

The Village Homes Subdivision in Davis: Origins and Evolution of “A Better Place to Live”

DENNIS DINGEMANS
University of California, Davis

ABSTRACT

Village Homes is a seventy-acre, 245-residential-unit subdivision in Davis, California, built in 1975–1983. It challenged various American subdivision norms while championing energy efficiency and solar systems; on-site groundwater recharge; mingled residential and agricultural uses; off-street paths for walking and cycling and reduced space for automobiles; shared semi-private open spaces to nurture neighborhood interaction; housing stock that varied in size, tenure, and cost to foster social diversity; a village center with businesses and community services; and a strong sense of place. All this was made possible by supportive contexts ranging in scale from individual actors, local politics in college town Davis, California’s, long history as a place sympathetic to “the search for the ideal,” California’s environmental leadership, and national and international events, chiefly the 1970s’ oil crises. Forty years later, nearly all original features of Village Homes remain intact, with the clearest exception being affordable housing, the loss of which has occurred across Davis and much of California. Its environmental and social design features have diffused to various extents to other developments in Davis and beyond, but no other subdivision in America has the same package, which reflects a particular place and time. Creating a denser version of Village Homes is a desirable goal.

Keywords: Village Homes, solar, neighborhood, environmentalism

I BEGAN TEACHING GEOGRAPHY at the University of California, Davis, in 1972 and retired in 2005. During that time I watched the city’s most famous neighborhood get proposed, approved, and built. I saw its living landscapes mature and evolve, and its built features undergo processes of additional investment and enhancement. I witnessed a generation grow up and their parents mature and retire; there is a second (smaller) generation of children present now. Since 1979, when I led my first tour for a group of visiting Chinese ecologists, I have taken scores of classes and visitors on Village Homes

field outings. I have investigated the roots of its innovative morphology and speculated on its importance to American suburbia. This article is a summary of my ideas on Village Homes based on this forty-year relationship.

A Distinctive and Famous Place

Village Homes is a seventy-acre, 245-residential-unit subdivision located in Davis, California (Figure 1). The land it occupies was optioned by the developers, Michael (Mike) and Judy Corbett, in 1972, and the planning and approval process took several years. Construction was fairly steady from 1975 through full build-out after 1983.

Village Homes was, and is, no ordinary subdivision. It challenged various American subdivision norms while championing energy efficiency and solar systems; on-site groundwater recharge; mingled residential and agricultural uses; off-street paths for walking and cycling and reduced space for automobiles; shared semi-private open spaces to nurture neighborhood interaction; housing stock that varied in size, tenure, and cost, all to foster social diversity; a village center with businesses and community services; and a strong sense of place. A bronze plaque placed in the village center by grateful residents declares “Village Homes is a special neighborhood designed to enhance a spirit of community and environmental sustainability.”

Village Homes has garnered a lot of attention and praise. In 1999, *Time* recognized Village Homes as “one of . . . the world’s best examples of sustainable development” and praised it for “combin[ing] environmental ecology with social ecology” (Jackson 1999). First Lady Rosalynn Carter visited and toured by bicycle in 1979, and Francois Mitterand, the President of France, dropped in by helicopter five years later. Prince Charles in 1977 buzzed past on his way to a lecture on organic agriculture. Sympathetic souls such as folk singer Pete Seeger, activist Jane Fonda, and authors Ernest Callenbach (*Ecotopia*) and E. F. Schumacher (*Small is Beautiful*) visited and delivered their opinions on the place (Schumacher 1973; Callenbach 1975). Village Homes was the subject of many reports in the popular press, academic studies, and how-to books.

This article first examines how Village Homes came to be: Why this cultural landscape at this place and this time? It considers factors at the scales of individual actors—the Corbetts and others; the local setting of the City of Davis, home to the University of California, Davis; the regional settings of Northern California and the Pacific Northwest (a.k.a. Ecotopia), and of the country and the world in the 1970s. Second, the article reviews

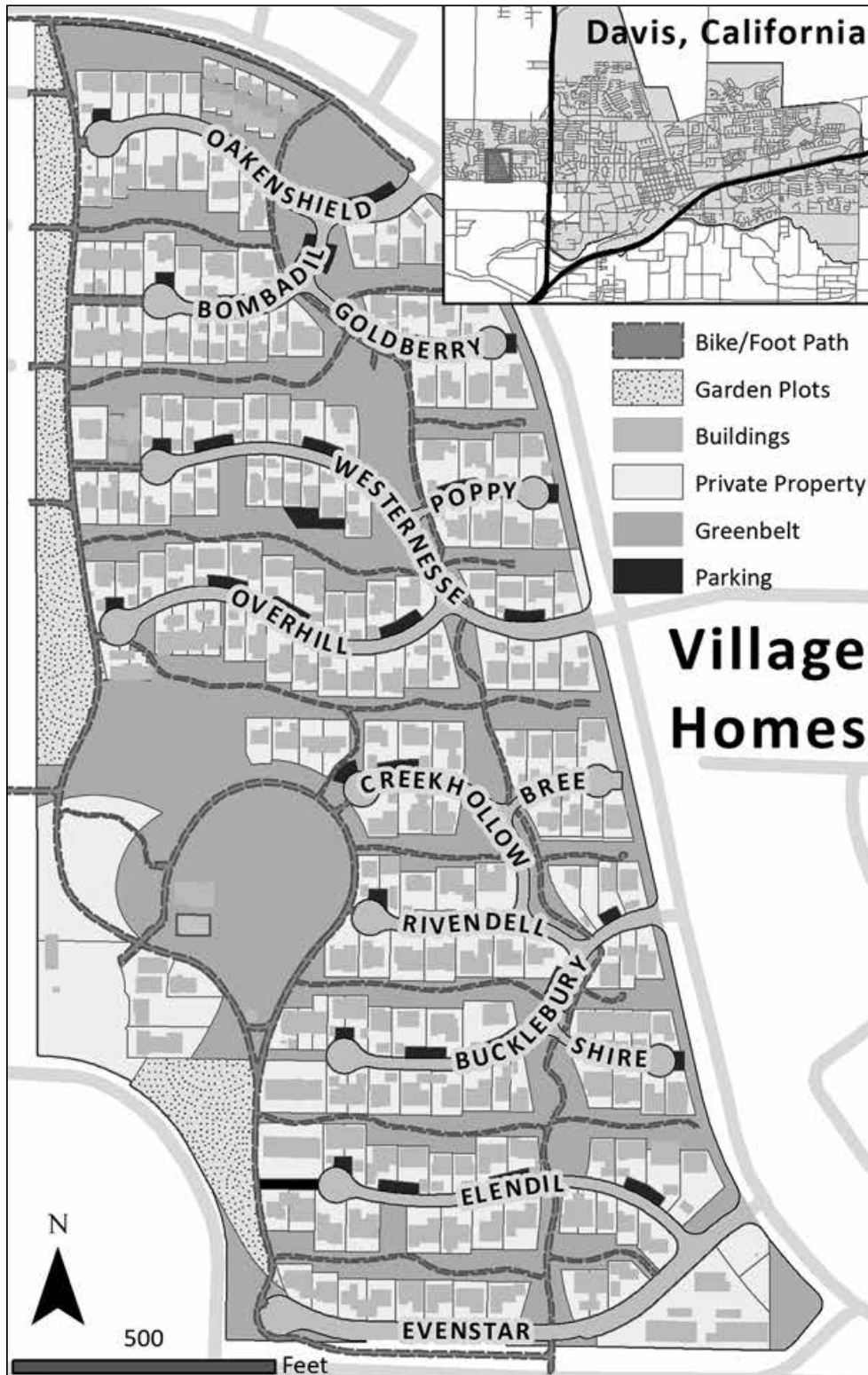


Figure 1.—The Village Homes subdivision in Davis, California.

the distinguishing design features of Village Homes, reports on how they look and function after forty years, and comments on the extent to which they have diffused beyond this one famous subdivision.

Supportive Contexts

Mike Corbett grew up in Seattle and Sacramento, and Judy Corbett in Sacramento. They were married shortly after high school, and their children would grow up partly in Village Homes. Mike studied architecture at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo but left *sans* degree, having become frustrated by contemporary building practices, which he found wasteful and lacking in aesthetic qualities. He switched to taking psychology courses at Sacramento State College (now University) and building houses with his stepfather in Sacramento's Pocket area and in Davis. He got his state contractor's license. Meanwhile, Judy Corbett obtained a biochemistry degree from UC Davis, worked as a lab tech there, completed a master's degree, and began a Ph.D. with the Graduate Group in Ecology. Her major professor was Robert (Bob) Sommer, an environmental psychologist and author of *Personal Space: The Behavioral Basis of Design* (Sommer 1969). Mike and Judy Corbett were acquiring the interests and skills that would enable them to imagine and create Village Homes.

The Corbetts organized in Davis a group of thirty environmental enthusiasts and dreamers. They met on Wednesday and Sunday evenings for two years, from Earth Day 1970 until 1972. They discussed their vision of an Earth-friendly and communitarian rural village of about five hundred people, to be built in Northern California or Oregon. However, the group realized that many of them were tied to Davis and did not want to move away, so the Corbetts optioned a \$500,000, sixty-eight-acre piece of prime in-fill land on the west side of Davis. A dozen investors (family and friends) put up \$10,000 starter shares in 1975. Those funds plus twenty appeals to financial institutions eventually got them a \$3 million loan from a lender patronized by Mike's stepfather. This money paid for the land, permits, and site preparation. Over the next few years, the Corbetts developed detailed plans for what came to be popularly called "the solar subdivision" and saw it through a long series of staff and citizen commission reviews, modifications, and approvals until final approval by the Davis City Council in 1975.

Several aspects of Davis made it a sympathetic milieu for an innovative subdivision designed for energy conservation and social interaction. Historically, Davis was a small railroad junction town and agricultural service

center. Then in 1906, it was chosen by the state legislature as the location for the University Farm. At first the Farm was an adjunct to the University of California Berkeley; later it offered its own courses of study and degrees in agricultural sciences; and then, as part of the UC system's response to the huge post-World War II increases in demand for higher education, it was declared a general campus of the University of California in 1959 (UC Davis 2008). Davis became a college town, its growth and character increasingly shaped by that reality (Gumprecht 2009, 145–188).

An early indicator that the city might be an environmental innovator came in the 1960s, when two candidates for the Davis City Council advocated on behalf of bicycle lanes and won election. By 1967, the council had approved the country's first network of on-street bicycle lanes, had gotten state legislation enacted and signed by the governor to permit them, and had seen them installed on several Davis streets (Davis 2018). Just a few years later, in 1972, three liberal activist candidates replaced three more-traditional, business-oriented conservatives on the council. Soon a new, citizen-driven general plan process was underway. The product of that effort included a new growth-control-inspired housing allocation system that first identified the city's needs (numbers and types of units) and then required developers to submit proposals to meet those needs. The city could then select the best projects (soon to include Village Homes). Also new in the 1973 general plan was an energy-conservation framework that encompassed aspects of transportation, building, and public education. By 1975, Davis had adopted the country's first local energy-conservation building code. Other Davis efforts from the same time period that, like Village Homes, would come to proudly represent Davis's commitment to environment and community were the launching of the buying club that evolved into the Davis Food Co-op (1972) and the establishment of the Davis Farmers Market in Central Park (1976).

California was a larger supportive context for Village Homes. In his article "California and the Search for the Ideal," James E. Vance, Jr. argued that for much of its history, California attracted migrants who were looking for inspired forms of settlement, both pastoral exurbias and utopian arcadias (Vance 1972). While Village Homes does not precisely fit either of these models, it clearly exemplifies "the use of changing morphology of residence to create or enhance new ideas as to the desirable life-style" (Vance 1972, 186). When Ernest Callenbach wrote *Ecotopia*, a futurist novel about a country that seceded from the United States to create a new society based on ecological principles, he set it in a territory made up of Northern California, Oregon,

and Washington (Callenbach 1975). Later, journalist Joel Garreau identified *The Nine Nations of North America*, choosing the name Ecotopia for coastal northern California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska. Davis sits in Ecotopia near its border with MexAmerica (Garreau 1981).

California's environmentalist values were also revealed in a number of leading pieces of regulatory legislation put into place in the late 1960s and early 1970s: the McAteer-Petris Act, creating the country's first coastal-zone management agency, the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (1965); the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (1970); and Proposition 20, which established the California Coastal Commission (1972). Jerry Brown's election to the California governorship in 1974 resulted in an administration with strong environmental interests and accomplishments, including, for example, "the nation's first-ever energy efficiency standards for buildings and appliances" (Walker 2007; Sullivan 2010). Davisites who worked for and with the Brown administration as direct links included Judy Corbett and Ann Evans, a founder of the Davis Food Co-op and Davis Farmers Market, and later, Mayor of Davis.

At the national scale, too, the 1970s were a period of growing action on behalf of the environment. The first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970, and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) came into effect that year. An earlier 1955 piece of legislation (which had already been amended several times) was strengthened to become the Clean Air Act of 1970; it also created the Environmental Protection Agency to coordinate federal environmental protection. Another earlier (1948) piece of legislation was given sweeping amendment to become the Clean Water Act of 1972. The 1973 oil crisis, which made petroleum products both scarce and dear, provided new incentive for expanded regulations and programs that conserved energy in myriad ways and encouraged the research and development of alternative energy sources. So, while Village Homes deviated in many ways from established American suburban norms, numerous characteristics of place and time came together to give it a high probability of being realized.

Defining Features and How They Have Fared

Passive Solar Homes—the Core Environmental Feature

The Village Homes subdivision plan required all houses to have "passive solar" design elements, whereby the sun's energy was used directly for heating or cooling. Residential structures were to be on streets running

east and west. Wider house exposures were to face north/south. There was to be abundant glazing for solar radiation inputs during the winter heating season. Many designers added greenhouse-like glazed features on the south, west, and east exposures. Heat-absorbing interior thermal masses, such as large, fluid-filled, metal pipes, were to be positioned to receive rays and store warmth (Figure 2). For the summer cooling season, projecting roofs and other shade-providing overhangs and awnings were to constrain thermal inputs. Vegetation, when grown to maturity, was required to enhance the winter sun and summer shade regime, and landscaping plans had to be reviewed by a homeowners association (HOA) committee for compliance.

After three years of construction, in 1978 when the subdivision had 100 of its eventual 245 housing units, Village Homes was the nation's largest cluster of energy-saving, passive-solar homes. From the beginning in 1976, many rooftops also contained optional active-solar features—mainly in the form of exposed plastic tubing that provided hot or at least pre-heated water. In later years, after about 1980, rooftop photovoltaics became common as



Figure 2.—This passive solar “suncatcher” house has large, metal, fluid-filled pipes that provide thermal mass. To the left of the photograph is a greenhouse-like room behind the grapevines.

that technology was developed and marketed. Corbett was a tireless advocate for these energy-saving supplements to the mandated elements of passive-solar design. Currently, a score of Village Homes structures take out permits to add or replace photovoltaic rooftop features each year. A field survey by the author in November 2017 identified some form of rooftop energy device on 61 percent of the houses. The eighty homes without any (visible from the ground) rooftop solar device (water heating or photovoltaic) leave room for continued investment.

As a commercially successful “solar subdivision,” Village Homes was the culmination of a half-century of experimentation and advocacy for passive solar design—in Davis, in the U.S., and worldwide. Mike Corbett built a few passive solar homes in the early 1970s, and these strongly resemble some avant-garde French designs that were being discussed in the architectural literature (Arizona State University 1975). Other early solar homes in Davis featured results of thirty years of solar home experimentation at MIT, where the world’s first solar home was built in 1939 (Hottel 1955; Arizona State University 1975). A handful of what their owners called “solar homes” was already scattered around Davis before 1971, when Corbett built his first. Notable research was published by the UC Davis duo of architect Richard Cramer (a Princeton-educated professor of art) and agricultural engineer Loren Neubauer (Cramer and Neubauer 1958; Neubauer 1968). Neubauer advocated for active and passive solar designs in his textbook on farm buildings (Neubauer and Walker 1961). He was just a youth in rural Wisconsin when he first drew up solar heating and ventilating plans for making his family’s farm animals more comfortable. Cramer was well informed about solar house designs produced at MIT, Princeton, and France. Together and separately Cramer and Neubauer published articles on solar housing for suburban homes (Cramer and Neubauer 1958).

For decades, these solar antecedents were swallowed up by the preponderance of buildings whose systems ran on cheap fossil fuels (and some hydroelectric and nuclear energy). Then, with the energy crises of the 1970s, that decade became known as the “solar decade” in Davis, and the epicenter of enthusiasm was Village Homes. From the 1972 elections onward, the Davis City Council had a majority of ecological enthusiasts who supported the municipal energy-efficiency ordinance, and the city’s planning department approved all the solar homes in Village Homes as well as others elsewhere in Davis.

In 1978, when the *Sunset Homeowner's Guide to Solar Heating* was published, solar homes had truly arrived on the national stage (*Sunset Homeowner's Guide to Solar Heating* 1978). It featured Village Homes houses and some of their designers: Mike Corbett, Marshall Hunt, Jon Hammond, and the firm Living Systems. In the following year, a Rodale Press book, *Village Homes' Solar House Designs*, gave nationwide publicity to forty-three energy-conscious house designs in Village Homes (Bainbridge, Corbett, and Hofacre 1979). These publications were among a plethora of reports and books on solar building that came out during that decade (Arizona State University 1975; Halacy 1975; Daniels 1976; *Solar Dwelling Design Concepts* 1977; Hudson Home Guides 1978; Sandia Laboratories 1979; *Solar Livestock Housing Handbook* 1983; Kachadorian 1997). One of the authors of the Rodale Press book of 1979 published a report on solar energy in California twenty years later with the subtitle "The forgotten solution to the energy crisis" and cited Village Homes, and various technical reports on its solar systems, as still relevant (Bainbridge 2001).

In addition to the technical knowledge developed in the building of Village Homes, the subdivision also made the important point that solar features could be incorporated into houses of all styles and sizes. Aesthetically, some of the earliest residences in Village Homes were not far from typical California tract ranch houses. Soon, however, there emerged a Village Homes architectural vocabulary that borrowed elements mostly from Bay Area Shingle, Sea Ranch, and California Mission Revival styles. While one could identify a "solar chic" style, it was by no means uniform across the subdivision. Houses were individually designed and built, a feature of high-end developments in the era of mass-built suburbs. Perhaps most unusual, as well as most energy efficient, is the earth-sheltered home of architect Jim Zanetto, with plant-covered walls and roof (Thayer 1994). Such house individuality remains an important characteristic of the Village Homes cultural landscape.

Corbett's construction and design firm was responsible for a majority (60 percent) of everything constructed in his subdivision (Village Homeowners Association 1995). But a substantial web of other design and construction professionals (and amateurs) were at work on their own homes or were building for others. Experimentation was in the air, and many contributions came from the university and the greater Davis community of present and former students. A node of the University's student and alumni contributors was the Ecology graduate program, from whence had come Davis area

homebuilders Jon Hammond and Marshall Hunt, as well as Judy Corbett. Not many ecology majors with environmentalist proclivities became homebuilders, but in various combinations Hammond, Hunt, and their UCD and Davis-area friends used their Village Homes experience under Mike Corbett's direction to become skilled homebuilders. Especially noteworthy was the career path of Virginia Thigpen, who built an experimental "sun-catcher solar mass home" while employed by Corbett as his office manager. Thigpen's career featured directing a planning and construction firm that over fifteen years of post-VH work proposed, designed, constructed, and marketed two significant subdivisions in Davis. Village Homes' influence thus spread not only via publications but also through the knowledge and skills acquired by its designers and builders.

Several graduate student theses and a dissertation constituted a core of studies that confirmed, with Village Home energy-use data, that the solar designs (coupled with their owners' zealous advocacy of energy conservation) were indeed saving the energy they were theoretically expected to save. These studies also reached conclusions relating to other economic and social aspects of the neighborhood. Jan Hamrin's UC Davis dissertation in Ecology documented a 30 percent energy savings in Village Homes, compared to similar non-solar homes in a similar climate (Hamrin 1978). Thomas Lenz, in his master's thesis in Geography (Technical University of Munich), documented 30 percent faster sales and 10 to 30 percent more dollars per square foot in sales price in VH compared to other Davis subdivisions (Lenz 1981). Lenz also documented heavy use of open spaces by children and for interactions by sociable adults (Lenz 1981; Landscape Architecture LDA 1993, 111). Hanah Saleh, in her MS in Geography at Oxford, tracked strong examples of Village Homes HOA leadership in shaping the landscaping and setting rules for use of garden plots (Saleh 1997). The decisions to have several expansive lawns and a large swimming pool were examples of HOA leadership and the Corbetts' willingness to let the residents shape Village Homes in meaningful ways.

It must be admitted that it was a good time to be building and selling homes of any type: the university's student enrollments and faculty numbers doubled in the 1960s and almost doubled again in the 1970s. In Village Homes, some 222 houses and twenty apartments were built between 1976 and 1987, and annual sales varied mostly in tune with up and down years of the building cycle. Peak years for construction and sales in Village Homes were 1978 (fifty completed/sold), 1979 (forty-nine), 1976 (thirty-two), 1980

(twenty-eight), 1981 (twenty-two), 1983 (seventeen), and 1977 (seventeen). Fewer than five were completed or sold in 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986, and 1987, as the supply of vacant lots was depleted.

Anti-Auto Crusade: Narrow Roads, Carports, Radburn-Style Paths

A second major focus of Village Homes environmentalism was transportation systems. Observing that half of a typical family's annual energy use was for transportation—double the 25 percent used for household heating and cooling—the Corbetts placed high priority on features to reduce transportation energy use. Much attention, while gaining city approval, was given to the specification that streets should be narrow—twenty-five feet wide instead of the forty-foot width specified in the city's code. Narrow streets meant less heat-absorbing black asphalt and more complete street shading. Vehicles would remain cooler, needing less air conditioning. As a result, 13 percent of the subdivision is occupied by paved streets, while 18 percent is the typical share for other subdivisions (Corbett and Corbett 2000). Also, parking is moved from the edge of traffic lanes by requiring clustered parking for visitors' cars (Figure 3). Thirty parking bays provide 208 spaces for guest vehicles. Through traffic by vehicles is minimized—for safety as well as efficiency—by making all thirteen streets *culs-de-sac*. Since every vehicle that enters must turn around for its exit, the network slows vehicle speeds and discourages car use for short trips through the four non-through and non-interconnected networks of local streets (Figure 1).

Small garages, and limits on the total number of garages, deliberately discourage the purchase of large (and presumably “gas guzzling”) vehicles. Just forty-nine of the 220 homes were allowed to have a garage, and a third of those were just one-car garages. There are carports instead of garages for 140 of the houses (Figure 4). Uncovered parking is all that is allotted to the remaining twenty-nine residences. The homeowners association has been quite firm in turning down requests by homeowners who have sought to add or enlarge garages.

How dependent are Village Homes residents on their automobiles? To help answer that question, the author surveyed all visible parked vehicles forty-five times, from August 30 to October 16, 2005. At night (9:00 PM to 5:30 AM) there were 402 vehicles on average (five surveys). Mornings averaged 342 vehicles (nine surveys). At mid-day (9:30 AM to 4:00 PM), there



Figure 3.—Narrow streets with thirty parking bays minimize paved surfaces; only 13 percent of Village Homes is covered by paved streets, as compared to 18 percent in typical American subdivisions. All street names come from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*.

were an average of 215 vehicles (sixteen surveys). Evenings averaged 311 vehicles (fifteen surveys).

These data revealed a typical suburban rhythm of exodus in the morning and return at the end of afternoon. But there were only 187 fewer mid-day vehicles than night vehicles. The 245 resident households, which likely have about 1.5 adults per household, are not sending 360 vehicles “out commuting” in the morning. This is indirect evidence that a goodly number of walkers, bicyclers, bus riders, and work-at-home adults live in Village Homes and save energy by not commuting by motor vehicle.

The Radburn Plan (thusly named because it was first used in Radburn, New Jersey, in 1929) is an important part of the Village Homes suite of auto-avoiding and energy-conserving features (Radburn Association 2018). Paths for pedestrians and bicyclists that are separate from the streets for automobiles run along the backyard of every house. These Radburn-style paths connect homes along ten east-west paths and link up with two main



Figure 4.—As part of the effort to de-emphasize the automobile, only forty-nine dwellings have garages and 140 have only carports. Further, twenty-nine residences have only uncovered parking. One result is a more cluttered, in some cases messy, streetscape.

(and wider) north-south HOA paths that serve the gardens, recreational spaces, and the community center. The Radburn-style and HOA paths also provide access to the seven clusters of U.S. Post Office mailboxes that encourage sociability and discourage residents from using their cars to get to their mailboxes (Figure 5).

The solar subdivision as represented by Village Homes proved to be incongruent with a major thrust in American city planning. The “New Urbanism” as represented in works and books by Andres Duany in the first decade of the current century advocated for two features that tapped into nostalgia for traditional forms—front porches and grid plans (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck 2000). These were design elements that Corbett rejected. To Duany and his cohorts the grid plan was logical, legible, comfortably predictable, and walkable—but it paved a lot of land. The New Urbanism emphasized front porches and front steps as iconic features that symbolized neighborliness. Corbett’s homes de-emphasized front porches because



Figure 5.—Moms and kids walk to clustered mailboxes (chosen to enhance social interaction, before they were required by the U. S. Post Office) on paths separated from automobile streets.

neighborly sociability was to come from pedestrian encounters along the backyard Radburn-style paths. Further, Corbett’s architectural propensity was to hide his entrances by placing them on the side of the house. Open carports were to be found where Duany located the porch, and instead backyard barbecue pits in unfenced yards played host to sociability amongst neighbors. Village Homes remained true to the California suburb’s emphasis on the backyard as the locus of family life.

Garden Life—Edible Landscapes and Market Crops

A mainspring of Village Homes’ success is the overall impression it gives of providing a life in a verdant garden. Somewhat more subtly, feelings of guilt for building Village Homes on seventy acres of “the best agricultural land on earth” are alleviated by participating in productive garden agriculture. There are two acres given over to European-style garden plots (e.g., allotment gardens in Britain, *kleingarten* in Germany) that are for rent to

residents. These are sufficient for up to half of Village Homes households. The use of rental plots has attracted usually strong but uneven interest. For some years in the 1990s a temporary slackening of demand allowed some especially enthusiastic gardeners to rent multiple 700-square-foot plots. The five-person elected HOA board at times debated the appropriateness of selling the produce from multi-plot operations but ultimately did not forbid commercial sales from garden plots. Today these gardens are in high demand and are amazingly productive and diverse (Figure 6). In addition to vegetables and flowers, several chicken coops with colorful poultry are clearly visible, as are beehives. The social opportunities in the community garden should not be overlooked; one fine day in 2005 I found myself chatting with an avid gardener who turned out to be the science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson.



Figure 6.—Composting bins are a common feature of Village Homes community garden plots. The edge of a chicken coop can be seen in the lower right-hand part of the photograph. The fence in the background marks the western boundary of the subdivision.

Village Homes also has about four acres of landscaping devoted to tree and vine crops that double as sidewalk-edible, household-consumable, and commercial opportunities. Included is an acre of functioning vineyards in four clusters (Figure 7). A half-acre of commercial-quality almond trees lines the eastern edge of the subdivision. A half-acre diverse fruit orchard at the northeast tip of the subdivision includes peaches, plums, and persimmons.



Figure 7.—This vineyard exemplifies the patches of communal fruit and nut agriculture that dot Village Homes. A 2017 inventory counted 1,537 trees of fifty-five species, planted and maintained by the HOA's gardeners. The house in the background has solar panels on its roof, as do 125 other houses. The number of rooftop photovoltaic panels grows each year. Rooftop solar water heating is diminishing as an obsolete technology.

A three-person gardening crew is employed full time to maintain the lands owned by the HOA. Interacting with the gardeners is part of the joy of wandering the Village Homes paths. Last year, in the roughly twenty acres of open space they maintain, there were 1,537 trees of fifty-five species. The 277 Chinese Tallow trees were the most numerous (for their reliable shade), followed by 251 grape vines and 127 almonds. Fruit trees included ninety peach, sixty-one plum, forty-five persimmon, thirty pluot, twenty-eight

cherry, twenty-three pomegranate, sixteen pear, fifteen fig, twelve kumquat, eleven nectarine, and ten citrus. Smaller numbers of apple, avocado, prune, quince, and lime were present. For several decades, the HOA endeavored persistently to sell the almonds for a profit, but in many recent years the almonds and the grapes were no longer harvested because of low prices.

A frequent comment by visitors to Village Homes is that the Radburn-style paths and adjacent parts of private back-yard gardens provide an edible landscape. Spontaneous picking and eating of fruits while traversing the paths is a delight to many. Less-enamored visitors sometimes point out that the paths constitute a messy hazard.

Green Radburn-Style Paths, Yards, and Eight-House Commons

In some areas, widespread heavy planting of private back yards gives a jungle-like impression to those who walk on the Radburn-style paths. Fruit trees of all kinds abound. Flower beds are found in more than half of the backyards and are visible from the paths. Flowering shrubs and other large plantings thrive, with sunflowers and hollyhocks among the leading “giant flowering plant” choices.

In addition to the private backyards, there are thirty-two “common area” plots where the HOA owns the land but where the eight households (four on each side of the path) whose back yards touch each common area are expected to jointly plan and develop it. In return for contributing some creativity to landscaping along the Radburn-style paths, those “group of eight” teams who can show that they are “designing and maintaining” their common areas earn a non-trivial discount on their monthly HOA fees. The common plots and the private yards often blend seamlessly with each other in their planting schemes and in the provision of children’s play features, backyard seating areas, and art (Figure 8). Backyard fences are permitted only as an exception to a general no-fence rule, creating an openness that is more characteristic of Midwestern than of California suburbs.



Figure 8.—The area of eclectic planting, including cacti, is the private backyard of a Village Homes house; in the foreground (viewed from a Radburn-style path) is a part of one of the thirty-two “group of eight” common areas, owned by the HOA but planned and managed by owners of the contiguous lots. The division between the private space and the communal space is often unmarked, as here.

Open Drainage Runoff, Moisture Recharge, and Bridges

The whole project site was graded by bulldozer at the beginning, to add some topographical interest to the paths and to support an innovative, distributed rainwater drainage system (Thayer 1977). What was formerly a tomato field laser-leveled for uniform-irrigation water distribution gained swales and vistas. There are three- to six-foot-high changes of elevation along the Radburn-style paths, and especially along the dual north/south HOA paths that run the length of Village Homes. Costly concrete drainage channels and culverts are avoided. Irrigation water requirements are reduced. The resulting small water-retention basins were the inspiration of Corbett, who fondly remembers his youth in Seattle where he played often in small streams and ponds. There are thirty-five wooden bridges—large and small—associated with meeting the challenge of navigating the flow of rainwater and the rise and fall of retention ponds (Figure 9). At the in-



Figure 9.—A small bridge crosses one of many low-lying areas that serve as part of Village Homes’ innovative surface-drainage system. Thirty-five bridges, large and small, are functional and aesthetic landscape features.

tersection of Shire, Buckleberry, and Elendil is Village Homes’ single most memorable landscape feature: a large (twenty-by-fifteen-foot) ephemeral pond. Rope swings from trees entertain the children who “swing and drop and plop” with obvious delight (Figure 10). Play after a rainy spell can take place in glorious muddiness.



Figure 10.—Rope swings hang from a walnut tree over a drainage basin that, when filled with rainwater, becomes a pond and then a mudhole, to the delight of children.

Private Parks—But Largely Open to the Wider Public

The 25 percent of territory that is owned by the HOA includes landscaping that is the equivalent of the public parks elsewhere in Davis. Two large grass lawns (about one acre in the northern green and almost two acres in the southern green) are visible from many points and are well used for active play. Soccer is the most common parent/child organized game; softball and touch football also make appearances (Figure 11). Between the green and the community center (discussed in the next section) is an open-air tiered theater space and nearby is a swimming pool for residents.

Along the two north/south HOA-maintained pathways (together about a mile in length) there are mini-parks and other small park-like spaces. Iconic features include a gazebo in the south, major (unplanned) play equipment in the north, and planned (in fact, community-designed and built) play equipment in the south end (Figure 12). This is the domain of the HOA's gardeners who have planted shrubs and trees and small lawns.



Figure 11.—Few houses in Village Homes have lawns, so the large common greens are important play and gathering spaces. The southernmost is almost two acres and the northernmost almost one acre. In the background on the right of the photograph is the neighborhood's only earth-bermed house, which here appears as a shrub-covered mound with a small white gable peeking through.

Many outsiders from adjacent neighborhoods walk the pathways big and small. They are Village Homes' versions of the city's extensive greenbelt system, which provides off-street biking and walking paths. The neighborhood's paths are travel-ways for kids going to school or visiting their friends, for bike riders commuting or recreating, for garden lovers watching the progress of crops and engaging with other gardeners. However, the experience of observing the daily life activities of Village Homes spaces and residents is not duplicated in any public parks or greenbelts elsewhere in Davis. A key feature is the relatively unfenced proximity of open spaces and paths with other living spaces in Village Homes.



Figure 12.—The gazebo on the South Green is an important space where residents (and others) enjoy planned and spontaneous sociability. Here, school board candidate Sheila Allen meets interested voters.

A Town Center Called Plumshire—a Centripetal Force

Village Homes has a low-key commercial center. Currently twenty-four enterprises occupy all or part of seven modest, nonresidential structures. The largest building, the Village Homes Community Center, houses a major child care center by day, in a space that functions also as an evening and weekend concert venue, a town hall, and a gathering place for community and private events.

The twenty-four commercial spaces are available for rent to residents (and/or outsiders when available under certain conditions), harking back to a day when many business people lived and worked in the same neighborhood. The tenant mix in recent years typically has included eight therapists (massage providers, social workers, psychologists), three publishers, a classy Italian restaurant (with a substantial outdoor seating area), and the offices of scholarly researchers (Figure 13). For forty years, a major tenant has been a



Figure 13.—Twenty-four enterprises rent commercial space in the Plumshire town center's seven modest nonresidential structures. Italian restaurant Osteria Fasulo's courtyard extends to the commercial center an important overall Village Homes design principle: enable outdoor living.

sizeable dance studio that began with a Corbett family member as proprietor. At least one significant architecture firm rents space in Plumshire.

Located in the town center is a rather residential-looking structure used by the grounds crew who maintain the HOA's open spaces. It garages the outdoors maintenance equipment and provides a point of contact between residents and their hired landscape workers. Among the offices in Plumshire is one occupied by the secretary of the HOA, which meets monthly. As intended by the Corbetts, there is a notable pedestrian and bicycle flow that connects the residents to their town center. The twenty-five spaces of the adjacent parking lot are often full, an indication that the town center of Village Homes also connects to the wider Davis community. Plumshire provides poster boards where opinions and invitations to join, sing, and exercise abound. One type of place that the town center has never had,

despite residents wanting it, is an informal inexpensive coffee or tea house that could provide even more neighborhood centripetalism.

Beyond Sustainability: Toward Social Justice

Striving to reflect the diverse population of Davis as a thriving college town, the Corbetts worked to implement their desire for a housing stock that had more diversity than any other subdivision in town. Corbett early on built a ten-unit, motel-like apartment in the southeast corner (Figure 1). In quite a few ways, the design was bare bones in order to allow profitable operation while being low rent. In the northern apex, a ten-unit cluster of 625-square-foot attached cottages was the last node of residences to be built. Conceived as basic senior housing, the houses sold quickly. They evolved into highly desired housing for non-seniors and became well appointed and well landscaped by owner/residents who anticipated the “small house” trend. On a per-square-foot basis, these might be the most expensive housing units in Davis. There are also ten units of rental housing in two five-building apartment homes designed as row houses. When Corbett requested a subsidized mortgage from a state housing agency, his application (which was denied) argued that his goal was to make housing available to underrepresented ethnic minority and senior citizen tenants. A bit north of these is an eight-bedroom house occupied by the Sunwise Co-operative living group. They were looking for a site to build a second enterprise (their original house is in Old East Davis) when Corbett accommodated them and agreed to their use of “sweat equity” to help make the structure affordable.

Judy Corbett noted (in a recent conversation with the author) that seven ethnic minority households had used sweat-equity contributions to purchase new homes in Village Homes. She reported that, within the previous month, she had talked with the son of a former Village Homes gardener who expressed renewed gratitude for the Corbetts’ contribution to launching his parents into homeownership.

There are dozens of small houses amongst the Village Homes residential stock. Duplexes are scattered from one end to the other. Twenty-three homes are of less than 1,000 square feet, and another thirty are less than 1,250 square feet—together constituting twenty percent of the non-apartment building stock. At the other end of the scale, thirty-six of the 245 homes are over 2,251 square feet. Eleven of those are over 2,750 square feet—yet hardly in contention for the “mini-mansion” label.

Still, it is hard to avoid the label of a gentrified neighborhood when noting the prices associated with the eighteen homes that sold from 2015 to 2017. The average price for a residential square foot is \$330 in Davis, but it is \$441 in Village Homes. Already in 2003, Mark Francis noted “affordability and gentrification” among the “practical problems” of Village Homes (Francis 2003, 73).

An indirect look at the social composition of the Village Homes population comes from a 2017 tabulation of the kinds of motor vehicles parked here by residents. A popular car is the Toyota Prius—ecological and moderately expensive; there are forty-eight parked there regularly. Two comparably sized upper-middle-class areas of Davis were inventoried at the same time. The “comparables” each had just one-half that number and that share (3 percent versus 6 percent) of Prius owners. Just forty-three of the Village Homes vehicles were American made (GM/Ford/Chrysler), only one-third of the share of domestic vehicles seen in the control neighborhoods. Luxury Japanese and all European cars were equally present in Village Homes (forty-four vehicles and 12 percent of the total) and in the control areas. Pickups were about half as common and sedans one-third as common in Village Homes as they were in the control areas. On the other hand, Subarus were twice as common in Village Homes. This profile of “drives” fits with what we know by direct observation: Village Homes residents lean toward the cosmopolitan and environmentally conscious. Yet anti-automobile sentiments displayed and anticipated by the Corbetts have not completely alienated Village Homes residents from the American love affair with their cars.

Discussion: “We Shape Our Buildings...”

The Corbetts, and especially Judy Corbett, are fond of citing an aphorism attributed to Winston Churchill. It states a kind of hopefulness about a causal pathway to improving life and society by first improving our built environment: “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.” That dictum motivated the Corbetts to encourage residents into friendships or at least cooperation and mutual aid with their neighbors. Walk and bike on the same narrow paths that pass alongside your unfenced backyards. Admire the vegetation in the roadside and path-side gardens and orchards. Let your friends and their children know when the peaches are ripe. Trust your children and those of your neighbors to roam the neighborhood on its bike and pedestrian paths, experiencing a nearly Edenic setting. Have a conversation about politics when sorting through the appeals for votes and

campaign funds that fill your mailboxes. Show initiative in renewing the flowerbed looking a bit weedy and tired in your “group of 8” common space. Prepare an especially flavorful contribution to the 5:00 Sunday potluck at the picnic tables on the north Lawn. Bring your strong voice to the Monday evening concerts in the Plumshire town hall building, which often include singing along. Repair the twenty-year-old jungle gym you helped to build when your oldest was still willing to be seen with a multi-aged and multi-gendered group of playmates. Watch your neighbor add high-efficiency photovoltaics to their roof, learn from their experience, and then follow suit.

Many features of the Village Homes built environment have nurtured the social and environmental behaviors that its designers desired. One can also see the wider adoption of elements of the Village Homes landscape across Davis, such as greenbelts with bicycle and walking paths separated from automobile streets; city ordinances that require energy-efficient designs; community gardens and edible landscaping; the use of drainage ponds that attract people and wildlife; and areas of mixed land use. While the Village Homes subdivision was by no means the only source of these ideas in Davis, it was an early and critical one. In the current era of dwindling resources (particularly the disappearance of inexpensive land in California) perhaps the proudest offspring of the subdivision would be a higher-density version that still delivered the sociability, eco-friendliness, and nature’s presence of the original.

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