overall health; any serious attempt at establishing an ecocity infrastructure must keep car-free, pedestrian designs at its core.

“Density done well” has been a description used by many municipalities who have been working on implementing ecocity principles into their city plan. Brent Toderian, Director of Planning for the City of Vancouver, Canada, also calls it “The Power of Nearness,” expressing a changing shift in perception about urban living. While a century of unimaginative urban planning has branded cities into our collective consciousness as drab and anonymous concrete jungles, a new generation of planners and architects are showing how rich and fulfilling city life can be when vital services and cultural offerings are within walking or biking distance. Think of it as a network of walkable urban villages, each one reflecting its own community’s needs and aesthetics, linked to each other and to a strong downtown by public transit, with room for urban agriculture, creek corridors and greenways.

Good for the Triple Bottom Line

In the past, a common obstacle for ecocity advocates was the conventional wisdom that anything less than direct automobile access would be bad for business. The mere suggestion of replacing a parking space with a sidewalk cafe would be enough to draw the ire of merchants and chambers of commerce. Over the last decade or so this perception has been changing drastically: With more and more cities embarking on pilot projects to close streets for traffic, businesses are seeing the benefits of car-free commerce.

For example, according to the *SF Chronicle*, the response to a recent daylong trial in San Francisco’s North Beach neighborhood in which merchants could place extra tables and chairs in the parking space in front of their businesses was ecstatic. “People loved it,” said Hanna Suleiman, who owns Caffè Greco on Columbus near Vallejo Street. “There are a lot of merchants in North Beach who would like to see this happen. Having more sidewalk tables will bring more people to the neighborhood, make it even more lively,” he added. Down the street, Caffè Roma owner, Anthony Azzollini, chimed in: “My business was up 30 percent – talk about economic stimulus.”

Across the bay in Berkeley, the city council has moved beyond trials and recently voted to endorse a downtown Eco-Plaza covering an entire city block between the UC campus and BART, the main metro station. After almost 20 years of planning processes backed by Ecocity Builders, the wheels are now set in motion to “daylight” native Strawberry Creek and create a pedestrian-oriented gathering space integrated with local businesses and major upcoming projects such as the Berkeley Art Museum. Councilmember Jesse Arreguin calls what could become one of the greenest corridors in the U.S. “a visionary proposal that will not only help revitalize our Downtown but will bring nature into the heart of our city and serve as a model for the region and the world.”

Instead of viewing integrated ecological design at odds with economic development, city planners worldwide are increasingly promoting urban density with a focus on community and people’s connection with nature as an automatic boost to small business and local commerce.



From Freiburg/Germany to Tianjin/China to Curitiba/Brazil, this new urbanism combines the strengths of the market with the strengths of good planning and basic ecological and social principles.

"We don't let the market dictate our planning," says Vancouver's Toderian, a strategy that enables the city to pour money into the kind of projects that make urban living desirable, like public art and cultural facilities. What this means, of course, is not that the market is being ignored or rejected, but expanded from a one-dimensional entity based on short-term profits to a living breathing organism attuned to the triple bottom line.

With bold opportunities around sustainability, creativity and architectural risk taking, ecocities are positioned to shape policy and enact the needed structural change for transition into a post-carbon economy. With stakes this high, it is crucial then to have a comprehensive ratings system that is able to discern and reward cities' progress toward becoming ecocities.

International Ecocity Standards

Imagine the USGBC's LEED rating system (www.usgbc.org) applied not only to buildings, but entire cities, integrating factors as diverse and complex as energy conservation, biodiversity restoration, and social justice. A set of standards and criteria so comprehensive that it would measure factors such as wealth and economic security of an entire urban area in accordance with the needs of all stakeholders,

including the environment and the community; a rating system in sync with human values, rewarding collaboration and synergy as much if not more than competition. Enter the International Ecocity Standards (IES).

Currently being developed by Ecocity Builders and a host of partner organizations from around the world, IES will evaluate and judge new and existing cities' progress towards becoming ecocities. Similar to LEED, it will rate urban development at various levels of attainment, from small neighborhoods to entire regions, using basic principles of ecologically healthy systems and designs. From ecocity mapping to human development, from urban fractals to building codes, IES measuring categories will be as integrative and multi-dimensional as the complex living systems it aims to evaluate.

For anyone familiar with the challenges of creating a fair, effective and universal ratings system for buildings, the idea of expanding the metrics to entire urban areas may at first appear daunting. However, as mentioned above, the reason for IES' ambitious scope is that cities have the potential to become not just less damaging but "net contributors" to restoring global biodiversity, productive agriculture, and energy independence. By including larger structural indicators such as net energy and materials input/output, appropriate locations, and impact of external trade, IES will emphasize the foundation upon which an ecologically balanced and healthy city must be based.

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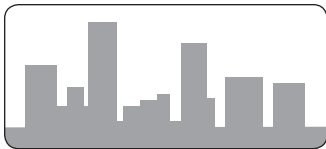
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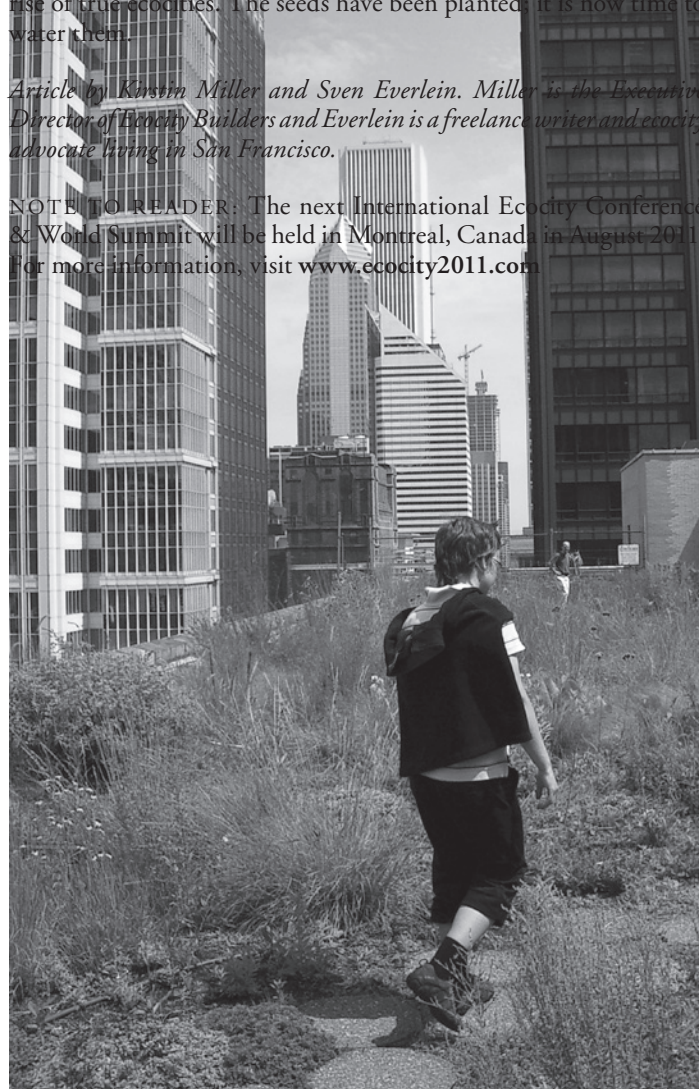


Some countries and municipalities have already put into place initiatives that are good first steps toward creating more and better ecocities. Good examples are *The Living Building Challenge* (<http://ilbi.org/the-standard/version-1-3>), which gives certification only after buildings have been performing for a year, *One Planet Communities* (www.oneplanetcommunities.org), or Vancouver's *EcoDensity Initiative* (www.vancouver-ecodensity.ca). IES will also incorporate existing indicators of urban health established by the United Nations' *Human Development Index* (HDI), including poverty rates, food and water security, infant mortality, longevity, and basic literacy. The United Nations has expressed interest in partnering with Ecocity Builders to integrate HDI with IES.

In order to meet the potential for truly transforming urban landscapes around the world, an internationally acknowledged, comprehensive, and binding set of standards is needed, and that is the aim of International Ecocity Standards. Ecocity Builders and associates have been laying the foundation for this transformation for over twenty years; with the upcoming 2020 Global Climate Leadership Forum in Salvador, Brazil and Gaining Ground Conference in Vancouver, Canada slated to integrate these groundbreaking standards into a streamlined track, 2010 promises to be a landmark year for the rise of true ecocities. The seeds have been planted; it is now time to water them.

Article by Kirstin Miller and Sven Everlein. Miller is the Executive Director of Ecocity Builders and Everlein is a freelance writer and ecocity advocate living in San Francisco.

NOTE TO READER: The next International Ecocity Conference & World Summit will be held in Montreal, Canada, in August 2011. For more information, visit www.ecocity2011.com.



Next, we look at the evolving concept of EcoCites, by Kirstin Miller and Sven Eberlein, who show that the path to reversing climate change must lead through our cities. Finally we look at green architecture where it all begins—our homes—with a practical article by Elizabeth Jacobson detailing all the materials and products she used in building and designing her own home, which we feature on our cover.

And of course, as usual, check out our exclusive quarterly Mutual Fund performance chart on page 11.

Online, at greenmoney.com, we truly have the best line-up ever of additional articles. We lead off with Living Homes by Steve Glenn and Green Real Estate Financing by Jeff Cole. Then read about a couple of new books: *Thriving Beyond Sustainability* by Andres Edwards and *The Blue Economy* by Gunter Pauli. Rounding out our on-line offerings is Cathy Kumar of the SW Green Building Center and her useful piece on 'What are Green Building materials?'

Of course we continue to update our online Global Calendar of Green Events. Check out the details for conferences like Sustainable Brands, Slow Money, and LOHAS, all in June. Later in the year there are some outstanding Green Building and Design conferences, including West Coast Green, GreenBuild and Ecobuild America, along with lots of renewable energy events.

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