

# BUILDING THE SUSTAINABLE ECO-VILLAGE

*A Special Report from the U.N. Habitat II Conference in Istanbul, Turkey, on Global Habitation*

by Brent Cameron

Just returned from Istanbul, Turkey, one of the oldest cities on the planet, the crossroads of East and West and the birthplace of the modern world. Istanbul is now a megacity of over twelve million people. Modern Western lifestyles are awkwardly superimposed on its crumbling and ancient beauty. The automobile has made breathing hazardous, and the speeding traffic mirrors the city's frantically changing values. Old women covered from head to toe in cloth with only their eyes showing stand next to young women with almost everything showing, eyes covered with a blank stare. Bleached blond teens strut through the bustling old world street scene. Men sit chain-smoking beneath subtle twelve-story Marlboro billboards. The fish and vegetable markets and ubiquitous sidewalk cafes with their roasting lamb barbecues now compete with McDonalds and Burger Kings. Each evening, the megaphoned Muslim prayer blasts out over the street, barely audible over Loreena McKennit more successfully wooing passersby into the record store.

I went to Istanbul with three teenagers from Virtual High—Greg, Devon, and my daughter Ilana—to attend Habitat II, a UN conference on global living. We wore many hats. Under the project name VillageQuest, we presented our ideas for sustainable, bio-regional villages and exchanged information and email addresses with a growing global network of groups establishing eco-villages worldwide. (<http://www.gaia.org>). As international press, we reported on daily events and workshops using an Internet website

(<http://bc-education.botany.ubc.ca/habitat/Index.html>) and joined with other youth to publish three conference editions of a youth-perspective newspaper on Habitat II. As participants in Virtual High, we lobbied the Child's Rights Caucus and presented our *Declaration of Learner's Rights and Responsibilities* (<http://www.intouch.bc.ca/pub/wondertree>) in an attempt to increase awareness of the need to enfranchise children.

As people, we enjoyed participating in community life in Turkey and meeting others from around the world. We discovered that we have an emerging common problem, hence a universal opportunity.

Habitat II (<http://www.undp.org/un/habitat>) looked at habitation within the growing trend of globalization. Government organizations seemed to focus on how best to cope with this trend and how to manage the apparently inevitable phenomenon of urbanization. The NGO's (Non-Governmental Organizations) seemed to concentrate on how to curtail this trend and on supporting bio-regional strategies to strengthen cultural identity.

For many, "globalization" seems a euphemism for industrialization, Westernization, urbanization, capitalization, resource profiteering and commercialization on a global scale. The people of the world seem caught up in acquiring the benefits of materialism and are apparently

willing (or persuaded) to trade the rugged simplicity of their rural lifestyles. Although each culture has its hardships and urban materialism seems a simple solution, often more seems to be lost than gained in the long run. Mass marketing through media controlled by multinationals is enticing people of every country into consumerism. National governments are collecting their royalties (interesting

term) for restructuring both economies and resource management strategies, from local control to international development. There is a global mass migration from the villages, where a previously sustain-

able and indigenous infrastructure fades in importance to the hype and lure of jobs and education that ultimately elude most people in the shantytown city suburbs.

Turkey offered an interesting insight into the political struggles that emerge from change and the power struggle associated with opportunity. The global struggle among international influences, national governments, local communities and the exchange of goods and resources that sustain everyone was dramatically present in Istanbul.

In most instances, we found the Turkish people delightful: they are friendly and engaging, community is in the streets, and even the alleycats are friendly to any passerby. The ever-present police walk holding hands, and sit talking with an arm over a shoulder or a hand on a knee. All

seems well (cars and exhaust aside). But the machine guns, armoured crowd-pushing vehicles and bus loads of helmeted, club-carrying police strategically waiting started us wondering. What, exactly, were they waiting for?

## PROGRESS AND PROTEST

The night before we left for Istanbul, we were informed by Amnesty International that Turkey has the worst reputation in the world for treatment of journalists in terms of number killed. We were warned to be careful. Two days later, the three youth and I were wearing international press badges (gulp), and were being scanned and searched amidst an army of police guards. Everyone was searched hundreds of times as they went from meeting to meeting, and it became routine to assume that in each meeting, listening to most conversations, were the "almost" secret police—secret enough to intimidate, but apparent enough to let you know they were listening and watching.

We learned that one does not criticize the military or the police in Turkey, and that there is a civil war in the country, which is also on the list of items not to mention. The Kurdish people in Eastern Turkey and the labor unions are questioning and resisting government action;

## Photos

*Istanbul old and new: The timeless serenity of the Blue Mosque (top left) and "globalization" (top right). Photos by David Allan Weir.*

*Centre: Virtual High student Devon files stories from his bathroom office in his 500 year old dorm in downtown Istanbul. Photo by Brent Cameron.*

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often they go to jail, and sometimes they disappear. We were given glossy brochures and shown a tourist's good time by the Turkish government, as long as we were looking at what they wanted us to see.

Maya, one of our more astute youth journalist colleagues from Switzerland, found the place where the police had hidden the dozens of street children so that they would not be seen by the visitors to Habitat II. While wandering the burned out shantytown suburbs of Istanbul, she carefully documented the children with her camera. Suddenly, several secret police came from nowhere, grabbed her camera, destroyed her film and told her to leave or they would throw her in jail. I found out later that Turkish urbanization had been fueled by the systematic military destruction of villages in eastern Turkey. In a hurried news conference by a group from Denmark championing a banned book (available at website address) it was disclosed that 75% of those living in the suburbs of Istanbul had fled there from rural villages when their houses and possessions had been burned by the military. Over 50% of the children were not in school and 50% of the families did not have enough to eat.

Several days later on a sunny Saturday afternoon, three other youth reporters from BC who had heard mention of a weekly protest went to investigate for their newspaper. (Our group from Virtual High had decided to stay away and avoid possible trouble; after all, we were there to network with others to promote creative eco-solutions to urbanization.) In the busy market street our colleagues came across about forty people staging a silent "sit-in" to bring attention to the fact that their friends and family had disappeared at the hands of Turkish police.

Hundreds of Habitat press and spectators were there when an army of police closed in from every angle. Our friends just managed to squeeze through the door of a Burger King before it was locked. They raced to the second floor where from the window they photographed the police with helmets, shields and clubs, at least four police to a person, systematically beating victims to the ground. (By the end of the day, according to official Turkish police reports, over 1,500 people in various protests all over the city had been subdued and arrested.) In minutes, police, protesters and spectators were gone, and shopkeepers went about cleaning the patches of blood off the street. Three days later, one of our Vancouver youth associates was interviewed over the telephone by Vancouver's CKNW, his voice still shaking as he recounted the



The daily "circle dance" performed by Turkish urban villagers on a pedestrian street, the site of bloody clashes between Turkish protesters and police during Habitat II. Photo by Greg Dean.

story of the arrests.

After spending that weekend in jail, most of those arrested were released. Their stories sparked another meeting at the NGO forum to protest police treatment and the violation of people's rights. My daughter Ilana and I were there when a woman at the microphone asked for everyone to sit down in solidarity with those arrested. Over one hundred people sat down. Ilana sat down at my feet as I captured the events on my Quicktake electronic camera.

My heart soared with pride as I looked down at my daughter expressing her commitment to peace and human rights, then sank immediately as I looked up and saw the police talking on their radios. There was a second request for everyone but the security police to sit down. I was left standing in a circle of press and a circle of secret police. I photographed the police and they photographed me. For some reason this rally was not attacked, and the meeting dispersed in confusion when the secret police grabbed several people and dragged them off.

Several days later at another sit-in, the police beat and arrested another 1,200 people. After a Turkish journalist working with us on the newspaper horrified Ilana and me with his account of six months of daily beatings and torture in jail for attending a political rally, we were afraid to publish either our pictures or our account of witnessed events until we left the country. This article marks the first time we have gone public with our story.

It was disconcerting to observe the degree of self-interest, apathy, or just plain confusion that surfaced at Habitat II. Habitat I, held in Vancouver in 1976, was earmarked with enthusiasm and positive intentions as global problems were addressed. However when the Turkish people presented their problems to a hopefully sympathetic ear, they found that most others had come to find sympathy and help for their own problems. For example, a group from Kobe, Japan came with the banner "Earthquake bad, government worse," and found it hard to listen to anyone else's problems when they themselves had come for support for their

Eco-village: See page 8

# "Habizart Burads! Kay Iplar Nerede?" "Habifart is here! Where is the missing?"

David Allan Weir, an accredited delegate to Habitat II sent to Istanbul to represent West Coast Youth, a Vancouver-based youth NGO which looks at human settlement issues in the Lower Mainland, witnessed striking evidence of the tension between protesters and police. Here is his report, as told to Galen Brandt Wooten.

Police were everywhere throughout the conference, but on Saturday, June 8, I noticed that police presence had increased dramatically. Riding in a taxi up to Taksim Square, the main traffic square in Istanbul, I spotted over thirty military troop transports packed with police stationed in the nearby football stadium parking lot.

When I got to the square, I saw almost a hundred motorcycles parked at the top of the steps above the square. Since each bike typically bears two uniformed officers, at least one carrying a machine gun, it was clear that approximately two hundred officers had already been dispatched to the scene. On the other side of the square, I saw additional armoured personnel carriers that I had not previously seen in this area. Walking down the pedestrian mall toward our newspaper office, I saw streets lined with police in riot gear. My initial reaction was that they had been deployed as a show of force in an effort to prevent something from happening - more as an exercise than a serious threat.

When I got to the office, however, I was told about the weekly silent protests staged every Saturday morning in a different public location in Istanbul by the "Saturday mothers of the missing". These are mothers and other family members of people arrested and "disappeared" within the Turkish penal system, many presumed dead, but none whom the Turkish authorities will acknowledge having arrested. The protest is always silent; twenty to forty people simply sitting down holding one or two signs.

On this Saturday, the site was four blocks from our office, in front of the Post Office. We were aware that the International Facilitating Group (IFG) had warned NGO participants to stay away from protest areas since "UN policy is not to interfere in domestic matters." Four of us left the office with the initial intent of simply observing the protest without getting involved. We were carrying cameras hidden from the police.

As we reached the Post Office, we saw about forty protesters sitting silently on the sidewalk holding a sign that read "HABIFART IS HERE!"

WHERE IS THE MISSING? HABIZART BURADA! KAY IPLAR NEREDE?"

They stared across the street at three armoured personnel carriers and several ambulances. Further down the street were numerous police buses, each of which can hold approximately sixty officers - enough police to outnumber the protesters at least four to one. As we stood watching and taking pictures of the protesters peacefully sitting there, a plainclothes police officer walked up behind us and shouted something in Turkish. A 15-year-old Turkish



Police "subdue" a protester at a "Saturday mothers of the missing" sit-in, a silent, peaceful sit-down protest staged weekly by mothers and other family members of people arrested and "disappeared" by the Turkish government. Photo by David Allan Weir.

member of our staff translated: "If you are a passerby, this is none of your business. Leave now, or you will be beaten."

At that, we turned on our heels and headed for the nearest alley, where we watched as the police moved in past us with their riot shields up, visors down and clubs out. They surrounded the protesters from all sides, with us following close behind. When we reached the Burger King storefront next to the Post Office, we dashed upstairs to its second floor, opened the window, pulled out our cameras, and began shooting the scene below us.

We shot for ten minutes as policemen moved in and beat up, arrested, dragged away and threw into buses not only all the protesters, but also many bystanders, including several Turkish journalists and at least one foreign journalist (who we heard was released a few hours later). All this took place under a huge banner stretched over the square and bearing the words: "ISTANBUL WELCOMES YOU ALL FOR THE HABITAT II CONFERENCE."

We could see foreign media crews with their

"Visitors" cameras clearly shooting the scene in full sight of police, often standing beside the police and even between police and protesters. As far as we could tell, none of these journalists was arrested, and their footage made CNN International News and the Turkish news later that afternoon; we ourselves saw footage of the following Saturday's protest on Turkish TV.

Suddenly we noticed police looking up at us and our cameras. We fled Burger King and launched ourselves back into the square, to what we hoped was the relative safety of our fellow journalists and welcoming escape alleys - and into the heart of the police flanks. One of our party shot photos of people being arrested and police officers dragging them away; immediately thereafter, these protesters were released.

After a few minutes, the police and remaining initial protesters massed to our right, and a new group of protesters, some of whom had pulled free of police custody, formed a new circle twenty feet to our left. Perhaps fueled by the international media attention, they began shouting in English: "If you are silent, you will be one of the missing." Police attention turned their way, and with riot shields up and batons swinging, the police descended on this new group, beating many, arresting them all, and dragging them off into vans in the space of five minutes. Flashing the peace sign with

fingers extended out the windows of the vans, the protesters were whisked out of sight.

By this time, most of the protesters on the site, about one hundred fifty total, had been arrested, all within under thirty minutes. The police then barricaded the alleys, funneled all traffic through the pedestrian mall, and formed a police barricade several officers deep at the eastern end of the protest area. On the other side of that line were more protesters who began shouting. Police further down the street arrested them and, beyond range of our cameras, dragged them away. (By the end of the day, according to official Turkish police reports, fully 1,500 people in different parts of the city had been arrested.)

At that point, one of our party decided to interview one of the police officers about his personal life. Do you have children? he asked. Yes, replied the officer, one son. Why did you join the police? Because I love my country and I love adventure.

The officer had answered perhaps a half dozen questions before his superior appeared and ordered him, too, to be silent.



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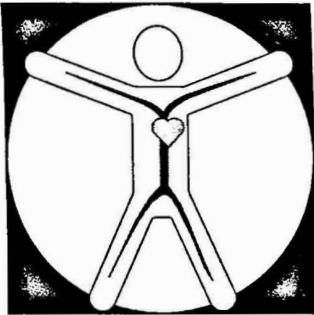
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### Eco-village: From page 6

own desperate situation. In some ways, because we had come with a message of hope and a plan for positive action, our optimism insulated us from the plight of the majority of the earth's population. However, it was blatantly apparent to us that we are all in this together.

The United Nations made no official comments about these events and only one radical Turkish newspaper covered the story. The story did not reach the international press either, except for a few lines and pictures on back pages. Meanwhile the Turkish government goes on destroying the habitat of millions of people, further arresting and sometimes disappearing anyone who protests.

While all this was going on, a meeting of international leaders was held in an international hotel that was

once a sultan's palace. As elite, they found consensus, and spoke in general terms of the need for equality in the world. After the conference, Greg and Devon managed to get a meeting and establish a first-name relationship with Ishmael, the Vice President of the World Bank. He granted them an interview, but the questions they asked (check our website) overwhelmed him. He promised to research the questions and send us his answers. We, like the police, are still waiting.

### HOW BIG IS OUR FOOTPRINT?

Perhaps we can put these current events into perspective with a quick history of cities. Until 1800 there was never a city in the world larger than 1,000,000 people. What many people live in now are really megacities.

London became the first megacity, made possible by industrialization and the shift from renewable fuels to non-renewable fossil fuels. In 140 years, the city grew to 8,000,000 and set a precedent for importing resources from outside the city (worldwide) and in turn, exporting its exhaust outside city limits. The Thames flowing through the city became a convenient outflow, polluting the river to the extent that swimming in it was often fatal.

Our megacities still persist in resorting to the obsolete strategies of the industrial city of over a hundred years ago. We need new ways to think about the city in a global ecological context.

Gunter Pauli of the United Nations University in Japan is coordinating over 4,000 researchers on the Internet (<http://www.unu.edu>) focusing on sustainability projects around the world. In his work-

shop in Istanbul, he advised people to start thinking of our cities metabolically, to analyze urban systems as living biological processes. He suggested that people think in circular terms rather than linear ones to understand biological systems. For example, to use a biological metaphor to describe Vancouver, we achieve a whole new understanding of the sewage system if we think of the city as a giant person. Each day the city's bowel



Virtual High students Greg and Devon question Ishmael, Vice President of the World Bank, in a private interview. Check the Virtual High website (see article) for his replies. Photo by Brent Cameron

movement would emerge as a giant turd floating out into the Georgia Straight—a turd three times the size of the largest BC ferry.

Dr. Pauli also mentioned UBC's William Rees and his "ecological footprint" model to describe the resource base needed to supply the life-support system of a city or town. To consume is to tap the resources of the surrounding ecosystem: in the case of a box of cereal, a wheat field; a

light switch, a reservoir and a river valley; a chair, a forest; and a wool carpet, a field of sheep. London, for example, has a footprint 125 times larger than its actual land base; it needs a resource equivalent to the entire land mass of the British Isles. Vancouver has an ecological footprint twenty times larger than the actual area of the city.

The average, per-person, Canadian ecological footprint is 4.8 hectares (equivalent to three city blocks). For a sustainable world, the average must shrink to 1.7 hectares, given the current population of approximately five billion people. It seems apparent that we Canadians use almost three times more than our share of the earth's resources. Doing more with less is one way to achieve reduction. Another is to work with new paradigms: new models that facilitate new ways of thinking about the situation that we are in. To reduce consumption, yet maintain our quality of life, we must devise new ways of thinking about living on earth, including incorporating new technologies in the service of efficiency and balance.

Increased understanding parallels natural evolution as we evolve more efficient ways of doing things. Old systems naturally become obsolete. Kerosene lamps are replaced by electric lighting, telegraph by radio, schools by intrinsic learning communities, the horse by the automobile and so on. Some people cling to old ways of doing things and others participate in pioneering new methods.

The Wondertree Foundation for Natural Learning has been experimenting with a new model for learning in the Information Age for the past thirteen years. We

have not attempted to retrofit technology into the schooling metaphor; rather, we have left factory schooling to the Industrial Age. Wondertree is a learning community working with children as naturally growing and developing organisms. Our consensus community learning model has enfranchised the group of teenagers in Virtual High (<http://bc-education.botany.ubc.ca/VH/Index.html>) with the responsibility of living according to their hearts - living to "realize their ideals" in the world.

The world is information, and as this trip to Istanbul attests, our youth are learning in a global ecology. Charged with the responsibility of living life to the fullest, they are enthusiastically traveling the world, researching sustainable living. David Muncaster (see *Common Ground* July 1996) is now doing village research in Nepal; a group recently traveled to Findhorn to participate in an international eco-village conference; and our trip to Istanbul made connections in Africa, Papua New Guinea, Australia, Denmark.....

#### FALSE CREEK

##### SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

All these ideas were brought back to Vancouver to seed an incredible opportunity for this city to establish itself as a world leader in ecological living. The City of Vancouver is planning to develop forty-seven acres of city-owned land along the southeast edge of False Creek as a sustainable community development. It could become a world class demonstration project that would match Granville Island as a tourist resource.

Imagine a sustainable community that can grow a significant portion of its own food, integrating rural agriculture and permaculture into the urban environment. Envision a community that collects its own water from rooftop rainwater and that can biologically transform its own sewage into drinking water in four days.

Visualize an urban village that can generate a significant portion of its own energy and draws on new technologies to heat the community using one-sixth the amount of energy used in conventional developments at one-sixth the cost.

Imagine what would happen if neighbours knew each other and worked together for both economic and for social gains. Appreciating that both the school and the old age home are obsolete and are insults to the sensibilities of both marginalized groups, imagine designing a sustainable village where everyone becomes a mentor and a caregiver who shares both the responsibilities and the joys of living together.

Consider what people could do with the many hours each day that could be devoted to individual fulfillment, family enjoyment and community development if most people didn't have to commute to work or to school. What could happen if people lived, worked, learned and played in a sustainable urban village? What would happen across the country if our city invested in one example of what is possible as a benchmark for sustainable development and ecological living?

In preliminary research it has been calculated from Statistics Canada data that the average Canadian family of four needs to earn \$65,000 per year to keep ahead of the \$64,000 it costs to live annually. This same family could live in a sustainable community on about \$40,000 annually. The money saved could be invested, or families could introduce job sharing and increase family time. A sustainable community is one way to step off the treadmill or assembly line into a simpler, more relaxing and fulfilling way of living.

To further our research into sustainable living and to make a difference in society through energy-efficient strategies, Wondertree has initiated a youth employment project to reduce the ecological footprint of existing and planned

housing in the Lower Mainland. Twenty youth (ages 18-24) will be employed next year (October 1996 to March 1997) to incorporate innovative technologies for sustainable living into a lifesize interactive public display at Science World. Families can contact our resource team who will make a home visit to evaluate energy-saving technologies that can help them live more efficiently by saving resources and money. Many systems that promote local efficiencies have been developed and are in use around the world; they just need to be implemented here at home.

#### CHANGE IS UP TO US

Our trip to the UN conference made one thing very clear: no one is in charge. No one is managing or can even begin to understand the affairs of the planet. Each organization is the puppet of the forces of a collection of other organizations, each out of control in this way. We have come home convinced that it is up to each individual to take responsibility for effecting positive change, to work with other local groups, and to trust that this is happening world wide.

With this thought in mind, I will conclude with this reflection on Habitat II. I am not sure what to make of the following series of coincidences. Rio held a UN environmental conference, while Brazil holds one of the world's worst records for the destruction of a biodiverse rainforest ecosystem. Beijing held a women's conference, when China holds one of the most significant records for human rights violations. Then Istanbul holds a UN conference on habitation, when the Turkish

government is investing billions of dollars to destroy the 3,000 indigenous Kurdish villages in eastern Turkey and displace 3,000,000 people from their homes.

Is this an effort to bring focus to the key problems of the world? Or is it intended to make a mockery of international and United Nations attempts to influence governments and multinational corporations?

Since rhetoric was the order of the day at the government level, the role of saving the earth seems to be up to you and me, and more importantly, up to us. Individually, we cannot save the earth. Yet the collective efforts of individuals working together in bio-regional communities can and will have positive global effect.

Let us work together to help make sure



Our hope for the future. Children in a Turkish village. Photo by David Allan Weir.

that the False Creek sustainable community initiative becomes a benchmark for new ideas — a community which by exemplifying these ideas, inspires others to create new ways we can all live more gently on this earth.

Brent Cameron, M.A., is the co-founder and co-creator of the Wondertree Foundation for Natural Learning. He is a learning consultant working with models of lifelong learning in self-design, consensus community, ethical enterprise and global ecology.



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