

Living in Community at 75

By Bruce Dobb

I'm living in the very urban Los Angeles Ecovillage near downtown LA (laecovillage.org). It's a community with lots of contradictions:

- Our cooperative offers a “car-free discount” for member tenants, yet more than half of our members own cars.
- We compost kitchen scraps, yet half of our take-away trash is full of our kitchen scraps.
- We grow some of our own food, but that's no competition for the two supermarkets at the end of our block, which supply most of it.

What was that quote in *A Tale of Two Cities*? “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief”...in short, that period was so much like the present period.

That pretty much sums up life here at the LA Ecovillage.

We're ecology-minded and planet-friendly, but we're urban. We do need to tolerate dirty streets, obnoxious motorists, terrible traffic, and too little green space—except for our learning garden, of course. We need to compromise with the community we live in and not scold anyone. Our members weather it all successfully—even the occasional crime. It all seems to work for the most part and helps keep a low carbon footprint.

There are huge advantages to living in our community. Lots of folks met their spouses here, lots of babies born here, many successful demonstration programs and cooperative ventures launched here, and recognition galore. (We are quite marvelous! All the co-ops think so.)

But then there's the grind of living in a gritty urban demonstration program located too close to a congested part of downtown LA known as “K-Town.” That's what I want to talk about right now.

Here's How I Do It

I'm 75 and live in a 700 sq. ft. cooperative apartment with

an outdoor patio and high ceiling. I have a formerly feral cat who shares the space because it's on the ground floor and he can come and go through my backdoor in a wink (often because he sees a mouse in the courtyard). There is ready access to a handicap ramp. I moved in here 11 years ago from a 5,000 sq. ft. house that I never liked and don't miss. My place works beautifully for me because I hate housework and there isn't a lot to clean. The only thing I miss is a garbage disposal—but no one really needs one. Air conditioning would be a nice thing here—and our co-op (Urban Soil/Tierra Urbana—USTU) is tackling that issue with membership fundraising.

The reason I know about the Village is that I bike a lot and a worker-owned co-op (The Bicycle Kitchen; bicyclekitchen.org) started in one of the unit's kitchens. I went there before they went big and moved that co-op up the street to Fountain Avenue. I always loved to bike and embraced the opportunity to live without a car. No sacrifice, but rather a joy. It helps to be a bike freak when you live among all the bike mechanics. (Also helps that I'm a former loan officer for the National Co-op Bank and understood co-op principals.)

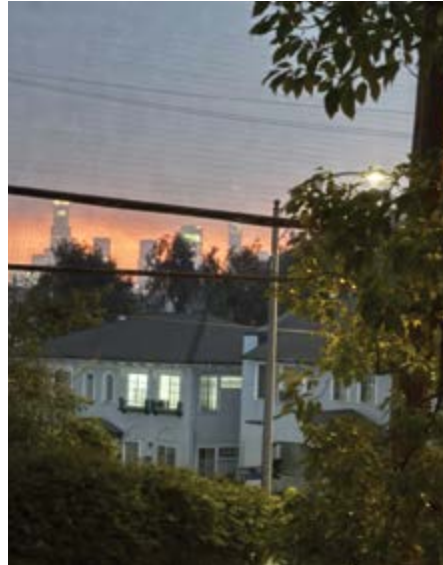
We're located between two subway lines—both with walkable stops close by. We are one block from the street with the largest number of daily bus riders in the nation, Vermont Avenue, where the 203 bus goes from Inglewood in the south to Sunset Boulevard in East Hollywood, to the north. I ride that bus a lot with many very poor folks and recent immigrants.

Poor people in LA are very resilient folks—they have to be. LA is their first stop in America and for many their last. They add to the fast pace of living in LA—everyone's got to hustle to make a living. Riding the bus helps keep my immune system strong and healthy. Covid ain't nothing on the 203; we got the biggies on our bus: chorelia, bubonic plague, bird flu; hell, it's all on the bus. I never catch colds.

Another plus about car-free living is that it's cheap. I save an



Photos courtesy of Bruce Dobb



easy \$500 a month without a car. And I am 75; at some point, they want to take your keys because you're a danger to yourself and others on the road. I will be ready for that day. I get around beautifully right now, without a car. Bus, train, rental electric bikes and scooters, LYFT, and don't forget the city's free transportation services for seniors (up to four one-way rides totaling 40 miles per month at no cost within Los Angeles County). LA also offers discounted taxi fares and shared rides for seniors. Thanks to discounts on public transit, I pay 35 cents every time I get on and off a bus—about the same if I rent a city rental bike from Metro.

And with all that (not-white-specific) privilege, what do I do? I take pictures; lots of pictures.

I get together with buddies all the time, visit art exhibits, work when I need money, and ride in monthly CicLAvia (ciclavia.org) bike rides. (This is where a main transit street in LA closes to cars for the day.) Mostly I get to push the world in a direction I wish it would go. No cars, no meat, and one-on-one encounters every day with real people—not just digital images. That's just baked into living in community and it's the best part.

I live a great lifestyle in LA because I can ride a bike here nine months out of the year, but you DO need options for those days you can't bike. If I'm feeling particularly arthritic at the start of the day and need food, I order groceries for a \$10 charge and they always come in an hour.

Our community is the best part. All ages, all backgrounds and profiles—I live in a very liberated community. Every Sunday we have a community potluck, open to all, where folks bring “cover dishes”—all vegetarian-only (cow meat means lots of emissions),

which can be very bland and tasteless unless you season it right and don't overcook the veggies. It's good to be a vegetarian, but not if you have to martyr yourself to tasteless food.

That's the one gripe I want to air in this firsthand account of life at the LA Ecovillage. The cooking on Sunday night at the potluck is godawful—not always, but most of the time. That starts with the fact that many folks just use it as an opportunity to clear out their fridge. They swipe it all up with a rag and boil it in a pot. Just add water. And then there's the fact that veggies are difficult to cook, even if you're a good cook—unless it's potatoes. My fellow members beat the hell out of their asparagus and manage to combine black beans with every last dish.

But that's ok. I've learned to always eat before, and try to cook something wonderful for the crew (something that's fresh!). At 7:30 promptly, every Sunday night, I hobble up to the community dining room on the second floor with a pleasant smile and always get into the best conversations and interesting meetings with visitors. It is well worth the mangled food stuff for the lively talks and fun of being with others.

Apart from that, it's great to be in our community. When most folks at 75 seem to get more and more isolated, I find I have lots of duties and responsibilities that I don't really notice because it's just part of being in a community. No one can hide in this community. There's lots of commotion here and plenty of people to pass the time of day with and take pictures of. I guess that's the sort of life I live. 🍷

Bruce Dobb is an owner-member at Los Angeles Ecovillage (laecovillage.org), where he's lived for nearly a dozen years.