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# **Eco-communities as insurgent climate urbanism: Radical urban socio-material transformations**

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# **Eco-communities as insurgent climate urbanism: Radical urban socio-material transformations**

## **Abstract**

Eco-communities are permanent interventions to build and reshape the urban, a form of insurgent urbanism. Using examples from already-existing urban eco-communities the ways such projects demonstrate lasting material, social and economic transformations are illustrated through three examples of; generating affordability, designing for frequent social interaction, and repurposing marginalised public urban spaces. These examples are scalable to city level, but would work best if replicated and reworked by neighbourhoods, rather than taking one-size-fits-all approach to climate urbanism. However, for many eco-communities there are often gaps between their imagined politics and their realisation. Racial exclusion and class exclusivity, along with contradictions encountered in property ownership and affordability, requires ongoing critical interrogation of seemingly radical versions of climate urbanism, lest they too contribute to the entrenchment rather than amelioration of inequalities in the contemporary urban.

## **Key words**

Commons, sharing, social interaction, housing, public space, place-making

## **Introduction**

The urban is a realm of contestation in responses to climate change, and as we know can entrench rather than ameliorate existing inequalities (Long and Rice, 2018). The urban is a site for action, as climate change alters what the urban does and can be, so too does the urban challenge how we can understand and respond to climate change. Here there are not just

possibilities but already-existing attempts to intervene in the ongoing neoliberalisation of our urban spaces; attempts to generate more inclusive, open, low cost housing, diverse livelihoods, public commons, and shared green and food producing spaces (Pickerill, 2016). There are also some important scalar dimensions here. Much of the existing work on climate urbanism is conceptualised at a city scale, for example exploring city-wide governance or large-scale infrastructure. The examples of what eco-communities demonstrate are all scalable to city-region level. Some are design elements that can be incorporated into large-scale projects (such as adopting the cost-sharing mechanisms which generate housing affordability), but other aspects are best replicated and repeated at neighbourhood scale. In other words, the repeatability of some of these material interventions and practices is potentially more useful than the creation of a large scale one-size-fits-all climate urbanism. Indeed, as discussed towards the end of this piece, the dangers of racial exclusion and class exclusivity in eco-communities (and insurgent climate urbanism) is best tackled by ensuring socio-material transformations are embedded within existing neighbourhoods and shaped by their existing particularities, which would require a place-based reworking of some of the concepts and practices discussed below to ensure they were appropriate and inclusive.

This short essay explores insurgent urbanism through the ongoing work by activists to reconfigure the urban in radical ways, producing radical versions of climate urbanism through changes in the materialities, practices and spaces of everyday life, resulting in important socio-material transformations (Hou, 2010).

Projects I have worked with have emerged from environmental and social justice activism, social movements seeking social change, and are often rooted in anti-capitalism and an anarchist ethics in the Global North. Contrary to some representations of such activism, there

has always been a duality of approaches which have included the transitory activism of resistance and opposition operating alongside a space of creativity and reformation of material and social lives (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). In the later is an emphasis on permanency of change, beyond the temporary interventions in the city through squats, social centres, or pop-up social collectives, there is a quest to build and reshape the urban. While temporary incursions have important roles to play in challenging the urban and reclaiming space, they unfortunately do little to fundamentally shift the material, political and economic configurations of the urban. As movements such as Occupy have demonstrated, the temporalities of these interventions all too easily dissolve, and while they leave lasting social changes (building new networks of connections, shifting discourse about ownership of urban spaces and making visible homelessness and poverty) their long term effect on the urban can be hard to discern (Halvorsen, 2012, 2015).

## **Eco-communities**

The building of eco-communities demonstrate lasting material, social and economic transformations (Cooper and Baer, 2010). These spaces, linked by their common concerns for minimising environmental impact, maximising use of renewable energies and materials, and self-provision (such as food), also seek to reshape social lives, with an emphasis on mutual aid, sharing of spaces and resources, and an ethics of collectivity. Here new forms of materiality are used to purposefully reshape the urban. Three brief examples demonstrate this through: generating affordability, designing for frequent social interaction, and repurposing marginalised public urban spaces.

Several urban eco-communities are founded on a quest to radically reduce the cost of housing and everyday living expenses, to build inclusive urban spaces that resist the increasing

exclusivity of the neoliberal housing market. Affordability is created through cost sharing schemes, such as at Low Impact Living Affordable Community (UK) (LILAC) where all residents pay 35% of their income for housing (purchasing shares they can eventually sell), or low cost rental from a community-owned (Los Angeles Eco-Village [LAEV], USA, Christie Walk, Australia) or privately-owned (Kailash Eco-Village, USA) property (Chatterton, 2013). The sharing of energy-generating infrastructures reduces costs by benefitting from economies of scale. Costs are further minimised through smaller home units, and the sharing of common infrastructures such as laundry rooms, bike storage, cars, gardens, visitors' rooms and entertaining space (Columbia Eco-village, USA) and of tools and equipment, Figure 1 (Jarvis, 2019). There is also an important social element to affordability, where urban eco-communities such as LILAC, LAEV, Kailash, Springhill Co-housing (UK), Cascade Co-housing (Australia) and Christie Walk, also share childcare and elder care, shopping errands, and cooking, reducing the need for external paid services.

*Figure 1: The shared infrastructures at LILAC, UK – bike sheds, laundry, common house and gardens (source: Author)*

This emphasis on formal and informal sharing of everyday life also reflects a purposeful attempt by eco-communities to design the materialities of their spaces to generate frequent social interaction, countering a tendency in the contemporary urban towards discrete, private, gated and exclusive spaces, where public space is prioritised for private motor vehicles (Sanford, 2019; Daly, 2017). Eco-communities such as Christie Walk, LILAC, LAEV and Springhill Co-housing, Blue Co-Housing (Australia) restrict cars to the edges, and design front doors to face each other, with narrow walkways between homes generating frequent encounters, Figure 2. Private gardens are limited and instead shared green space is designed

to encourage community building, countering the rise of isolation and generating a social practice of mutual interdependence.

*Figure 2: Pedestrian walkways between houses facing each other, Blue Co-Housing, Australia (source: Author)*

Finally, eco-communities seek to transform the urban beyond their property. They seek to rework what the urban can and should be more broadly (Chatterton and Pusey, 2020). Many host and enable urban social justice and environmental activism, but they also reclaim and repurpose the spaces in-between private properties, and public and wasteland places.

Peninsula Park Commons (USA) spilled over into the surrounding sidewalks, building planters on public land for growing vegetables, herbs and flowers. LILAC allocated some of their land for allotments and green space to share with the surrounding communities. LAEV lobbied for traffic calming bulb-outs on nearby roads and for sidewalk vegetation to be food production spaces, such as fruit rather than ornamental trees, Figure 3.

*Figure 3: Sidewalk planting and chalked intersection, LAEV, USA (source: Author)*

Urban space is being reclaimed not just for food production (building on the growing guerrilla gardening movement), but also to reassert the importance of roads for pedestrians, for walking, cycling and playing, not just cars. Practices of resident-driven place-making, painting and chalking intersections, building benches, book sharing stalls and even tea-making stations – recently seizing the opportunities offered by coronavirus lockdowns and a radical drop in traffic – contribute to broader quests to reclaim urban space for everyday mundane play (Stenning, 2020).

## **Contradictions, negotiations and personal lives**

Eco-communities seek permanent and lasting shifts in the material, political and economic configurations of the urban. Their interventions are no less radical than the demands of the social justice and environmental activism from which many emerge, but their permanency requires then to negotiate, navigate and at times compromise. The shift to permanency makes visible several contradictions; of dealing with finances and capital, of engaging in property ownership, of navigating regional government through planning processes, of complying with building regulations, to concerns about thefts and personal security and safety leading some to be less accessible than initially planned. But eco-communities are much more than just buildings, they are homes. Eco-communities make visible the politics of individuals, and in so doing the complex politics of everyday social lives and living together. The negotiations required to share personal spaces, other people's children, the laundry, a neighbour's musical choices, for example, become writ-large in the success or failure of an eco-community.

There are often gaps between the imagined, the intent and the realisation of these radical projects. This is most notable in how few have adequately addressed long-term affordability, with many eco-communities being initially low cost to join, but then reverting to market valuations of property prices which curtail new membership. The predominance of the white middle classes in Global North eco-communities and the racial exclusion of others is too often ignored or apologised for, but rarely tackled as a systemic structural problem. The lack of black residents in Ithaca Eco-village (USA) despite being near a diverse metropolitan city, for example, was articulated by members as a failure of affordability, rather than a complex socio-cultural question and structures of belonging, identity, racism, and social justice (Chitewere, 2018). At times the ecological rationale of eco-communities overrides and erodes the social justice politics that many of them began with. Consequently, eco-communities



have a worrying tendency to entrench rather than ameliorate existing inequalities in a similar way to other forms of climate urbanism. Race and class require much further interrogation here.

## **Conclusions**

Eco-communities are actively intervening in the urban through new forms of materiality and social practices. Many seek to radically reconfigure the affordability of housing through sharing infrastructures and resources, how and how often people socially interact, and what public spaces in the urban are utilised for, as just some examples. There is great promise in these projects and in their continued experimentation and innovation. But there is also a need to carefully interrogate the inequalities and exclusions of these apparently radical versions of insurgent urbanism, just as much as we critically explore the ways climate urbanism continues to securitise the urban as a space of enclosure, privatisation and commercialisation. Indeed, Covid19 has laid bare the risks of high urban density, lack of public green space and limited mutual support networks in disease transmission. Eco-communities have fared well in these new circumstances because of their practices of mutual aid, easy access to green space, home working spaces, investments in cycling and walking, and purposefully built light-filled rooms, terraces and balcony's. Pre-Covid the main benefit that residents identified of eco-communities was the collectivity, the sharing, the social support - the sometimes-intangible elements of being with others. Although challenged by the need to socially distance, eco-community residents have greatly benefitted from being together, collectivity, commoning and caring in a time of global crisis (Morrow and Parker, 2020).

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