**From Isla Vista to Eco Vista: A Design Project in Community Resilience**  
March 29, 2020

John Foran

*“An ecovillage is an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes in 5 areas (social, culture, ecology, economy and whole systems design) to regenerate their social and natural environments. Ecovillages are living laboratories pioneering beautiful alternatives and innovative solutions. They are rural or urban settlements with vibrant social structures, vastly diverse, yet united in their actions towards low impact, high-quality lifestyles”*

– Joubert and Gregger 2017)

## **Introduction: Isla Vista, a 50-year experiment in community**

Since its “boom town” development in the 1950’s and 60’s, with the inception of the UCSB campus, the unincorporated college town of Isla Vista has proven a dynamic incubator for models of community development and environmental sustainability. Over its 50-year history, Isla Vista has been a site for radical experiments in alternative lifestyle, civil disobedience, new economies, community governance, land-(mis)use, and environmental stewardship. It has served as a public research laboratory for numerous disciplines across the UCSB campus. As an epicenter for youth culture, Isla Vista presents unique opportunities for the study of college campus and community dynamics that touch upon some of the most critical issues facing American society – among them, access and affordability, land development and gentrification, food insecurity, mental health, substance abuse, sexual violence, free speech, and law enforcement-community relations. Its unique demographic profile – with high density (346 acres or .54 square miles with a population of 23,096 according to the 2010 Census) and young adults (more than 80 percent between the ages of 18 and 24) – Isla Vista serves as a fascinating laboratory for study, with significant potential to yield valuable information in the coming global transition to living sustainably.

Organizations active in Isla Vista in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s provided Isla Vista with recycling beginning in the early 1970s and encouraged organic gardening and farming projects in the 1970s and early 1980s, laying the groundwork for the current mission of the Isla Vista Parks and Recreation District.

Over the past five years, the local community, the County, the University and the Isla Vista Recreation and Parks District have worked together to foster further positive development in Isla Vista toward a more connected, self-directed community.

Beyond its identity as a home to many UCSB students and vibrant, but under-represented non-student communities, Isla Vista serves as an exceptional candidate for the modeling of *eco-transition* – what activists and academics today call “just transition” – for the following reasons:

* Given its finite geographical boundary and a high density youth population, the opportunity to both study and witness change in Isla Vista will be far greater than would be the case in larger, more diverse and geographically expansive cities. The cost and timeline for infrastructural transition should thus be less than expected for Isla Vista over other sites.
* As a part of UCSB’s community, there is a higher percentage of consciousness surrounding shared values for environmental and sustainability-driven behavior.
* The past five years in Isla Vista have witnessed a shift in community awareness towards environmental considerations and an increase in local awareness surrounding sustainable development, environmental stewardship, food production, access and distribution, and cooperative housing affordability.
* Finally, and very importantly, Isla Vista elected its first local government – the Isla Vista Community Services District -- after passing a referendum in 2016, and two years later another referendum empowered it to tax utilities, drawing revenue to a $1 million annual budget by 2019. This would soon be followed by an even more surprising development.

**The Eco Vista Project**

In 2017, two UCSB undergraduates, Jessica Alvarez (now a key consultant and my research collaborator) and Valentina Cabrera, started a project whose goal was to lay the groundwork for an ongoing effort to turn their community, Isla Vista, into a model “eco-village” through a thoughtful bottom-up process of engagement with others. The community offers a tremendous opportunity for UCSB students interested in sustainable development to work in a “living laboratory,” testing their ideas about best practices against real-world realities.

Over the summer and fall of 2017, the project was named Eco Vista, and activity began, setting up a [website](https://ecovistaproject.com/) [[www.ecovistacommunity.com](file:///E:\Proposals\AS%20grants\2018-19\Pearl%20Chase\www.ecovistacommunity.com)], as well as making plans for implementing a survey of the residents of Isla Vista. In winter quarter 2018, the 94 students enrolled in my Sociology 134RC: Radical Social Change class, tested a pilot survey and some did interviews with each other and their roommates on what, exactly, they (the residents of Isla Vista) want to see their community become. The Isla Vista Community Services District has also conducted a survey of residents to which we hope to gain access.

Subsequent classes of my own have led to an archive of research projects on food issues, housing, energy, transportation, local cooperative start-ups, media, outreach, a zine, and other cultural creations. In the Fall quarter of 2019 my Environmental Studies/Sociology 130SD class, titled “Earth in Crisis,” culminated in a two-week study and role play of a Green New Deal for Eco Vista, producing a 27-page list of projects for aligning Isla Vista’s next community development planning process with the Green New Deal (see Text of the Resolution 2019, Ocasio-Cortez and Klein 2019, Klein 2019, and Hudis 2019 for a few of the many discussions of the Green New Deal).

There are now more than 250 people on the Eco Vista e-list, and the group holds bi-monthly General Assemblies in Isla Vista during the academic year. There are working groups on all of the areas mentioned above. We also have a precious legacy of the life’s work of the late long-time Isla Vista resident scholar and activist Michael Bean (2020) in the form of an *Eco Vista Sourcebook* of ideas and projects for bringing about Eco Vista on which to draw. In March 2020, Eco Vista became an official Transition US Initiative, joining 160 other communities in a network of towns where ecological and social justice-driven bottom-up transformations are occurring (see Hopkins 2014, Transition United States website).

**The Research Project**

The goal of this proposal is to tie together this body of work on the current state of sustainability in Isla Vista, collaborate with residents to articulate their visions for improvement, identify relevant successful initiatives around the world, and co-design ecologically sophisticated visions and strategies for creating a Community Development Plan for Eco Vista as a model of sustainable development that might inspire the creation of network of other community-student projects.

The long-term aim is for Isla Vista to become something akin to an eco-village (Kasper 2008, Global Ecovillage International Network) in the next five to ten years, where coops and community-owned businesses are the norm, renewable energy is in place, agro-ecology and urban gardens are flourishing, and governance and budgets are determined directly by the residents.

My own teaching and scholarship over the past ten years (since attending the UN Climate Summit COP 15 in Copenhagen, Denmark in December 2009) has evolved in the direction of what I call climate justice studies (Foran 2019, Bhavnani et al. 2019), with a focus on the social movements that are working to bring about just transitions and forge comprehensive alternatives to the crisis around the world.

One context in which this project will be situated consists of the well-publicized efforts to take effective climate action at the global, state (California), and municipal levels that are sprouting everywhere, as close to home as Los Angeles. Yet another reference point is provided by the UC Carbon Neutrality Initiative, with which I have been involved for several years on projects around faculty engagement and education, including one which extends the CNI to the sustainability efforts of the CSU system (UC-CSU KAN 2017), and more recently the launch of a digital platform called [NXTerra](https://nxterra.orfaleacenter.ucsb.edu/) to curate teaching resources for college and high school teachers and their students to deepen their understanding of the climate crisis, climate justice, and critical sustainability interested in climate education from the elementary through college levels.

Other intellectual currents that inform the project include *Transition Towns* (Lindberg 2017, Palsson 2017)*, commoning* (Bollier 2018)*,* and more generally a burgeoning global literature on *systemic alternatives* (Acosta et al. 2019). To these orientations may be added a central research focus on movements for radical social change, defined as a deep transformation of a society (or other entity such as a community, region, or the whole world) in the direction of greater economic equality, cultural vibrancy, and political participation, accomplished by the actions of a strong and diverse popular movement. The global climate justice movement represents the potentially most visionary and far-reaching social movement in terms of its transformative potential in the history of humanity, and it comes to us not a moment too soon. On the front lines of the crisis it addresses are both young people and communities of color, and both are amply represented in Isla Vista.

**Methods, Data, and Work Plan**

Such a project lends itself to the practice of “mixed methods” now common in the social sciences (Cresswell and Clark 2018). Specifically this includes quantitative *and* qualitative survey data, individual and group interviews (Burgess 1984), participant observation, content analysis of existing documents and archived media, participatory action research or PAR (Bergold and Thomas 2012), visual video-based sociology, mapping, and qualitative comparative analysis (Ragin 1987) are appropriate, both to the data that already exists and the new data we will generate.

The core of our data gathering will be conducting numerous in-person or on-line interviews and hosting townhall-style Eco Vista general assemblies over the course of the 2020-21 academic year, both with a wide variety of stakeholders. In the first half of 2021, we hope to convene a series of community-wide visioning exercises to begin to synthesize all of this into a living document, community development set of plans for Eco Vista.

One of the newer approaches that guides our community-based collaborative work is that of “emergent strategy” (brown 2017), which counsels working from the bottom up in an inclusive way to generate a collective analysis enabling members to articulate their desires and most sought after outcomes. Each of our issue areas will start with an assessment of the current state of Isla Vista, proceed to the identification of residents’ ideal states, and end with a “change analysis” to determine what needs to change in order to achieve those visions.

**Deliverables**

The central overall deliverable will be a comprehensive document that brings all of our work together, to be presented in the fall of 2021 to the Isla Vista Community Services District on behalf of the community, and published as a series of articles, high-profile on-line essays, and reports. Along the way, and in its parts, we expect to produce a variety of analyses, data sets, and other materials, many of which we will archive at our project website, currently envisioned as part of the existing Eco Vista website.

**Conclusion: A Far-Reaching Significance**

We are aiming high: to assist in and lay the foundations for the establishment of an ongoing, multigenerational, student-community project for an equitable and just transition in Isla Vista, and to put the result, Eco Vista, forward as a model for small towns and for college students to emulate in their communities. Our one-year project goal is to begin to gather community testimony, clarify and analyze it; identify other relevant best practices from around the world; and design and offer pathways to a just transition of Isla Vista, California, into a model for experiments in sustainable, resilient, participatory development, a model we are calling Eco Vista.

**Works Cited**

Acosta, Alberto, Federico Demaria, Arturo Escobar, Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh,. 2019. *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.

Bergold, Jarg and Stephan Thomas. 2012. “Participatory Research Methods: A Methodological Approach in Motion.” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 13 (1). Art. 30, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1201302>

Bhavnani, Kum-Kum, John Foran, Priya Kurian, and Debashish Munshi, co-editors. 2019. *Climate Futures: Re-imagining Global Climate Justice.* London: Zed Press*.*

Bollier, David. 2018. “The Commons Transition Primer Demystifies and Delights.” *Resilience*. January 12. <http://www.resilience.org/stories/2018-01-12/commons-transition-primer-demystifies-delights/>

# brown, adrienne maree. 2017. [*Emergent Strategies: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*](https://www.amazon.com/Emergent-Strategy-Shaping-Change-Changing/dp/1849352607/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1513114807&sr=1-1-fkmr0&keywords=Emergent+Strategies%3A++Shaping+Change%2C+Changing+Worlds). Oakland: AK Press.

Burgess, Robert G. 1984. “Interviews as Conversations.” Pp. 101-122 in Robert G. Burgess, *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research*. London and New York: Routledge.

# Creswell, John and Vicki L. Plano Clark. 2018. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Third Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Escobar, Arturo. 2018. *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Foran, John. 2019. “System Change Not Climate Change: Radical Social Transformation in the Twenty-First Century.” Pp. 399-425 in *Handbook on Social Movements, Revolution, and Social Transformation*. Edited by Berch Berberoglu. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foran, John. 2014. “Beyond Insurgency to Radical Social Change: The New Situation.” *Studies in Social Justice*, 8 (1): 5-25. <http://brock.scholarsportal.info/journals/index.php/SSJ/article/view/1036/1006>

Hopkins, Rob. 2014. *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*. White River Junction: Chelsea Green.

Global Ecovillage Network. <https://ecovillage.org/global-ecovillage-network/gen/>

IICAT [International Institute of Climate Action and Theory]. 2018. “IICAT Global Cities Project (2017-2021).” <http://www.iicat.org/global-cities-project-2017-2021/>

Joubert, Kosha and Leila Dregger. 2017. “Global Ecovillage Network.” September 19. http://www.kosmosjournal.org/news/global-ecovillage-network-sacred-activism/

Kasper, Debbie Van Schyndel. 2008. “Redefining Community in the Ecovillage.” *Human Ecology Review* 15 (1): 12-24.

Lindberg, Erik. 2017. “Transition Political.” *Resilience*. September 7.<http://www.resilience.org/stories/2017-09-07/transition-is-political/>

## Palsson, Nils. 2017. “Initial Report on the Transition National Gathering and Movement Strategy Session.” September 15. <http://www.transitionus.org/blog/initial-report-transition-national-gathering-and-movement-strategy-session>

## Ragin, Charles C. 1987. *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Transition United States. [http://www.transitionus.org/home](http://www.transitionus.org/home%20)

UC-CSU KAN [Knowledge Action Network for Transformative Climate and Sustainability Education and Action]. 2017. “Final Report.” <http://ehc.english.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Comprehensive-Final-Public-Report-final-final-with-appendixes-November-17-2017.pdf>

U.S. National Census. 2010. “Isla Vista: Quick Facts.” <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/islavistacdpcalifornia/LFE041216>