

# OUR CITIES, OUR HOMES, OUR LIVES:

Regenerating Culture and Ecology  
and  
Promoting Healthy Living  
in Urban Areas

*Stories from Around the World*

Compiled by:  
Shikshantar: The Peoples' Institute for  
Rethinking Education and Development

## **Our Cities, Our Homes, Our Lives**

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*Dedicated to:*

All those families, children and youth who have made Udaipur as a Learning City  
<[www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/udaipur.html](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/udaipur.html)>  
a joyful and meaningful process for the last 8 years.

All those friends, known and unknown, around the world,  
who are doing what they can to transform cities and  
make them livable, balanced and positive places.

The 100th Anniversary of Hind Swaraj.  
May we continue to struggle for swaraj in our cities, our homes and our lives.

## Some Startling Statistics about Cities

*Although statistics should be taken with a grain of salt, they can be helpful in getting a broad sense of the urban scene. In that spirit, we have gathered a few statistics about cities to share with you.*

Cities cover only 2% of the earth's surface, but consume 75% of the world's resources and produce 75% of the world's waste.

In 1950, 29% of the world's population lived in urban areas. In 1994, 45% of the world's population lived in urban areas. This year, the world's urban population of over three billion people, has for the first time in history exceeded the number of those living in rural areas. Going by this trend, by 2030 around two-thirds of the world's people will be living in cities.

City population growth in the developing world is an average of 5% each year. The UN believes that by 2015, 13 of the 15 largest mega-cities will be in the developing world: 10 in Asia, 2 in Latin America, 1 in Africa.

Slums and squatter settlements are home to about 30% of the urban population.

In 1990, the UN estimated that the world was producing between 300-400 million tones of hazardous wastes annually, about 98% of which was generated by OECD countries, much of it sourced in urban areas.

The number of urban centers in India increased from 2795 in 1951 to 3609 in 1991. In 1901 there was only one city with a population more than one million. In 1991, there were 23 such cities in India. Projections estimate that by 2011, 40% of the total population, about 500 million people, will live in cities.

*Clearly, we need to spend more time reflecting on what it means to be an urban species...*

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# food

## Eating Good Organic Food in Havana

Although the streets of Havana, Cuba, are dominated by decrepit buildings, it is rare to come upon an abandoned lot strewn with garbage and weeds. Instead, these disused plots are coveted prizes: sites that precipitate heated standoffs between gardeners with trowels and boys carrying baseballs and bats. But, because the Cuban state favors redistributing vacant plots to those willing to grow food on them, the gardeners usually win. The result is that Havana's urban fabric now boasts an unusual juxtaposition of decay and growth, as urban gardens and farms arise alongside crumbling architectural remnants of bygone times.

While over the past 40 years the Castro government has systematically ignored the city's decaying built environment, it has, in the past decade, devoted a certain amount of resources to transforming unused land into urban agricultural plots. In 2002, Cubans produced 3.4 million tons of food from 35,000 hectares of urban land; in Havana, 90% of the city's fresh produce came from local urban farms and gardens.

The country's urban agriculture movement materialized out of the Special Period, an economic crisis from 1990-94 when the former Soviet Union ended its food subsidies, plunging Cuba into a severe food shortage. Without any other options, Cuban urbanites began growing their own foodstuffs on unutilized land. This wave of urban agriculture spread not only through Havana, but also other Cuban cities. The result has been the increased production and greater availability of fresh and nutritious food.

The urban farms and gardens come in various shapes and forms. One type is the *organoponico*, or intensive vegetable garden, where vegetables and herbs are grown in containers on hard surfaces. Then there are the smaller plot, patio, and popular gardens, which are managed by a family or group. Factories, offices, and businesses

offer a third model of urban gardens—workplace gardens—which grow the food served in company cafeterias, while Havana denizens practice a fourth type of crop cultivation, one that uses mesh tents to shade seeds and vegetables as they grow. Finally, there are suburban farms, which can be public or private; they not only produce food, but also serve a secondary purpose of filling in the empty spaces around the city’s periphery, so that the land doesn’t become illegal dumping grounds.

Because of geographic, economic, and political reasons, most Cuban farmers use organic cultivation methods. The trade embargo has meant the country’s food producers cannot import the pesticides and herbicides used in other parts of the world; thus, the growers have turned to innovative integrated pest management techniques and all-natural biopesticides. These solutions make environmental sense, too, as the proximity of urban farms to densely populated communities makes pesticides a potential health hazard.

The workers of Havana are not the only ones who reap the rewards of Cuba’s ambitious urban agriculture program; retirement homes, schools, and hospital kitchens also receive anywhere from a fluctuating donation to steady supply of food from neighborhood plots. These gardens, coupled with the comprehensive rural and suburban farms, play a critical role in completing the sense of food security that Cubans enjoy.

As fixtures in the landscape, the urban gardens provide food and a pleasurable visual contrast to the city’s decay. And while many of the country’s fertile patches are out of site behind walls, elevated on patios, or secluded by banana tree branches, they are indicators that despite the crumbling facades, there is much growing in Cuba.

**Reference:** <http://www.metropolismag.com/cda/story.php?artid=150>

## **Other Examples from Around the World...**

The Germans pioneered the idea of rooftop gardens in the 1960s. Now, 10% of all roofs in Germany are growing vegetables, herbs, spices, and other plants.

In the USA, it started in 2001, when the metropolitan city of Chicago introduced the idea by converting its City Hall into a model example of rooftop gardening. Since then, more than 2 million square feet of rooftop gardens have been planted across the city.

Food Not Lawns is an organization that is inspiring homeowners around California, USA, to transform their front or back lawns into gardens of edible food and medicines. Find stories of their community connections and friends at <[www.foodnotlawns.org](http://www.foodnotlawns.org)>.

# transport

## **Nourishing Community Culture in Toronto**

The city of Toronto has found a way to promote appreciation of its diverse urban culture while honoring the legacy and ideas of one of its strongest community activists, Jane Jacobs. What has been born is an annual series of free neighborhood walking tours that are led by local residents who are passionate about where they live, work and play.

The idea is to get out – on foot – and explore and experience what makes Toronto’s different communities unique. It combines insights on urban history, planning, design, culture, and the simple act of walking, all linked to the perspective of local residents who intimately know the areas. Since Toronto is made up of many smaller, unique and colourful communities, Jane’s Walk is helping Torontonians appreciate the many wonders and the cultural heritage of their city.

Jane’s Walk was started by a group of Jane’s peers and friends who wanted to celebrate the life and work of the urban activist and writer who championed a fresh, community-based approach to city building. The first annual walk was held on May 5, 2007, and it was officially declared Jane Jacobs Day by the city’s mayor. Twenty-seven walks were held by as many volunteer local guides. Jane’s Walk 2007 exceeded all expectations in attendance and media interest – demonstrating the existence of a strong desire to learn more about the city and an appreciation for Jane’s idea that walkable, diverse neighbourhoods are the hallmark of a healthy city.

In May 2008, Jane’s Walk will expand to four additional Canadian cities: Ottawa, Calgary, Winnipeg, and Vancouver.

## **Making Way for Bicycles in Paris**

Paris is now home to the world's largest urban bicycle service. In 2007, the city launched a low-cost bicycle rental program to help solve traffic, pollution and parking problems. Across the city, you'll find 20,600 bikes and 1,450 bike stations - nearly one every 250 yards. The solution was modeled after a similar program in France's third largest city, Lyon. There, the city's 3000 bikes have traveled nearly 10 million miles over 2 years, saving an estimated 3,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide from being released into the air. By 2007, bicycle use in Lyon had tripled and car usage had dropped 4%.

In Paris, the program is expected to be even more popular. On the day the program was launched, 13,000 people had already purchased their annual passes. The program also received strong support from the local government. The city's deputy mayor explains that the program was meant "not just to modify the equilibrium between the modes of transportation and reduce air pollution, but also to modify the image of the city and to have a city where humans occupy a larger space."

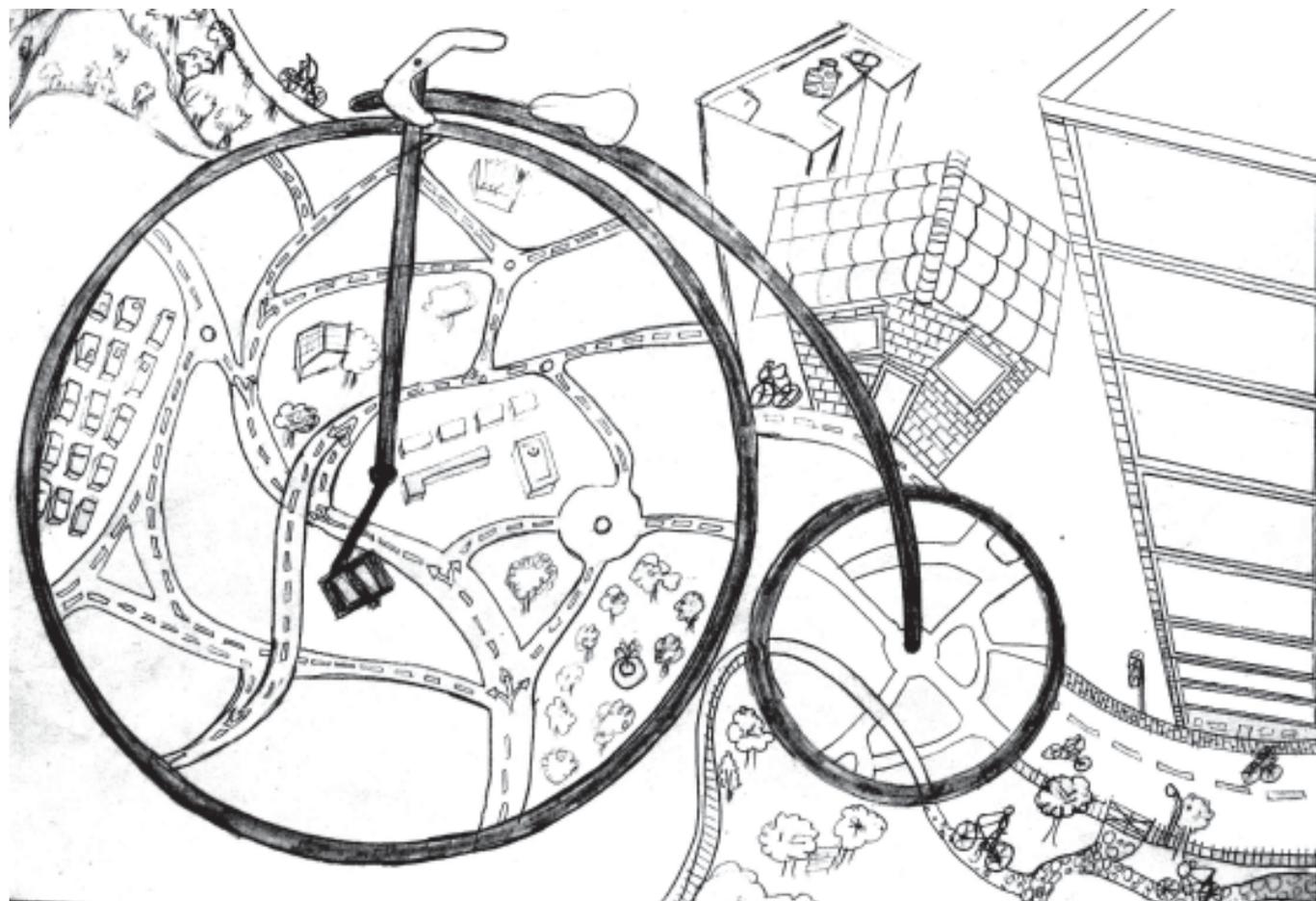
The system is designed to be affordable – even free – for most cyclists. Renting a bike is absolutely free for the first 30 minutes, and most distances can be reached in well below half an hour. To encourage people to return bikes quickly, rental rates rise the longer the bikes are out.

The system is a part of a 10-year public-private partnership, and employs the equivalent of 285 people full time to operate the program and handle bike maintenance. All revenue goes back to the city of Paris, in addition to an annual fee paid by the private company. In return, the private company gets 1,628 city-owned billboards, about half of which will be given *back* to the city for free to use for public-interest advertising. As the Socialist mayor of Paris says, the bicycle rental system "could change Paris's image — make it quieter, less polluted, with a nicer atmosphere, a better way of life."

## **Car-free in Canada...**

The eclectic community of Kensington Market in Toronto, Canada has reclaimed their streets from the mess of traffic, parking, car horns, and air pollution caused by motorists. Their solution? *Pedestrian Sundays*. On the last Sunday of each month, the streets of Kensington Market are closed off to traffic. Instead, residents and shop owners take to the streets in a vibrant expression of their culture, ideas and interests. On *Pedestrian Sundays*, you'll find restaurants cooking and serving up favourite dishes on the sidewalk, dancers performing to the sounds of live musicians, drum circles forming spontaneously on street corners, yoga and capoeira being practiced side by side, and artwork being created in the middle of the road right before your eyes. Culture comes out from behind closed doors and into a public space, as communities celebrate a day of cleaner air, safer streets, and the satisfaction of reclaiming their space.

In Ottawa, the capital city of Canada, residents have enjoyed Sunday Bike Days for years. Every Sunday during the summer, from 9am – 1pm, the city's parkway system (a series of roads along the main canal) are closed to traffic so that people can enjoy a morning of scenic cycling, skating, running, or walking. Over 65 kilometers of roads are closed down so that people can enjoy their leisure time free from air pollution, speeding cars, and honking horns!



## **...and in Bogota, Colombia, South America**

In Bogota, Colombia, city officials and local residents have proven that car-related congestion need not be inevitable in a busy, crowded, metropolitan city. In a weekly event known as *Ciclovía*, over 150 kilometers of city streets turn 'car-free' so that local residents can come out to bike, walk, picnic, dance, play, and generally *enjoy* their streets. And they *do* come out; one and a half million people turn up each week. It's a favourite time to reconnect with neighbors and friends in a vibrant environment – filled with lively music, the arts, and local culture.

The best part is that cities can do it inexpensively: the infrastructure (roads) are already in place, and there are no added capital costs.

Skeptics worry that a ban on cars will hurt the local economy. But local business has actually boomed with the scores of pedestrians, cyclists, and other visitors flocking to the streets. Many local shops, which were previously closed on Sundays, have opened up for business to satisfy people's tastes for food, drinks, and local handicrafts.

The point has been clearly made that a city's thriving culture need not be dependent on cars.

# communication

## Going Mobile Phone Free in U.S.A. and Italy

Mobile phones have given us an affordable and very convenient mode of communication. But is it possible that they've spread so quickly that our privacy and peace of mind have also been compromised?

Think of the last time you were spending time with someone and had it interrupted by the distinctly annoying, high-pitched sound of the latest bollywood ringtone. You probably don't have to think back too far; it happens thousands of times a day in Udaipur!

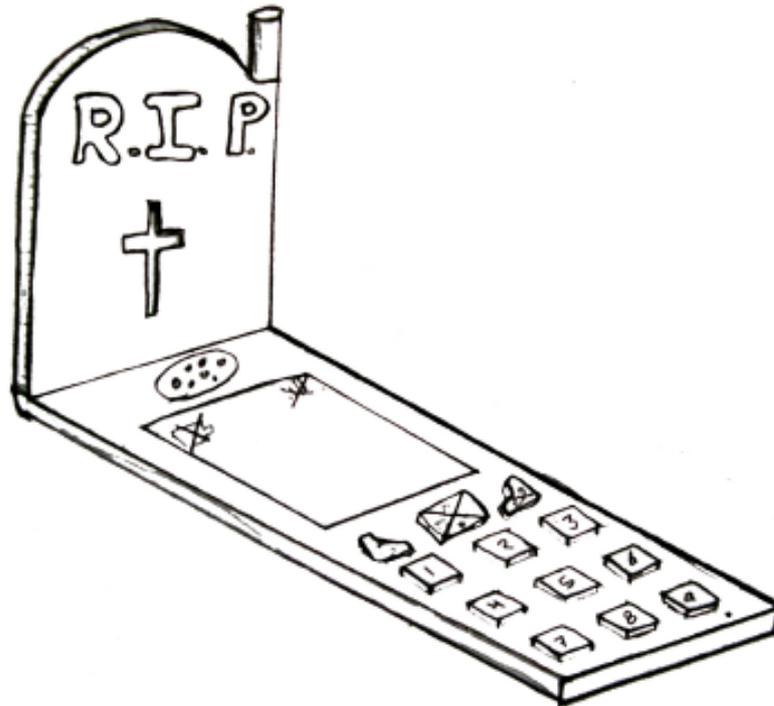
In many countries around the world, people have decided to fight back against the mobile phone invasion. In North America, movie theatres, performance halls, hospitals and medical clinics are all posting notices to patrons to please turn off their mobile phones. (Hospitals and medical clinics are also highly concerned about the harmful wavelengths that mobile phones are known to emit!)

The latest group to catch on to this growing mobile-free trend is restaurant owners. As one restaurant owner says, "It's disturbing when a restaurant creates a nice atmosphere and nice food, and someone is screaming into the telephone and aggravating the entire dining room... People come here to have a good time, and some of them end up complaining to us about it. It affects their ability to be together." The feedback from customers so far, he adds, has been "*1000 per cent thank you.*"

In Italy, where mobile phones have taken over the country – much like they are doing in India - phones are banned in *all restaurants*, and they are very strict about enforcing this rule. In the USA, some restaurant owners

simply choose to request guests to switch their rings to vibrate, and usher guests outside if their calls disturb the restaurant's atmosphere.

The point is not to make rigid policies, but to recognize the impact of fast-encroaching technologies on our own quality of life – and then to do something about it.



## Bill-Board Free in Brazil

In 2007, the world's fourth-largest metropolis and Brazil's most important city, São Paulo, became the first city outside of the communist world to put into effect a near-complete ban on outdoor advertising. Known on one hand for being the country's slick commercial capital and on the other for its extreme gang violence and crushing poverty, São Paulo's Clean City Law was an unexpected success.

As the driving force behind the measure, mayor Gilberto Kassab quelled the rebellion from the advertising industry with the help of key allies amongst the city's elite. On many occasions, Kassab made the point that he has nothing against advertising in and of itself, but rather with its excess. He explained, "The Clean City Law came from a necessity to combat pollution ... pollution of water, sound, air, and the visual. We decided that we should start combating pollution with the most conspicuous sector – visual pollution."

Since then, over 15,000 billboards, outdoor video screens and ads on buses have been eliminated. Strict new regulations have drastically reduced the allowable size of storefront signage. Nearly \$8 million in fines were issued to cleanse São Paulo of the blight on its landscape.

So far this effort has been a success. Surveys indicate that the measure is extremely popular with the city's residents, with more than 70 percent approval.

Reporter Vinicius Galvao comments, "You couldn't even realize the architecture of the old buildings, because all the buildings, all the houses

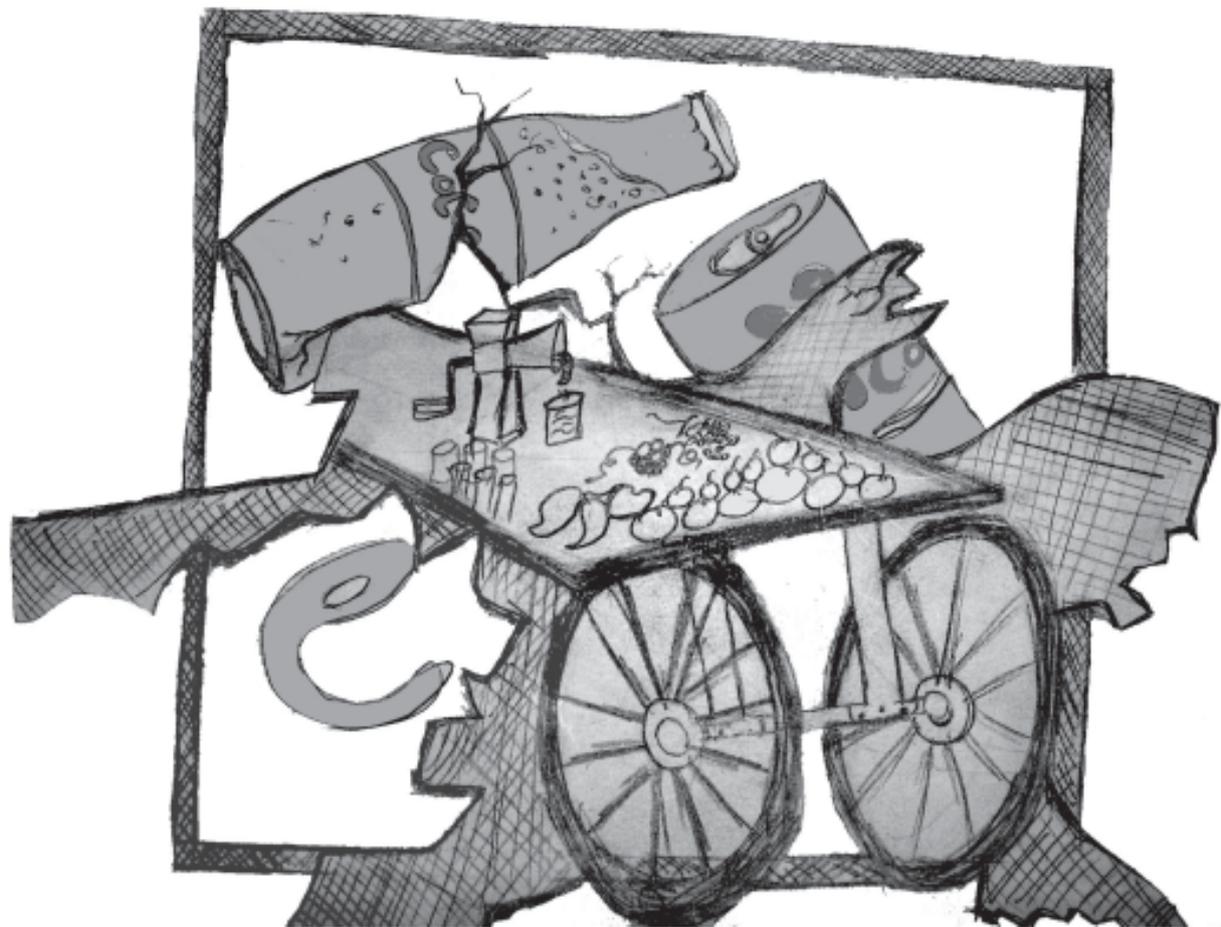
"I feel good. No words in every place, no giant disgusting pictures on the wall, no trash fonts (like Arial) polluting my eyes. When I go to another Brazilian city everything looks ugly. It's all about visual pollution."

- Tony de Marco,  
photographer

were just covered with billboards and logos and propaganda. And there was no criteria. The city's now got new language, a new identity.”

The debate over outdoor advertising may spill from Brazilian borders, threatening a fast-growing, \$30 billion global industry. In Argentina's capital city, the mayor of Buenos Aires has been researching legislation that would ban outdoor advertising. In the United States, billboards are already banned in Vermont, Maine, Hawaii and Alaska.

“Things that push back, restrict or restrain outdoor advertising are good,” says Robert Weissman. “They make the public landscape more enjoyable, less cluttered and essentially more public in nature.”



## **World Cafe Dialogues in Valdez, Alaska, USA**

*“We live at the edge of the mountains — on the sea. There is only one road going out of town. There are more than 10 bears for every person in these mountains and the salmon runs bring the bears out of the forest. Bald Eagles are everywhere. We are very isolated from the rest of the state. We have 6 feet of snow each year. The snow and wind often close the roads and airport. If we can get through the mountain pass, by car we are 5 hours from Anchorage and 6 hours from Fairbanks. This isolation is one reason that depression and suicide are community concerns.”*

- Victoria Throop, World Cafe Organizer, Youth Awareness Coalition, Valdez, Alaska

The Valdez World Café was introduced as a way for the entire population to come together and talk about the key issues and challenges that face them as a community. They scheduled the events for Fall 08 and Spring 09, with the first Café on National Family Day, September 22. The Café questions focused primarily on family health and well-being. Although the issues of suicide and isolation were not explicitly mentioned in the series of questions, it turned out they were part of the conversation at every table. As a result, the Spring World Café will focus explicitly on depression and suicide prevention in the city.

Victoria and her team distributed flyers and ads designed to attract all sectors of the community. They wanted everyone to be represented and involved. Here's what Victoria had to say about the World Café, in summary: “It was a fantastic success. We had 20 families in attendance - 87 people that bridged a wide range of ages and socio-economic groups, and an amazing 17 volunteers that helped us that night. For a small community, that is a lot! ... Having it a family affair created an atmosphere of joy and reminded the adults that it is our job to create a healthy and safe community for these children.”

*Learn more about the World Cafe as a tool for city/community dialogue at [www.worldcafe.org](http://www.worldcafe.org)*

## Intergenerational Interviews in Chicago, USA

Imagine Chicago was a city-wide initiative that took place between 1992-2002. A key element of the effort was to use appreciative inquiry to invite people around the city to begin to imagine a different present and future, and engage in actions to bring about that future. A remarkable number of initiatives sprang up over that time, which are documented and can be found on [www.imaginechicago.org](http://www.imaginechicago.org)

One of those initiatives was a series of intergenerational interviews, in which young people met with elders in the city, to ask them positive questions about their lives and the city. What follows is an excerpt from the invitations that were mailed out and the kinds of questions that were asked.

*I am writing to invite you into a process which I think holds great promise for our city. Imagine Chicago is about to begin its first series of Chicago conversations, in which we hope you will participate. The intent is to get Chicagoans thinking and talking with each other, across generations, about their Chicago stories and hopes, in a way which inspires collaborative action.*

*Picture Ma and Pa Streeter's makeshift wooden shack where the Hancock building now stands. Think of those whose dreams for Chicago became reality. Aaron Montgomery Ward, who fought hard to keep the lakefront clear of any building or obstacle that would make it inaccessible to citizens... Jane Addams, who saw the possibility of building urban community and including those who had been left out... What a long way we have come because of many people's visions for, and commitment to, the future of the city of Chicago.*

*What are your own hopes for this city? What has been the high point of your life in Chicago and why? What do you plan to do to make the city better than it already is? What do you want to leave for the next generation of citizens?*

*We are especially hopeful that you, who have been a keeper of the city's promise, will share your Chicago visions and experiences with a young person who is eager to listen to and learn from your experience. Your doing so will encourage and inspire those who are committing themselves to this volunteer civic process, grounded in hope and personal accountability. I will call in a few days to seek a 45 minute appointment for a young adult to engage you in a conversation about Chicago. We hope you will have time to share your images and ideas with us."*

### **Intergenerational Interview Questions**

1. How long have you lived in Chicago? What brought you here? What is it like for you?
2. When you think about the whole city of Chicago, what particular places, people or images represent the city to you?
3. Thinking back over your Chicago memories, what have been real high points for you as a citizen of this city?
4. Why did these experiences mean so much to you?
5. How would you describe the quality of life in Chicago today?
6. What changes in the city would you most like to see? What do you imagine your own role might be in helping to make this happen? Who could work with you?
7. Close your eyes and imagine Chicago as you most want it to be in a generation from now. What is it like? What do you see and hear? What are you proudest of having accomplished?
8. As you think back over this conversations, what images stand out for you as capturing your hopes for this city's future?
9. What do you think would be an effective process for getting people across the city talking and working together on behalf of Chicago's future? Whom would you want to draw into a Chicago conversation?

# energy

## Clean Energy in Rizhao, China

In a nation known for its heavy dependence on coal, the city of Rizhao, China, is an inspiring example of the mainstreaming of renewable energy sources. Large-scale solar power and marsh gas applications in the city directly benefit more than 1.5 million residents, dramatically reducing their yearly energy costs while providing other environmental and health benefits.

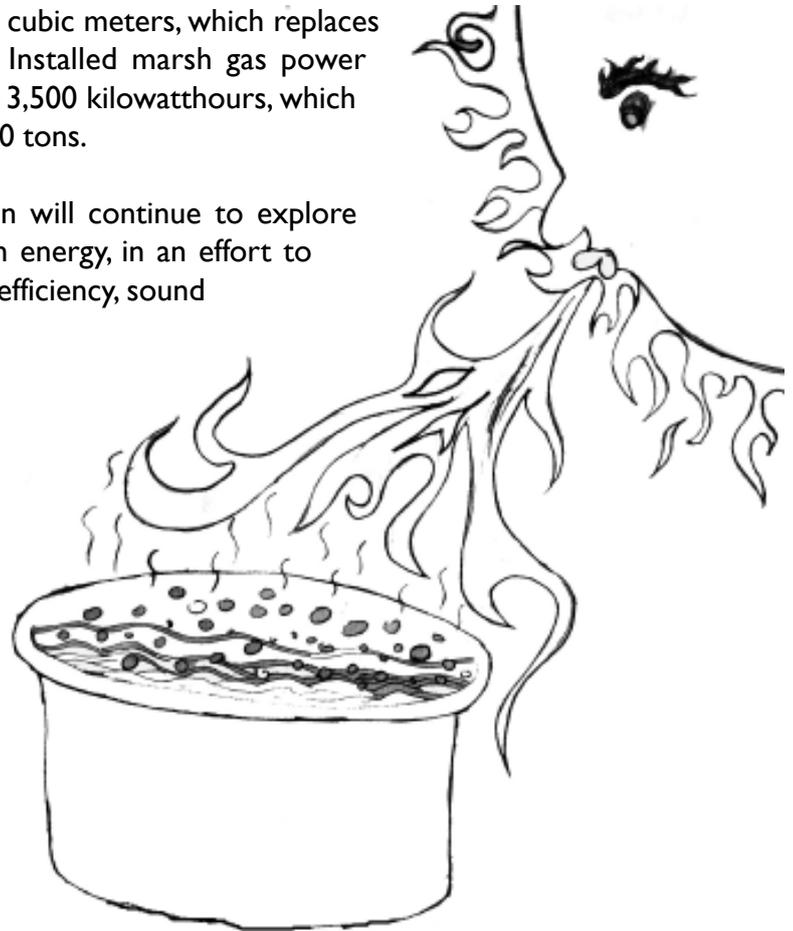
Policy and lawmaking by Rizhao's local administration have been instrumental in bringing about the city's energy revolution. Since his appointment in 2001, Mayor Lizhaoqian and the Rizhao Municipal Government have adopted several measures and policies aimed at popularizing clean energy technology, including the Regulations on Implementing Solar Energy and Construction Integration that standardize the use of solar energy—particularly solar water heaters—in new buildings. Building examiners must approve all construction procedures before the buildings are sanctioned, and any blueprints that lack built-in solar water heaters will fail to pass final approval.

Solar water heaters are currently installed in 99 percent of all buildings in Rizhao's urban area, and in more than 30 percent of residences in rural areas. Additionally, more than 6,000 families in Rizhao use solar cookers in their kitchens. The city is also home to more than 560,000 square meters of solar photovoltaic panels, which have effectively reduced conventional electricity usage by 348 million kilowatthours per year.

More than 15,000 residential units in Rizhao use technologies that allow them to generate marsh gas from agricultural waste water, with the units capable of generating up to 230,000 cubic meters daily. Currently, the

city's annual marsh gas production is 4.5 million cubic meters, which replaces the use of some 3,100 tons of coal annually. Installed marsh gas power generators have a total production capacity of 13,500 kilowatthours, which would reduce the use of coal this year by 36,000 tons.

Mayor Lizhaoqian noted that his administration will continue to explore new approaches to popularize and utilize clean energy, in an effort to build Rizhao into "an eco-city featuring energy efficiency, sound ecology, and a beautiful environment."



## **Making a Transition in Totnes, UK**

The great unleashing was September 6, 2006. Naresh Giangrande and Rob Hopkins organised an evening at the town hall in Totnes, UK, of music, talks, and sharing. Over 350 people came, the Transition Towns (TT) project was launched.

There are now over 100 official TT all over the world (towns, islands, cities and villages), and over 1000 others who are at some stage in the process. It has spread to over 16 countries. (Check out <http://transitiontowns.org> for links.) Something has caught people's imagination all around the world. What is it?

TT proposes that by using far fewer resources and far less energy (and in the process, emitting far less CO<sub>2</sub>), a town can be more pleasurable, abundant, and resilient than what it is at present. 'Peak oil' — the point at which global oil supplies reach their peak and begin to decline — means that urban populations will have to decrease what they use. With China, India, and Brazil rapidly industrialising, there is scant hope that an additional 2.5 billion people will be able to live the same lifestyles as those of the West — something has to change! But it won't necessarily be a bad thing. In fact, it could be better!

TT challenges the idea that all social, cultural, and political needs can be best satisfied by the market. Nothing could be further from the truth! Local people, creating local products and properly using renewable resources, are the best placed to meet our needs — now and in the future. The TT initiative is more like a party than a protest march. It doesn't fight against the existing reality, but seeks to make something better. "Build it and they will come!" is its motto.

The process starts with one person who puts out a call to adventure, a call to action. The people who respond form a Transition Initiating group. In Totnes, UK, Rob and Naresh started by raising awareness of the limited shelf life of the current system and the possibility of creating something better. They talked about how fossil fuel era has brought some good things, but also many unwanted guests: pollution, disease, failure of social and political systems, an international system of sweat shops and exploited labour, to name a few. Despite an increase in material wealth in the West, no studies have indicated an increase in the level of happiness. Instead, alienation in many different forms, unprecedented levels of mental illness, and social breakdown are the norm.

TT events can be anything from films, talks, and public meetings, to seed swaps, home insulation days, and organised cycle rides. They aim to reach out to as many people as possible, with the message that “Everyone is welcome; everyone is needed and valued.” This was followed by a series of projects that look at the different pieces of the system that will need to be re-localised. Every area of our lives — from the food we eat, to the medicines we need to education, transport and energy. Different groups look at each of these areas and begin the process of re-localisation by creating obvious practical solutions. Their most important planning tool is *Energy Descent Pathways*, which uses scenario planning to create a conversation about alternative futures and community choices.

One unusual group that formed really early in the project was Heart and Soul. Typical environmental projects only consider external changes, but TT recognises that the transition is both inner and outer. Heart and Soul explores: How are people going to be happier with less? What sort of things will give satisfaction if a new car or a new TV isn't? They are finding that the joy of living in the natural world, living in harmony with our neighbours, forming interconnecting webs of social and economic dependency, creating relationships that matter, and simple kindness, compassion, and love, are part of making the transition.

TT groups network with other social, political, and environmental groups in their locality to help create a positive and sustainable future. Through this, the webs of life that have sustained people in the past, come back to life. Energy Descent Pathways visions a positive sustainable future and then works backward to identify the practical steps necessary to reach that future. This gives the project a visionary outlook, keeps members focussed on the eventual goal, and reminds them that in the middle of chaos and uncertainty, a future they want is both possible and actually being created step-by-step. Small changes add up.

# waste

## **Zero Waste Canberra, Australia**

At first glance, the concept of Zero Waste may seem like a silly dream. But it is fast becoming a reality around the world.

The idea of using all the techniques we have to achieve zero waste was around in the 1960s. But it only really began to take off in the 1990s. The idea of zero waste took life in 1996 in Canberra, Australia, the first city in the world to set itself a goal of “no waste by 2010”.

‘Zero Waste’ as a term works better than ‘100% recycling’ because the latter vision seems to imply that the community has to do everything. Zero Waste requires the need for dual responsibility. First, the community has to maximize refuse, re-use, repair, recycling and composting and secondly, industry has to redesign the objects the community cannot reuse, repair, recycle or compost. And, of course, both industry and the community need to reduce wasteful practices like overpackaging and overconsumption.

As Bill Sheehan of the Grass Roots Recycling Network says, “Zero Waste is a design principle. If we plan for eliminating waste, whether we reach 100% elimination is not the point. The point is to start planning for the elimination of waste rather than managing waste.” Zero Waste is coupled with Clean Production, because as long as discards are contaminated with toxics the tendency will be to try ‘to get rid of them’ rather than reuse them. Zero Waste is linked to Environmental Justice because as long as officials are looking for places to get rid of the waste they will be looking for sites for mega-landfills or giant trash incinerators. All too often the sites for these undesirable activities end up in the poorest and most disenfranchised communities.

The Waste Management Strategy for Canberra [pop. 311,000] set the vision and future directions for waste management in the Australian Capital Territory. The strategy is the result of extensive community consultation which has identified a strong desire to achieve a waste free society by 2010. By 2010 it is envisaged that waste will have been eliminated by a community that:

- has encouraged the producers of goods to take responsibility for the form in which their products are sold to ensure that waste is not generated with the initial production, during use or at the end of the product's life;
- has created an environment for developing innovative solutions to avoid generating waste;
- only buys what it needs. Whether they be building materials or groceries, waste is avoided by efficient buying and production practices;
- has created cost-effective methods for recovering resources so that materials can either be re-used or reprocessed into valuable products;
- has created industries dealing in unwanted materials;
- has extended the opportunities for resource recovery to the Canberra region;
- takes pride in its achievements in eliminating waste and includes environmental education as a key element in achieving the vision.

Canberra is currently recycling 66% of all household and commercial waste. Proof of the success of their Zero Waste Strategy has reduced disposal to landfill by 42% over the last 5 years. In Canberra, they stop at nothing to get people recycling: they hold wormery workshops, "secondhand Sundays", there are "ecobusiness" councillors and "waste-wise" school programmes. Most importantly, though, they have efficient and comprehensive recycling collection schemes.

Following Canberra's lead, zero waste schemes have slowly started popping up in different places around the world: Kovalam in India has one, Seattle, San Francisco, Cape Town, Toronto, and a few places in New Zealand.

## Seattle Aims for Zero Waste

Following the example of Canberra, the Seattle City Council has committed the city to a zero waste policy in response to its expanding garbage problem – a total of 440,000 tons in 2006. The city's new plan caps the tonnage of exported garbage at 2006 levels and requires yearly reductions. This strategy represents a major change in the way the city views its trash. "Instead of accepting more trash as inevitable, we are now treating waste as a resource," said Richard Conlin, author of the Zero Waste Strategy Paper. The main components of their zero waste strategy include:

- Shoppers must pay 20 cents for each plastic or paper bag they use at stores in Seattle. "This is a voluntary fee," said Council President Richard Conlin. "No one has to pay it. You only have to pay it if you choose not to use reusable bags." The city will distribute at least one free reusable bag per household, and it will consider providing more free bags to low-income shoppers.

- A ban on polystyrene or Styrofoam containers, such as clamshell containers, at takeout restaurants at food-service businesses. Starting in July 2010, the ban will expand to all plastic food containers and plastic utensils. Food-service businesses will have to start using biodegradable or recyclable containers and utensils. The University of Washington Food Services has taken the lead and found that containers, cups and utensils made of paper, corn, sugar cane and reed work just as well as plastic for the 28,000 meals served each day around campus.

- Food waste and garden lawn grass and leaves are picked up from households. It goes into the local compost facility and is sold back to the community as "cedar grove compost."

- The renovation of the existing two transfer stations for improved recycling.

- A \$100,000 annual Waste Reduction/Recycling Matching Fund is available for community waste-reduction initiatives and for durable products designed for easy reuse.

- Grants and tax-breaks encourage contractors not to demolish old buildings but to disassemble and recycle their building components.

## Plastic Banned in Springdale, Newfoundland, Canada

You see them everywhere you go. In trees, blowing along the streets, and making a mess in landfills. For some people, plastic bags are an absolute nightmare. The worst invention to ever reach North American streets. The Town of Springdale wants to become the first town in Newfoundland, and the second in Canada, to declare itself a no-zone for single-use plastic bags.

Perhaps the most visible argument to rid the world of plastic bags comes from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). In May 2007, they aired a documentary by Rebecca Hosking that painted a portrait of a marine world turned on its head as a result of plastics waste. To make *Message in the Waves*, Hosking filmed marine life off of Hawaii. Afterwards, she told stories about watching a turtle choke to death on a plastic bag and of albatrosses feeding bits of plastic to their chicks, leading to slow and painful deaths. Her documentary portrayed how the area's currents created a pool of trash, and what the consequences were to marine life captured, tangled, and choking on that waste.

*Message in the Waves* claimed 80 per cent of trash found in the ocean originated on land, and close to 90 per cent of that is plastic. A 2006 United Nations report estimated 46,000 pieces of plastic are floating in the water for every square mile of ocean. A report by Greenpeace, *Plastic Debris in the World's Oceans*, said at least 267 marine species are known to have suffered from entanglement or ingestion of marine debris. An estimated 1 million seabirds choke or get tangled in plastic nets or other debris every year while a whale washed up in France with nearly a kilogram of plastic bags in her stomach that she had mistaken for food.

Reports estimate that more than 113 billion of the bags are used each year. They've become an important part of retailer branding, but are used just long enough to move goods from purchase to their final destination.

After the bags have been discarded, they remain in the environment for thousands of years. And when they break down, they only break down into smaller pieces of plastic.

“It takes awhile for the plastic bags to break down,” says Candy Weir, Green Bay Waste Management Authority coordinator. “It’s something that’s going to hurt our environment... If it was just a few it probably wouldn’t be so bad, but the number of bags that are around our site on a weekly basis is unbelievable.” She said the household trash is brought to the site in trucks, but as the trash is compacted, the bags break open and the smaller bags get out. Once dumped into the landfill, they are torn open by animals and then it doesn’t take much for the wind to pick them up. Some reports say that almost half the bags making their way into the ocean have been blown there from landfills. Weir adds the simplest solution is to refuse, reduce, re-use and recycle: “If you really don’t need a bag, say no to it and if you have to take plastic, find other ways to use it.”

For people who never throw out the bags, you could re-use them by returning them to the retailer or take that giant bag of saved plastic bags to a recycler like Scotia Recycling in Corner Brook. Ms. Weir said the GBWMA is encouraging people to purchase the reusable bags being sold to consumers who are conscious of the plastic bag waste. For retailers, they can recover the bag cost directly and because the bags don’t get thrown away as readily, it means their branding programs have greater longevity.

Some governments have already taken steps to reduce the numbers of bags. In China, they’ve banned the use of the thinnest plastic bags with a fine up to US \$1460 for infractions. In Ireland, that government has taxed the bags since 2002 and claimed a reduction of 90 per cent.

# space

## Repairing the City of Portland

City Repair was formed in Portland, Oregon, USA, in 1996 by citizen activists who wanted a more community-oriented and ecologically-sustainable society. Born out of a successful grassroots neighborhood initiative that converted a residential street intersection into a neighborhood public square, City Repair works with the idea that *localization* (of culture, of economy, of decision-making) is a necessary foundation of sustainability. By reclaiming urban spaces to create community-oriented places, it plants the seeds for greater neighborhood communication, empower our communities and nurture our local culture.

City Repair projects honor the interconnection of human communities and the natural world. Almost all are completely all-volunteer efforts, made possible by the contributions of hundreds of volunteer coordinators and generous supporters. The projects include:

- **Village Building Convergence:** is a 10-day event held every May, where a convergence of citizens, natural builders and activists come together to help neighborhoods design and build their own community amenities, and turn neighborhoods into Villages - one workparty at a time!
- **The Depave Project:** promotes the removal of unnecessary concrete and asphalt from our urban areas, in order to reduce stormwater runoff pollution of rivers, and to increase the amount of land available for habitat restoration, urban farming, trees, native vegetation, and beauty in urban areas.
- **Intersection Repair:** helps neighbors convert street intersections into public gathering places, the most essential part of the neighborhood for community building.

- **City Riparian:** engages neighbors in a collective process to design and install forest gardens and other permaculturally-informed landscapes in the commons.
- **The T-Horse:** serves as a mobile tea house, public square and potluck activator that reminds us what is missing without local public gathering places, and demonstrates how a space can be transformed into a place with free hot tea and homemade chai!
- **Community Potluck Gatherings:** are open to all, to share great food and desserts, and connect with old and new friends, throughout the city.

*More details on this space transforming projects can be found at [www.cityrepair.org](http://www.cityrepair.org)*

A group of frustrated neighbors in the Dutch city of Delft finally got fed up about autos speeding down their street. One night, they dragged old couches and tables into the middle of the road, strategically arranging them so that motorists could still pass — but only if they drove slowly. The police eventually arrived and had to admit that this scheme, although clearly illegal, was a good idea. Soon the city was installing its own devices to slow traffic, and the idea of traffic calming was born — an innovative solution now used across the globe to make streets safer.

*Check out more stories like this on the Project for Public Spaces website: <http://www.pps.org/>*



## Enhancing Livability in Curitiba, Brazil

Despite rapid immigration from its impoverished rural surroundings, innovative urban planning has led to a happier, healthier and greener Curitiba. Much of this success is due to creative planning by local city administrators who managed to instill a sense of public responsibility that serves as an example for both rich and poor cities alike. The most notable of these public figures is Jaime Lerner, who served as Curitiba's mayor multiple times between 1971 and 1992 and is widely considered the visionary behind many of the city's innovative programs. These initiatives include:

- A citywide limit on people's ability to cut down trees on their own land without a permit. For every tree a resident *does* cut down, two more must be planted in its place, leading to the planting of 1.5 million trees since the 1970s.

- The creation of a world-renowned Bus Rapid Transit system that provides affordable, speedy, and eco-efficient transportation for about 70% of Curitiba's daily commuters. The system's megabuses carry up to three hundred passengers each and travel as fast as subway cars, but require about one-eightieth the construction cost. Well-placed Plexiglas tube stations create efficient boarding and departing for passengers while reducing idling time and air pollution. As a result, auto traffic has been reduced by 30% since 1974 and Curitiba boasts the lowest levels of air pollution in Brazil.

- The designation of a pedestrian only street Rua das Flores in Curitiba's downtown shopping district has gained the support of local business that have seen their profits and sales rise significantly. Local business owners responded by sponsoring community projects, organizations and local events.

- Offering tax breaks to Curitiba planners who include green initiatives into their construction.

- Facing an influx of streetchildren, the city opened free municipal day-care centers, offered teenagers jobs in public gardens and parks, and set up a system that links businesses needing small chores and maintenance jobs with streetchildren needing food and employment. Young people who once took flowers and vandalized green spaces now work to maintain the beauty and livability of public places.

- A program allowing residents to trade collected trash for fresh food or bus tickets in crowded squatter settlements unreachable by garbage trucks. The city's organic waste is composted for use as manure on outlying farms that produce food for the trash-for-food exchange program. Inorganic waste goes to a municipal plant built out of recycled materials where disabled people, recovering alcoholics, and immigrants sort the trash for recycling. Curitiba boasts one of the highest recycling rates in its region, and the recovered materials are sold to local industries.

These initiatives have revitalized the city and its people. They have brought a new sense of civic pride to a city that could otherwise have been doomed to join the ranks of urban slum-cities ridden with automobiles, poverty, garbage and pollution, but devoid of green space and affordable transit. In fact, 99% of Curitiba residents polled in 1994 said that they were happy with their town. Most importantly though, Curitiba residents have an extraordinary sense of civic pride and a unique willingness to sacrifice some personal comforts for the good of the city.

- Contributed by Ryan Doyle, USA <[doyle@stolaf.edu](mailto:doyle@stolaf.edu)>

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## Chicago Goes Green

You've heard of green buildings, but green cities? The roof garden at Chicago City Hall has become a symbol of Mayor Richard Daley's ambition to turn Chicago into the USA's greenest urban area.

The Daley administration has put policy and money where their mouth is. In the last few years, they

- planted 500,000 trees;
- are putting up the most energy-efficient, ecological municipal buildings in the country;
- providing developers with much faster permits if they construct green buildings and green roofs;
- promised to obtain 20% of the electricity used by the city from clean and renewable sources;
- established a \$600-million-a-year program to repair neighborhoods and city parks;
- converted hundreds of abandoned, contaminated properties into organic city farms.

“During the last decade, Chicago's performance, measured in virtually every conventional category of civic well-being, has been off the charts,” local boosters say. “Chicago attracted more than 100,000 new residents, added tens of thousands of downtown jobs, prompted a high-rise housing boom, reduced poverty rates, built thousands of affordable homes, spurred a \$9-billion-a-year visitor and convention industry, and transformed itself into one of the most beautiful cities in America.”

The city government is supporting the Chicago Center for Green Technology <[www.cityofchicago.org/Environment/GreenTech/](http://www.cityofchicago.org/Environment/GreenTech/)> which helps homeowners and offices learn how green technologies are cost-effective and good for the environment and people and how to incorporate environmentally friendly, cost

saving features into their home or business. The building was renovated into a live demonstration center that practically features rain water harvesting, solar power, natural building materials, natural driveways, green roofs, smart lighting system, ground source heat pump, and native landscaping. CCGT's Green Building Resource Center also has a small library that includes green product samples. CCGT offers free seminars for the public 2-3 times per week. Tenants who occupy the Chicago Green Tech building provide environmental products and services. Greencorps Chicago, the city's community gardening and job training program and WRD Environmental, an urban landscape company, all have offices at CCGT. CCGT has built a strong network of green partners involved in construction, landscaping, research, etc. across the city.

So many new green practitioners have emerged, in fact, that the first mall in the U.S. dedicated to green and socially responsible businesses — Green Exchange — will open in Chicago early in 2008. The 250,000-square-foot building will hold about 100 vendors. And not just retail outfits. Green Exchange will house an organic restaurant and café, a sustainable furniture store, a green building supply company, an eco-friendly printer, architects and designers focused on sustainability, an environmentally-friendly clothing company, a car-sharing service, a bike shop, and more. And the location is great: an estimated 350,000 motorists pass the site each day.

Hartshorne & Plunkard, the construction company carrying out the building project is taking care to preserve many of the historical features of the building. At the same time, the team will also comply with LEED standards when renovating by incorporating an energy-efficient environment, a green roof, clean air quality, a landscaped courtyard, bike rooms, meeting and event space, priority hybrid parking.

## Urban Innovations Film Festival

*Featuring the initiatives you just read about! (Please cut and paste these links into your browser)*

### **City Repair in Portland, USA**

<http://www.cityrepair.org/wiki.php/about>

Citizens of Portland create a “sense of place” by transforming ordinary neighborhood intersections into a vibrant public space for local people to gather and form communities.

### **Stories of Ecological Design from Around the World**

<http://www.design-e2.com/>

e2 is a public television series that highlights innovative solutions to pressing issues of food, water, transport, energy, and design in urban areas. The stories offer ideas for balancing social, cultural, environmental and economic aspirations. Visit the site regularly to view the episodes on-line.

### **The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil**

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=->

[66172489666918336&q=the+power+of+community&ei=HGaPSO\\_4KYmS4wKujoGSCA](http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-66172489666918336&q=the+power+of+community&ei=HGaPSO_4KYmS4wKujoGSCA)

Check out the film that shows the entire Cuban story, how it converted Havana into an organic-food producing city, when the oil crisis hit in the 1990s.

## **Jane's Walk**

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-4195677381758722138&q=jane's%20walk%20in%20toronto&hl=en>

Hear the stories of the walks from the coordinator of the program in Toronto.

## **Bicycle Freedom in Paris**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWj7N5Gai3w>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUYfdBdQVuE&feature=related>

View two different news reports on the Bicycle Freedom Network of Paris.

## **Pedestrian Sundays in Kensington Market, Toronto**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzpBusel6\\_Y&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzpBusel6_Y&feature=related)

Watch how residents transform a busy market area into a diverse, outdoor dance and music festival every Sunday.

## **Ciclovia in Bogota, Colombia**

<http://www.streetfilms.org/archives/ciclovia/>

The city of Bogota, Colombia, shuts down 70 miles of its streets every Sunday, from 7 am til 2 pm, so its 1.8 million residents can get out and bicycle, roller skate, walk, engage in dance and aerobic classes, meet, enjoy themselves and stay healthy!

## **Solar Water Heaters in China**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYDBTPep8ic>

The mayor of Rizhao shows how solar water heaters are being used in every house in the city.

## **Conserve Chicago Together, USA**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-zoC4Roy\\_Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-zoC4Roy_Q)

In this promotional video, see samples of the many Green initiatives happening around the city.

## **Living in a World Without Waste - Kamikatsu, Japan**

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7502071.stm>

The Mayor of Kamikatsu, a small community in the hills of eastern Japan, has urged politicians around the world to follow his city's lead and make themselves "Zero Waste".

## **Rainwater Harvesting - Brazil and India**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xtMnE9Bo6s>

<http://www.oaecwater.org/education/roofwater-harvesting-booklet>

Many cities around the world are building rainwater harvesting systems to meet their water needs, re-charge their groundwater tables and make their cities greener and more sustainable. Check out this film and booklet for inspiration and practical ideas.

## Notes

**SHIKSHANTAR:  
The Peoples' Institute for  
Rethinking Education and Development**

Shikshantar, a not-for-profit movement, was founded to challenge the culture of schooling and institutions of thought-control. Today, factory-schooling and literacy are suppressing many diverse forms of human learning and expression, as well as much-needed organic processes towards just and harmonious social regeneration. We are committed to creating spaces where individuals and communities can together engage in dialogue to: (1) generate meaningful critiques to expose and dismantle/transform existing models of Education and Development; (2) reclaim control over their own learning processes and learning ecologies; and (3) elaborate (and continually re-elaborate) their own complex shared visions and practices of Swaraj.

Shikshantar is based in Udaipur (Rajasthan, India). Our core team works in collaboration with local and trans-local partners through dynamic processes of participatory conceptualization. To learn more about our efforts, please contact us at:

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***We welcome and encourage your questions, suggestions and support.***