**Spaces of Experimentation:**

**Local Self-Government on the Peri-Urban Fringe**

Katherine Burnett[[1]](#footnote-1)

Research Associate, Agriburban Research Centre, University of the Fraser Valley

MA Candidate, Department of Political Science, University of Victoria

**Abstract**: This paper positions the peri-urban fringe as a site of experimentation, arguing that is an increasingly important location for the emergence of alternative political structures. As an example, this paper presents a case study of the Yarrow Ecovillage, an intentional community in Chilliwack, BC, that combines a residential development with organic farming and commercial enterprise. The community has established formal structures of democratic self-government through a consensus decision-making process and structures of deliberative democracy, and also engages in informal self-governance practices. Drawing on site visits, extensive interviewing with residents, and participant-observation, this paper demonstrates that the Yarrow Ecovillage functions largely as a self-governing polity that relies on the interaction of citizens, the deep integration of the residential community with the surrounding agricultural land, and shared spaces and community events.

**Introduction**

The peri-urban fringe, located at the transition from city to countryside and defined by the interface of urban and rural, has always been a critical interface of human existence (Macdonald & Keil, 2012) and has historically been a zone of change and intersection (Thomas, 1990), yet is emerging as a site of increasing importance as more cities grow into regional conurbations with multiple hubs. This new model of urban development is contrasted to a historic model of an urban core surrounded by a hinterland typified by decreasing density., and has been described as a post-suburban urban form (Kling et al., 1995; Dear, 2003). Soja conceptualizes these conurbations as regional cities (2013), arguing that some of the most interesting changes in the regions are occurring on their edges or in the spaces between hubs.

While powerful actors and governing structures associated with the sovereign state restrict the ability of urban-dwellers to shape and rewrite the city (Chatterton, 2010), their decreased influence on the peri-urban fringe allows individuals and groups a greater capacity to engage in transgressive practices of self-government. In British Columbia, Canada, new community formations and experiments with local governance are increasingly emerging on the peri-urban fringe, where the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1972), as is being inscribed upon the land. As such, deliberative attempts to foster democratic engagement have emerged as organized structures of self-government within these new communities on the peri-urban fringe. This paper presents a case study of one of these communities, documented as part of a larger research project into changing peri-urbanisms, using it as an example of a self-governing polity that has been deliberately established on the peri-urban fringe. The presence of alternative political structures and mechanisms for local self-government on the peri-urban fringe support a view of the peri-urban fringe as a heterotopic space; this paper argues that the peri-urban fringe is increasingly being used as a space of experimentation where governing methods unaffiliated with the state apparatus and the rituals of sovereignty are imagined and implemented.

**Spaces of Experimentation**

The peri-urban fringe is often understood in reference to what it provides the urban core of the city, including urban food security, local agricultural production, and a transition area between urban and rural (Selfa & Qazi, 2005; Douglas, 2006; Simon, 2008; Cabannes & Raposo, 2013). The peri-urban can also be understood without the necessity of referring to the urban core, yet all too rarely is the peri-urban understood in its own right; instead, the peri-urban fringe is too often viewed solely as a relational place. The peri-urban is to be tamed by the city, and to be used in the service of the city. In an analysis of the role of the peri-urban fringe to sustainable urbanization and urban development, Simon (2008, p. 170) argues, “fringe or PUI [peri-urban interface] areas should be treated as integral elements of urban systems (i.e., as extensions of cities) in both functional and planning terms, because they and their environments are integral to the growth and operation of growing cities. Accordingly, their integration into urban planning systems would facilitate holistic and systems-oriented planning.” This view of the peri-urban as an extension of the urban core, to be planned for as such, follows logically from looking out at the fringe from within the core. Other scholars, though (for example, Foot, 2000; Allen, 2003), have questioned this dominant paradigm, drawing attention to the ways in which the peri-urban fringe is both a place where features of both urban and rural coexist and a place that development and environmental pressures have transformed into something unique that cannot be explained with recourse to an outdated urban/rural dichotomy. The peri-urban is a space in its own right; when understood as something more than a relational space, it appears quite different (as observed by Foot, 2000). The concurrent yet dissimilar projects taking place on the fringe are transforming different peri-urban areas into political spaces unlike those that currently exist in either cities or suburbs; the peri-urban can arguably best be explained as a space of experimentation.

The city of the early 20th century is in the process of undergoing a most peculiar form of inversion that is moving what Foucault (1984) has described as heterotopic spaces from the dead zones and marginal spaces of the urban core to the fringe zone of a rapidly expanding periphery. This is a surprisingly hasty transformation; Doran (2000), in his discussion of dead zones, describes an architecture of transgression that occurs almost entirely within the city's core. This space, however, has been almost completely colonized by the return of capital to the city, explored by theorists either as a return of the ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2005) or as an unending cycle of gentrification and super gentrification (Newman & Dale, 2009). Little attention has been paid to where the heterotopic spaces displaced by this micromanaged and carefully scripted version of creativity have actually gone. The world of the heterotopic increasingly exists on the fringe of the city, in the poorly understood spaces where declining residential areas intermingle with industry, small lot agriculture, and remnant nature. Small pockets of dense street grids mark where historic downtowns of smaller villages and centres have been swallowed by the conurbation and frozen within it as a ship in an icefield. Dear (2003) has documented this shifting zone as being one of the hallmarks of a post-suburban age; Soja (1996) famously termed this space exopolis, and it has elsewhere been described as a “collage of the urban, rural and suburban” (Phelps & Wood, 2010, p. 371).

The displaced heterotopias of the core find new life in this sprawling region; Foucault (1984) sees the heterotopia of deviation as a space outside of existing rules and norms. The sites of heterotopia, in contrast to the cookie-cutter urbanism of the core, are irreducible to one another; they represent experimental niches where new ideas can take hold, or can fail as necessary. Although this model moves towards Soja's (2013) idea of a regional city, there is still but one core – and failure of the core is equated with failure of the region. The core can no longer play host to significant experimentation, and yet the shifting ground of the fringe can see different systems both blossom and fade to ruin. The residents of the fringe can be viewed as a sort of pioneer, occupying new norms and ways of performing the city. These pioneers stand in opposition to the core, and to the pockets of more traditional suburbia. For Foucault, the heterotopia presupposes a system of opening and closing that both isolates it and makes it penetrable, while also contesting and inverting the spaces around it. A heterotopia stands as an other space; not merely relational, it operates in defiant opposition to mainstream spaces.

**Alternative Political Structures on the Peri-Urban Fringe**

Among the experiments taking place in peri-urban fringe spaces of British Columbia are novel structures of local self-government. The creation of alternative political structures on the peri-urban fringe is largely a reaction to structures of government associated with the state, and to local governance as it is experienced and understood from within the urban core. During interviews on the peri-urban fringe, the oft-stated rationale was the environmental devastation associated with mainstream society and dominant models of governance. The urban core is still strongly associated with modernist aspirations towards separation, particularly of the separation of humans from nature and of the city from the environment, and with ‘consumer culture’. Capitalism and governance are tied up with each other in a way that people are attempting to escape on the peri-urban fringe, where they are attempting to imagine alternate models of living. One example of this phenomenon is manifest in the intentional communities that are formed with an explicit goal of resisting consumerism and reintegrating human society with the surrounding ecosystem. Intentional communities traditionally involve a deliberate attempt to create a positive environment or an alternative lifestyle outside mainstream society (Poldevaart, 2001; Meijering et al., 2007), and often involve collective ownership of land or resources. Members join voluntarily, usually forming such communities and creating their governing structures on the basis of commonly held ideologies or shared social, political, religious, or ethical values (Shenker, 1986; Meijering et al., 2007). Such communities are attempts to create an entire way of life; Sargisson (2001, p. 68) notes, “Intentional communities are defined according to the intentions of the people who live in them and the *raison d’être* of the community itself.”

A number of new intentional communities with innovative governance structures have been established recently on the peri-urban fringe – within British Columbia, 53 different cohousing communities were documented, and although they exist within urban, suburban, and rural areas as well as peri-urban, the fringe is home to some of the particularly innovative models. Refugees from the mainstream have begun to use these fringe areas and the flexibility that the spaces afford to invent new communities and experiment with alternative political structures; it is perhaps not surprising that ecovillages are slowly beginning to proliferate in these areas. A specific type of intentional community based on shared environmental values, ecovillages are defined by their attempts to build communities that foster environmental sustainability and connections with nature. The Yarrow Ecovillage, the case study discussed in this paper, provides an archetypal example of both an ecovillage in British Columbia and the kind of experimentation with governance structures that is currently taking place on the peri-urban fringe.

Overcoming the perceived nature/society divide, as well as the built environment that fosters the separation of humans from the natural world, has been an important driver of the ecovillage movement (Kasper, 2008). Like in ecovillages elsewhere (for example, Kirby, 2003), residents of the Yarrow Ecovillage wish to create a community of neighbours, while also redefining the relationships typical of mainstream North American society. Ecovillages stand as an implicit critique of this society, but also represent a belief in an alternative. Within the Yarrow Ecovillage, it is not only interpersonal relationships being redefined, but also relationships between residents, land, and food. As Kirby (2003, p. 323) has observed, “It is the marriage of environmental concern and community building that distinguishes the ecovillage movement from other intentional communities, both historical and contemporary.”

Ecovillages are a form of heterotopic space; they are deviations from the norm, and more importantly, they are idealist. These types of transgressive spaces are only one form of heterotopia, representing what could be reflected in the mirror that Foucault (1984) suggests is held to society in such spaces. They represent a reaction to a specific understanding of dominant society and of the urban core. They are also a place where the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1972) is being claimed, and where the results of such a claim are being written on the land. Intentional communities demand a right of self-government beyond the apparatus of the state; the democratic structures upon which they are based are locally responsive yet not subsidiary to the state. However, decisions are constrained by policies of the levels of government within which intentional communities are located – for the Yarrow Ecovillage, municipal policy is the most important limit. Despite these constraints that municipal structures place on practices of self-government, communities like the Yarrow Ecovillage are too small to have municipal authority or to be able to provide municipal services, and, moreover, dividing municipalities would create a highly parochial system. My argument here is neither that such communities be accorded the status of municipalities – rather, it is that they do not need such status. The peri-urban fringe, as a space of experimentation, allows for structures of self-government to be imagined and implemented without recourse to association with, or subsidiarity to, the state apparatus.

**The Yarrow Ecovillage**

Research on the Yarrow Ecovillage was conducted as part of a study on alternative political structures on the peri-urban fringe; this was one of the local case studies undertaken as part of a larger research project. In the spring of 2013 the author conducted research in the Yarrow Ecovillage near Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada; part of this research was to document the emerging structures of local self-government on this site, situated twenty minutes from the edge city of Abbotsford. Semi-structured interviews, extensive site visits, participant observation, and an analysis of discourses in textual documents were combined, following Yin's (2003) model of case study methodology to examine a contemporary phenomenon occurring in a real life context.

As an intentional community, the Yarrow Ecovillage represents an attempt to build a creative and mutually supportive society that promotes the connection of humans with their natural environment, while also minimizing ecological impacts. The Yarrow Ecovillage comprises private housing, community gardens, agricultural land, and a commercial zone at the front of the property. There are 33 private residences on the property, each entirely self-contained. However, the houses are close together and connected by a common path, creating a landscape that fosters interaction between neighbours. The Yarrow Ecovillage housing development is called Groundswell; a second development, Elderberry, is currently being planned. Elderberry will be a co-housing development for adults 50 years and older, and has the goal of creating a seniors’ community near agricultural land and workshop space. The commercial zone at the front of the property currently houses the Yarrow Deli, and is also where farm products are sold to members of the public in the summer. Plans are currently in place to expand retail at the front of the property.

The Yarrow Ecovillage straddles the boundary of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). When the ALR was implemented in 1973, following the passage of the Agricultural Land Commission Act, the boundaries did not always follow property lines; the parcel on which the Yarrow Ecovillage is now situated was cleaved in two. At the back of the property, furthest from the commercial zone, is a section of farmland located on ALR land. This farmland is further split into two fields; the north field leads directly into community gardens, which are not on ALR land but are situated just on the other side of the boundary. The south field is furthest from the housing development and is separated from the north field be a stream, and is thus where most of the agricultural production requiring heavy machinery takes place. The Yarrow Ecovillage also features on-site wastewater treatment; as a rural community, the ecovillage is not connected to the municipal sewage system. The wastewater treatment plant is a part of the community’s commitment to pursuing a responsible connection with their surrounding environment, and was chosen for being both more effective and more environmentally sustainable than septic fields.

The Yarrow Ecovillage Community Farm covers 20 acres of land, and is certified organic. The land is owned collectively through the Yarrow Ecovillage Society Cooperative, and it is through this body the land leased to farmers. There are currently four different commercial agricultural businesses operating on this land, including three vegetable farms and an heirloom apple orchard. Each of these are for-profit corporations, essential to the livelihood of its farmers, and each of the businesses have made explicit commitments to farm in a manner as socially responsible and environmentally sustainable as possible. As well as selling off-site, the farmers collaborate to offer a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) harvest box; the CSA program helps guarantee that local residents have access to the products of the harvest, while also ensuring year-round financial support for the farming businesses.

During the interview phase of this research, the idea of a mutually beneficial relationship and immediate sense of connection between community residents and the surrounding farmland was regularly highlighted as one of the important benefits of living in the Yarrow Ecovillage. The close proximity of housing to agricultural production was an important factor in residents’ choices to relocate to the Yarrow Ecovillage, as was access to outdoor space. For residents who lived in the community and also farmed the land, the relative affordability of the farmland, the security of farm tenure, and the community support for agricultural businesses were important to their decisions to live and farm in the Yarrow Ecovillage. However, even for residents who did not farm the land, farming still played an important role. The most common refrain of interview respondents was that they wanted to know where their food was coming from and how it was being grown; one resident added that she liked having a personal relationship with the farmers growing her food, while another emphasized that he liked knowing that he could trust the food that he was feeding his children. This lack of trust in conventional food production, as well as a dismay in the environmental degradation associated with it, was discussed by each of the non-farming residents interviewed. Living near farmland, and having “direct visibility” to the farms, was an important element in overcoming this lack of trust evoked by the modernist separation of land uses and to conventional food production – as one resident asked,

“Why can’t we walk out and see the farm? People are afraid, is my food being grown right? Is it full of chemicals? Whatever, I can see it. I can see what’s happening, where it’s growing.”

Each of the residents interviewed alluded to a sense that mainstream, capitalist culture, as well as the structures of government associated with the state, was causing gross ecological damage; moving to the Yarrow Ecovillage was, in part, an attempt to establish a self-governing society that could overcome this nature/culture divide.

**Local Self-Government**

Residents of the Yarrow Ecovillage have implemented formal governance structures; the community meeting is the highest level of government within the community, and all decisions are by consensus. Most decisions are not taken at this level; the community has different sub-groups and committees in place, yet all decisions are subordinate to the community meeting. Such processes of collective governance, and the requirement for consensus on all matters, have necessitated formal structures of deliberative democracy. The community has, at times, hired outside facilitators to lead consensus workshops in order to strengthen these structures and to help build the skills that ensure fruitful discussion and debate. Government by consensus is not necessarily easy to achieve – one resident, couching her experience tactfully, noted, “there’s good parts and not-so-good parts, lots of fodder for personal growth” – but whether issues can be resolved in a single meeting or require months of discussion and negotiation, any decision that must be made within the community are done so collectively. The formal structures of self-government represent only a small element of local governance within the Yarrow Ecovillage, and are arguably the least important element. Government can be found in activities throughout the ecovillage, masquerading as community gatherings, as common meals, as barn dances, and as spontaneous conversation on the stairs in front of houses. While decisions are formalized at community meetings, they are achieved through the close association of community members and the discussions that take place outside formal structures of self-government.

“As to common meals, there is a general agreement that a well ordered city should have them;” wrote Aristotle in the *Politics* (1995, Book 7, Part 10). Although most cities no longer feature common meals, and are considered to be well ordered even in their absence, the Yarrow Ecovillage is ordered largely according to Aristotle’s pronouncements. For Aristotle, not only were such common meals necessary, they had to be open and accessible to all citizens of the city. He suggests that these common meals be paid for out of public lands; his position is based on an exploration of both the common meals provided at public cost in Crete and the common meals to which all citizens must contribute financially in Sparta (Lacedaemon). Of common meals in the latter city he notes, “the very poor can scarcely take part in them; and, according to ancient custom, those who cannot contribute are not allowed to retain their rights of citizenship” (1995 Book 2, Part 9). Although Aristotle opposes stripping citizenship from those who cannot pay for common meals, he observes that some philosophers find an element of democracy in the practice of dining in common – for this reason, common meals must be open to all who would be granted the right to participate in political life. Plato also theorizes the common meal; he finds its origin in perpetual combat readiness, and although he cautions that shared meals have the potential to corrupt (1980, *Laws*, Book 1), he nevertheless posits the construction of citizenship and the maintenance of public discipline through the common meal. Although these two Classical philosophers differ in how they would order the common meal, and to whom the common meal should be open, taken together their writings speak to a political citizenship that is tied up with commensality and found in the political community ordered and strengthened through the sharing of food.

Common meals form an integral part of the governance of the Yarrow Ecovillage; the role of commensality to democracy and self-government cannot be easily translated, yet, in a manner reminiscent of Aristotle’s political thought, citizens are constructed through the sharing of common meals. Significant deliberation also takes place at these common meals, making possible many of the decisions taken in community meetings. However, despite the importance of common meals to governance, to democratic decisions, and to the construction of political citizenship in the Yarrow Ecovillage, common meals are largely absent from modern political thought. Most Western political theorists, at least since the Middle Ages, have been largely silent on the role of commensality in government. Within the peri-urban fringe, though, mechanisms of governance with roots in Classical thought are being resurrected and reimagined in the form of novel structures of local self-government.

Political socialization takes place at other community gatherings, from the farmers markets to the barn dance. It is further supported by the layout of the residential community, as all of the houses exit onto a central avenue that features natural gathering points within it. Children often play in this area; although they are often unsupervised by their parents, they are kept safe by what Jane Jacobs (1961) refers to as ‘eyes on the street’. The central space, the windows looking out onto it (windows reminiscent of those that Jacobs remarked upon in New York), and the spontaneous gatherings on doorsteps and house stairs all allow residents to police their own community and to keep members safe outside of state mechanisms for policing and governance. On the other hand, this phenomenon of ‘eyes on the street’ also creates what Foucault (1977) refers to as the disciplinary gaze; residents are visible to their neighbours, and must behave in accordance to the social norms and political values of the community. Residents are both subject and object of this gaze, at once governing and governed. Foucault (1977, p. 170) notes that this technology of discipline is entirely unlike “the majestic rituals of sovereignty or the great apparatus of the state.” However, the gaze as it is exercised in the governance of the Yarrow Ecovillage is also entirely unlike the technology that Foucault describes; rather than operating within a hierarchical structure, the gaze is here exercised between equal members of a political community. The community has been intentionally structured so as to encourage and to impose self-regulation; so long as residents internalize this gaze neither police forces nor rituals associated with the state apparatus are needed, yet the deliberative mechanisms in place ensure that there is always room for discussion and debate as to the social norms and political values that residents self-police.

If the peri-urban fringe is used as a space of experimentation, innovative land use regimes are perhaps the most obvious example. The peri-urban is well-known for highly disciplined land use; the strict separation land uses that are the hallmark of modernist planning in both the city and the suburb are even more pronounced in the peri-urban. Tensions between agricultural and residential land uses have resulted in a firm division between the two – given that separation is nowhere as pronounced as in the residential/agricultural boundaries of the peri-urban fringe, only the role of the peri-urban as a space of experimentation can help explain the blending of land uses that is also occurring in different fringe communities. The Yarrow Ecovillage is only one of the peri-urban communities experimenting with combined residential and agricultural land uses, yet in each community that is doing so, alternative political structures and governance mechanisms must supplant the state apparatus that would simply impose boundaries upon the land. In the Yarrow Ecovillage, we can see that the community as a whole governs the land, but also that the community is governed through the land. The close proximity of housing to agricultural production exemplifies the agriburban community (Sandul, 2009), yet proximity alone would merely exacerbate land use tensions were it not for the deep integration of the residential community with the surrounding agricultural land.

The farmers and residents of the Yarrow Ecovillage are consciously doing something unique, something deliberately transgressive, with their land use regime. Although each emphasized the mutually beneficial relationship of the residential community and the agricultural businesses, they also claimed that what they were doing would not work under mainstream political structures. The role of the farm in nourishing people living in the community and in supplying them with fresh, local produce was highlighted in the interviews. As one resident and farmer at the Yarrow Ecovillage stated,

“I think what makes the farm work here is that people have a sense of ownership over it. And I think without it, there would probably be more tension between the farm and people who are not farming, just living, but like, just about everybody who lives here eats vegetables from the farm, so that makes a huge difference, like they know, well, if somebody’s out there tilling the field and it’s a little bit annoying to hear the tractor sounds, well, that’s your future carrots.”

Two of the non-farming residents interviewed alluded to the noise involved in living next to for-profit agricultural production, yet none indicated any annoyance with the noise; on the contrary, they were all explicit that the benefits outweighed any annoyance. However, the sense of ownership over the farmland extended beyond the produce grown upon it:

“just the fact that they can access the farm, that they can go walk around in it … it’s their farm just as much as anyone else’s in a way too, so, I don’t think it’s something that’s easily replicable, you wouldn’t necessarily be able to create this on every parcel of ALR land, but I think that’s a major part of why this works.”

Most of the farming residents, including each of the owners of businesses that find their profit in the agricultural production on the land, live in the Yarrow Ecovillage. Just as they participate with the other residents in the democratic governance of the land, their decisions as farmers are constrained by their dual roles as residents. They are friends with their neighbours and have close personal relationships with many of the people who consume the food that they grow; they depend upon the support of the non-farming residents of the ecovillage, and have a vested interest in ensuring that the land is farmed in safe and sustainable ways. Moreover, the community as a whole has opted to mandate that all farming on their land be organic, thus reducing negative externalities from farming.

One resident, a farmer who depends upon the agricultural land for her livelihood, remarked of the organic farming practices employed in the Yarrow Ecovillage and the integration of the community with the agricultural land,

“that’s why it works. If it was a different way, it wouldn’t work. So I can understand why municipalities look at farms and residential and think, oh my gosh, how am I going to keep these two from killing each other?”

The farmers at the ecovillage do not spread fertilizer slurry, even that which would be allowable under organic standards, because the noxious smell would offend neighbours. They also follow alternative farming methods, understood by the farmers as being more environmentally sustainable and locally responsible. This is contrasted against the standard model:

“If, say, there was a monoculture, big cornfield out there, and they sprayed sludge, and created waste problems, and, you know, so, if it was a different kind of farming methods out there it would create a lot of problems, and yeah, the residents wouldn’t want to live right next to it.”

The structures of self-government in the Yarrow Ecovillage allow the community to create land use regimes that the municipal government cannot; the democratic processes of this political community allow mechanisms both to constrain the practices of farmers and to govern the residential community through the farmland.

Living in a community such as the Yarrow Ecovillage leaves little room for either privacy or anomie; moreover, conflicts stemming from the need to achieve consensus in decision-making processes occasionally have interpersonal ramifications without any offering any of the benefits that can derive from a more agonistic democracy. Nevertheless, the community politics are structured by an overarching idealism. Community members do not always agree on goals, or on the best means of achieving agreed-upon goals, yet they respect the intentions of their neighbours. The Yarrow Ecovillage is, at its core, a community of political idealists, and members believe they are building something greater than themselves. As well as creating a new community that stands in opposition to the mainstream and structures of local-self government that require and compel participation in political life, they are creating the spaces that they want to be available to future generations. Participating in the political structures associated with the sovereign state is not seen to create these spaces, and neither does claiming the right to the city in urban areas; one resident emphasized the need to make rural an agricultural spaces accessible to children, suggesting, “we’re doing the next generations a disservice when we don’t give little people access to understanding land, and growth processes, and being part of harvest, and watching the cycles…” Another was critical of dominant planning regimes and contemporary urbanism more generally, stating “City folks and planners have been working to push it all apart… but we’re not sure that it’s a benefit to be unaware of how food is produced.”

The peri-urban fringe is constructed as a space of opposition to the urban core, and the political structures of the intentional communities on the fringe are positioned as an alternative to the limited avenues for participation available under a state-centric approach to politics. Nevertheless, the experiments taking place in this space of opposition are not only for community members; one resident suggested that the political spaces being created and the deep integration between the residents and the land being fostered at the ecovillage are “going to help create a more healthy society in the long run. So, anything that supports more access to people growing up in relation to farming and farming lifestyles is totally valuable.” The experiments on the peri-urban fringe are viewed, by residents, as something of a gift that the community would like to give to future generations.

**Extra-Local Barriers to Self-Government**

Residents of the Yarrow Ecovillage have created a land-use regime unlike anything else in Chilliwack, and also unlike anything that municipal bylaws were prepared to countenance. In order to build the ecovillage in the fashion they desired, community members engaged in activism directed at the Chilliwack City Council until they were granted the first ‘ecovillage zoning’ in Canada. Despite this success, the community has had to apply for zoning variances a total of 12 times as of April 2013. Many of the residents interviewed expressed frustration with the municipal structures of the area in which they ecovillage was located; they are not unsatisfied with the City Council or its political decisions, but rather with the constraints posed by unresponsive policy. Part of the problem stems from the way that ecovillage residents are perceived; rather than being viewed as decision-makers within their political community, they are individuals who must be protected from a land developer – here, the ecovillage, as an association, is the land developer. However, no precedent exists to understand the ecovillage as a structure of local self-government, or to engage with it as such.

Local bylaws have proven an obstacle to the ecovillage development; as an example, the minimum pipe size that the Municipal Government mandates to ensure adequate water flow for firefighting presupposes that multi-family developments will only exist in the urban core. One resident pointed out that their residential development required the same level of water flow as Cottonwood Mall, which is “absolutely enormous in comparison to [the ecovillage]”. Moreover, while this particular mall is located in the urban core of Chilliwack, the Yarrow Ecovillage is a rural community located on the outer fringe of a fringe city. The majority of community members interviewed referred to such unresponsive policy mechanisms that blindly treat a rural multi-family residential development the same way as a large urban shopping centre as a significant barrier to the ecovillage development; eventually the community was granted an exception from the requirement for a larger pipe size, but the time and money spent fighting this requirement significantly delayed construction and development. Preconceived notions of desirable or ideal residential developments also became barriers; the dominant notion that peri-urban residents should want and be able to expect spacious, low density housing in rural areas (high density housing in small residential lots was an central tenet of the community’s mandate, due to their goals for fostering environmentally sustainable land development) also delayed municipal approval processes. The ecovillage residents had come to a consensus decision against individual yards for each of the residences, and in favour of collective gardens, out of the shared desire to construct an environmentally sustainable community, yet this countered prevailing cultural norms around desirable housing developments in Chilliwack. The absence of any mechanism to deal with community members as an association, rather than as a group of atomized individuals, led urban planners in Chilliwack to initially view this decision as one made by a land developer against the best interest of residents rather than one made collectively by residents exercising practices of self-government.

Although conflict over land use and tensions between residential and agricultural land is expected on the peri-urban fringe, in-depth interviews at the Yarrow Ecovillage indicated very little conflict; tensions around land use were easily dealt with within the community. The role of agriculture as a draw for residents clearly played a role in this; residents had specifically chosen to live next to farmland, and were perhaps aware of what this would entail. At the same time, the governance of the farmland, both by the community and by organic farming standards, prevented most of the conflicts that would be expected in the presence of conventional farming. It is important to note that residents of the Yarrow Ecovillage are the same people who explicitly chose to live next to agricultural land; either they were drawn to agricultural land to be actively involved in farming, or to take advantage of passive agricultural land uses, such as living close to open spaces or wishing for their children to understand and to be exposed to food production. The community governance of residential and agricultural land uses is clearly important to the functioning of the Yarrow Ecovillage, but may not necessarily be easy to export to a setting where locals did not specifically desire to live in communities in which agriculture is a prominent feature.

Blurring the divide between residential and agricultural land, as well as between urban and rural, the Yarrow Ecovillage functions as a heterotopic space in the peri-urban fringe. Importantly, the innovative land use scheme blurs the line between agricultural use and non-use: those who do not farm the land still use the farmland. Residents of the ecovillage need not even set foot on the land to enjoy its presence, benefiting already from both the view that lies outside their windows and the sense of security that they associate with having access to food that they trust. Moreover, they need not be involved in the physical labour of producing food crops for their contributions to functionally benefit food production, as their financial investment and participation in community governance help to make community food production possible. The blurring that exists in this innovative community renders impossible any strict binary opposition; although distinctions such as farmer and non-farmer are useful distinctions that residents deploy to impose order on the landscape, and distinctions between the concepts of residential and agricultural uses renders the landscape legible to municipal policymakers and other outsiders, the actual functioning of this transgressive intermediate space illustrates that conventional approaches to the peri-urban fringe fail to take into account that access to local food and the ability to live close to food production are considered desirable by certain populations – here, a population that is also dissatisfied with mainstream governance and what is perceived as concomitant environmental degradation.

**Conclusion**

The Yarrow Ecovillage represents an attempt to create a community that is responsible to the environment and to future generations. In order to fulfil these goals, members have created alternative political structures that allow them to exercise practices of self-government, and to order their community based on shared values and ideals. Residents have observed that such a community could not exist within the urban core; the land use regime they have created requires a certain level of flexibility that they could only find away from this core. The dominance of land developers have made the urban core too expensive for experimentation and did not allow members the economic or the political freedom to experiment with this particular land use regime. By choosing to create a community on the peri-urban fringe, they have helped to transform this region into what is rapidly becoming a space of experimentation. As a largely self-governing polity ordering its members without recourse to the state apparatus, trying to create a society outside the dominance of capitalism interests (as evidenced by their flight from the ‘consumer culture’ that they collectively abhor), they are participating in a transformation of the fringe into a heterotopic space where such projects can take hold.

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