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## YES! Magazine Summer 2006 Issue: 5,000 Years of Empire

### Prescott, Arizona: EcoHood Ideas Take Root in Older Neighborhoods

by Susan DeFreitas

The Lincoln-Dameron neighborhood in Prescott, Arizona, encompasses roughly two blocks, including two apartment buildings and 30 houses, the majority built in the 1930s. It's a middle- to low-income neighborhood, about 50 percent Hispanic/Native Americans along with European-American college students and retirees. The neighborhood, which is built around the floodplain of nearby Miller Creek, is home to six greywater systems, two rainwater cisterns, five organic gardens, 25 heirloom fruit trees, and (at last count) 57 chickens.

Welcome to Prescott's "EcoHood."

A central figure in the growth and development of this neighborhood sustainability initiative is Prescott College instructor, landscape contractor, and self-described "permaculture activist" Andrew Millison. Millison had always thought of the area as a prime location for an urban ecovillage. But it wasn't until he purchased a home 20 miles outside of Prescott that the concept really took shape.



Susan DeFreitas

"Here I was," said Millison, "getting introduced to the concept of peak oil while simultaneously burning up a quarter to half tank of gas every day. That's pretty much when it hit me—the age of cheap oil was coming to a close."

At the same time, three eco-minded friends—Catherine "Wind" Euler, Jesse Pursely, and Marcee Keller—moved into the Lincoln-Dameron district intending to get more community-oriented and sustainable. Millison moved there soon after.

The development of the EcoHood has continued as a self-organizing process. Members share a vision of ecological sustainability, but they approach the project in a variety of ways.

Within a few months of moving in, Wind Euler installed permaculture systems (see page 33) that are now run and maintained by student renters from Prescott College. On just over an acre, across the creek from a McDonald's, Euler and her tenants raise chickens, turkeys, corn, squash, tomatoes, and carrots. Greywater recycled from household activities such as laundry, dishes, and showers irrigates plants in the landscape.

Marcee Keller also installed grey-water irrigation, but focused more on eco-oriented home improvement. The artist's studio she's building behind her home was designed by students from the Ecosa Institute, a program for sustainable architecture and design. It will be built with sustainable materials and designed for maximum energy efficiency. Keller and Millison also plan to remove the fence separating their yards to maximize garden space and to share compost, rain-water, and a children's play area.

Jesse Pursely focused more on a life of ultra-simplicity. Although he and his friend Thomas Arnold moved into the house on Dameron Street over two years ago, they have never turned on the gas or electricity. Arnold lives in a teepee in the back yard while Pursely and his girlfriend essentially live as if they were "squatting" in the home they actually own.

Andrew Millison has made his home into a showcase for a whole range of permaculture systems, including rainwater cisterns, a movable chicken coop, and sunken-bed organic garden patches. Indoors, he uses earthen plasters and wood heat.

The EcoHood now encompasses seven households, including college students already living on the block and young couples who moved to Lincoln-Dameron to be part of what was happening there. The concept has unfolded organically, with neighbors swapping skills, information, tools, and, at times, childcare, chickens, and compost.

Prescott's EcoHood is generating interest. Last year, the Ecosa Institute purchased a plot of land in the area to use as green student housing. In the summer of 2006, Ecosa's permaculture design certification course will center around designs for public space in the neighborhood.

Perhaps most promising of all, Millison's presentation on the EcoHood last year at a local satellite of the Bioneers Conference attracted the attention of Chris Carlile and Christian Nys, two investors in Phoenix-based perma-culture developments. Plans are now in the works for an affordable housing permaculture apartment/condo development centered around community gardens and supported by greywater, rainwater, and solar energy systems.

All of which would probably be baffling to a real estate agent assessing the area. But while the EcoHood would hardly top the charts of the booming local real estate market, Millison maintains that, from an ecological point of view, Lincoln-Dameron is the wealthiest neighborhood in town. The EcoHood has water at 12 to 20 feet, with old wells throughout the neighborhood, sits on an average eight feet of topsoil, and is sheltered from wind by topography and large, established cottonwoods.

"Those ritzy new houses up on the hills," said Millison, "are situated high off the water table on solid rock. They're exposed to wind and wildfire, isolated from town, and they're huge—which means they're costly to heat and cool."

The EcoHood is not a glossy, high-end vision of sustainability. It is, in fact, a model that challenges our very notion of wealth and how we measure it. Homes in the neighborhood tend to be smaller than the modern norm—1,000 to 1,500 square feet—making them more amenable to a green retrofit. But who needs a bigger house when you have more nature, more community, and more living space by extension? And how do you assign a dollar value to fresh food, streets that are safe for kids to roam, and a bike trail that runs alongside your backyard creek into the heart of town?

These are the intangibles that have proven increasingly attractive to like-minded folks in the area. As more people from outside the neighborhood become interested in joining it, a key challenge for Millison and his neighbors will be how to avoid "eco-gentrification." The solution to that challenge will rest largely in finding ways to make the concept appealing to their retired and Hispanic neighbors.

Plans for meeting this challenge—like the EcoHood itself—are in the formative stages. Residents are considering such ideas as neighborhood block parties, a vegetable stand, tool library, or garden club. This kind of neighborhood outreach will become more necessary as the EcoHood moves out of individual backyards and into the neighborhood's public spaces.

Despite the challenges, Millison says the advantages of the EcoHood model of community sustainability are far-reaching and fundamental. "By working in a middle- to low-income neighborhood, you make it accessible. By working within the existing human footprint, you preserve wilderness, cut down on fuel consumption, and give yourself access to the waste stream of the city for recycled materials."

Additionally, the EcoHood model doesn't require a large initial investment on the part of its participants or a shift from mainstream models of family and homeownership.

"Really," said Millison, "the concept is about bringing traditionally rural values like self-reliance, respect for the land, and community into the city."

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Susan DeFreitas is a writer and poet who lives in the high desert of Prescott, Arizona. More information on Prescott's EcoHood, Andrew Millison, and other Arizona-based permaculture projects is online at [www.millisonecological.com](http://www.millisonecological.com). Information on the Ecosa Institute's Permaculture Certification Course is available at [www.ecosainstitute.org](http://www.ecosainstitute.org).

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