

Homes a model of ecological design By Stuart Leavenworth - Bee Staff Writer Published Sunday, April 27, 2003

Twelve-lane freeways. Four-car garages. Strip malls, sports stadiums and cloverleaf interchanges.

When it comes to ecological footprints, California is Mr. Bigfoot. But some residents also have pioneered ways to live lighter on the land. Just ring the doorbell of Judy Corbett's house.

Walk inside the living room, and sun streams through overhead skylights. Turn on the faucet, and scalding water flows from a solar tank on the roof. Pick your breakfast from fruit trees outside. Drive to day care? Forget it. It's a block away.

Judy Corbett takes a stroll down one of many paths winding through Village Homes in Davis, the community she and her former husband, Michael Corbett, designed in the 1970s. A typical household there consumes 40 percent less energy than homes in nearby subdivisions.

For a quarter century, the 240-dwelling Village Homes community in Davis has won international plaudits for its ecological design. Judy Corbett and her ex-husband, Michael Corbett, developed it during the oil crisis of the 1970s. Now it is one of Davis' most popular communities.

"Village Homes has demonstrated that development can work for people and the environment," said David Bainbridge, a former Davis planner who teaches at Alliant International University in San Diego. Village Homes, he says, is a unique mix of open space, compact development and energy-efficient design - features rarely rolled into a single subdivision.

Judy and Michael Corbett were young ecology students when, inspired by the garden cities of Britain, they became unlikely developers.

"I was in graduate school, and we would sit in class and hear about the destruction of species, all this stuff that hadn't hit the press yet," Judy Corbett recalls. "A lot of us said, 'We can't sit here and do nothing.' So we quit to go out and work in the world."

The Corbetts got lucky. A developer had been blocked from developing a 60-acre tomato field just west of Davis. With help from friends and Sacramento Savings and Loan, they purchased it for a bargain price in 1975: \$6,000 an acre.

The couple then spent several years trying to persuade reluctant engineers and banks to endorse their unconventional project.

City engineers didn't like the Corbetts' proposed drainage system, which relied on the land's natural contours to drain stormwater into marshes, instead of on big pipes and culverts. The Federal Housing Administration objected to houses that weren't perpendicular to the curving streets, but instead were oriented to receive maximum sun exposure.

Despite that opposition, Village Homes was built, and now includes 220 houses, 20 apartments, 12 acres of greenbelts, 12 acres of communal gardens, offices, a community center, a restaurant and a near-Olympic-sized swimming pool.

Two decades after they were planted, the community orchards are so laden with fruit that residents complain of citrus overload. Kids play in parks far from any buzz of traffic.

According to a 1995 study, a typical Village Homes household consumes 40 percent less energy than homes in nearby subdivisions. Even outside, the summer temperatures are lower because there is less concrete.

Resale values are higher than elsewhere in Davis and "for sale" signs are rare. A 1,600-square-foot house usually sells for between \$400,000 and \$480,000, said Joan Stiles, a Davis real estate agent.

It is not utopia, Corbett readily admits. During a recent stroll, she grumbled about

homeowners' habits of stuffing junk into their carports. If she could do it over again, Village Homes would include more storage space and the latest sustainable building materials, such as environmentally certified wood and newer solar technologies.

The Corbetts, however, have no immediate plans for Village Homes II. Across the country, similarly innovative developments have been blocked by zoning codes, resistant lenders and "not-in-my-back-yard" neighbors.

"The sad fact is, developers are making so much money building what they are building," said Michael Corbett, who runs the Village Homes restaurant. "Until people demand something different, nothing will change."

Michael and Judy Corbett *Time*, February 22, 1999

Back to the Garden: a Suburban Dream By David S. Jackson/davis

As developer Michael Corbett strolls around the gardens of Village Homes, his pioneering experiment in ecological living in Davis, Calif., life looks pretty good. Solar panels help keep the houses warm, shared backyards bring neighbors together, and natural drainage irrigates fruit trees. Corbett reaches up to a branch, plucks off a persimmon, and bites into it. "Just right," he proclaims with a smile. Village Homes is one of the world's best examples of sustainable development--it doesn't degrade the environment that future generations will inherit. But only a quarter-century ago, the ideas behind the project were considered so radical that it almost didn't happen.

Corbett, now 58, was a young homebuilder in the early '70s, when he and his wife Judy began thinking of ways to combine environmental ecology with social ecology, which uses building design to make neighbors more neighborly. The couple bought 60 acres of tomato fields west of downtown Davis and drew up plans for a housing development that would combine residential, commercial and agricultural elements in an unprecedented mix. The houses, which would use the latest in solar-heating technology, would be built in clusters and oriented toward the backyards, which would open onto large common areas. Fruits and vegetables would grow there, using water collected by natural drainage (the land would be contoured to capture most rainwater, with excess flowing into ditches and ponds rather than concrete storm sewers). The streets would be narrow and end in cul-de-sacs. Winding walkways would connect the homes to a small courtyard of offices, reinforcing the theme of a community built for people, not cars.

The Corbetts submitted their plans to city officials--and got doused in cold water. "Everybody had a problem," recalls Judy. "The police department didn't like the dead-end cul-de-sacs. The fire department didn't like the narrow streets. The public-works department didn't like agriculture mixing with residential. And the planning department picked it apart endlessly."

Financing was another roadblock. "We went to 20 banks that wouldn't make a loan because the plan was too unconventional," says Corbett. "Everything was untried and unproven." But he and his wife were dauntless. "We never considered giving up," Judy says. "We weren't developers, we were missionaries."

They set up traffic cones on an empty parking lot to show the fire department that emergency equipment could easily navigate the narrow streets, even past parked cars. Village Homes' streets--with an average width of 23 ft., compared with up to 36 ft. on normal streets--would not only cost the city less to build and maintain but would give off less heat in the summer. They convinced the police department that putting sidewalks behind the homes rather than in front and eliminating throughways would make residents safer, and Village Homes' low crime rate has proved the point.

They promised city officials that agricultural runoff wouldn't be a problem because they would use environmentally safe growing methods. And to those who objected to natural drainage, Corbett argued that cities had been built around that concept for centuries before modern techniques came in. As for financing, Corbett finally got help from a small local bank by not telling it about all the ecology business. The only major idea that had to be dropped was a plan to recycle sewage through underground pipes to nourish the orchards. The public health department refused to bend.

After three years of delays, the Corbetts got the go-ahead, and the first of 240 homes began going up. In the heart of the development, a day-care center and a small suite of offices were built. Nearby, a solar-heated pool and playground looked out on a vineyard. (A restaurant would come later.) The homes came in all types and sizes: traditional, modern, even four with sod roofs. There was virtually no restriction on style, but all had to use solar heating. And there was one iron commandment: Thou shalt not block thy neighbor's sun.

Gardens soon sprouted, and so did kids. Families flocked to the development, drawn by the community spirit, open spaces and the bike paths that connected them to downtown Davis. "It really is a village," says Kit Bruner, 51, who moved in 15 years ago with her husband and two children. "There were eight 8-year-old boys in a two-block radius. You knew the parents of the child your child was playing with."

The residents became as diverse as the bounty of their vegetable patches. A bond salesman who had never gardened before started raising onions, broccoli, cauliflower, parsley, snow peas, chard and kale. Near him is a physics professor who once specialized in nuclear energy and now prefers the solar kind. There are schoolteachers and state-government employees (Sacramento is 15 miles away), young couples and retirees. Although the houses grew as large as 3,000 sq. ft., Corbett built several 1,000-sq.-ft. units for low-income residents.

Village Homes' success has attracted admirers from near and far. Architects and landscape-architecture students still troop through regularly, and Japanese tourists are frequent visitors. "They're always trying to find what the latest thing in the world is, so they can capitalize on it," says Corbett with a laugh. The late French President Francois Mitterrand and former First Lady Rosalyn Carter have taken tours.

But enthusiasm for solar energy ebbed in the '80s after President Reagan ended tax credits for alternative power sources. Judy Corbett, who had been appointed to California's Solar Cal Council by Governor Jerry Brown, suddenly found herself without a job when his successor, George Deukmejian, pulled the plug on the agency. So she set up a nonprofit organization called the Local Government Commission to help educate officials on ways to deal with social and environmental problems. "It was clear to me that without mayors and city council managers and supervisors undertaking the lead in making things change, Village Homes could never be duplicated," she says.

Village Homes was one of the inspirations for the Coffee Creek community that green architect William McDonough is designing in Indiana, but other developers have been slow to pick up on the Corbetts' ideas. "The problem isn't that the public doesn't want it," Corbett says. "They come here and see what we've done and say, 'Why isn't everybody doing this?' But developers are so closed-minded. They continue to build thousands of places where you can't get around without a car."

Village Homes isn't perfect. The Corbetts say that if they could do it over again, they'd build garages rather than open carports, which have filled up over the years with unsightly junk. Corbett

would also put solariums--solar-heated rooms--in every house, and his wife would like to use photovoltaic roofing shingles to generate electricity from sunlight.

But what Corbett would most like to do is put his ideas into practice on a larger scale, especially since the fight against suburban sprawl has moved to the top of the nation's environmental agenda. His next goal is to create a combined residential, retail and office development south of Davis that would feature natural drainage and on-site food production. More than two decades after breaking ground for Village Homes, he's back in front of those persnickety city officials, seeking the green light to build. "At this point in my life," he says, "I don't want to do anything if it's not on the cutting edge." It may be lonely out there, but he doesn't mind.