

# Infrastructure and Zoning

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The interesting infrastructure feature at DR, which would turn out to be a common feature in all ecovillages I visited except for Red Earth Farms, was the common house. The common house at DR was a large, multi-purpose building with plastered straw bale walls. People used the large living room for meetings, activities, and dining. The bathroom area had multiple composting toilets, two showers, and a few energy-efficient laundry machines but no dryers. People dried all their clothes in the sun using clotheslines.

For intentional communities, a central community building where people can easily get together on a daily basis is essential in order to facilitate communication and coordination. It also serves as a no-cost social space with a roof, which is a refreshing departure from mainstream communities that tend to only have commercial third places like cafes. While most cities have libraries as third places free and open to the public, the main function of libraries is quiet learning and research, not social interaction. Experiencing the common house at ecovillages made me wonder how practical it would be to implement such places in mainstream cities.

The common house had some deficiencies that hinted at DR's slow group decision-making process. Despite the village being about 15 years-old by 2012, the common house did not have thermal curtains while pretty much all individual homes did. Many people I met at DR said that changes can happen very slowly at DR. It seemed more accurate to say people were fast at making decisions on individual matters but slow on group matters. Since the common house was very uncomfortable during hot weather, many people without a permanent home, mostly new residents, visitors, and work exchangers, went to the bar at the Milkweed Mercantile, the swimming pond, or Zimmerman's general store in Rutledge town center.

Rutledge and the surrounding areas had enough infrastructure for basic goods and services. The town center of Rutledge, about two miles away from DR, had an impressive general store named Zimmerman's, or Jimmy's, as it was affectionately called. The store had a small cafe that sold burgers and ice cream. People from DR would come to Jimmy's and spend a few hours just chatting and enjoying the cool AC breeze. About 12 miles away from DR was a bigger town named Memphis, equipped with a supermarket, a library, a department store, and even a local theater company.

DR had relatively dense zoning for a rural town where some buildings were as close as 5 yards from each other. Houses tended to have small yards suitable for gardening while lacking a driveway following the DR's ban on using automobiles within the village. DR's town structure was based on what members called the "European model": Homes were clustered together in a dense central area while a large area of farmland surrounded the central area. This structure allowed for more frequent social interaction and cooperation at the expense of not being able to constantly monitor the farmland.

Not content with this model, a group of former members formed the sister village of Red Earth Farms about a mile from DR. Former members who wanted to focus more on homesteading structured Red Earth Farms based on what they called the "American model" - each individual house was surrounded by a large ring of farmland, which allowed each household a direct view and access to the farmland. At the time of my visit, Red Earth Farms had what I remember to be four households. Rather than having a more strict ecological covenant like Dancing Rabbit, Red Earth held annual ecological audits to see how they were doing and what they could do better next year. Similar to DR, Red Earth Farms also had a central parking lot at the edge of the village, but it had no central common house. The houses were so spread out that it took several minutes to walk from the central parking lot to the nearest house while at DR, it took only a minute or so to walk from the parking lot to the nearest house. Although DR and Red Earth Farms were technically two separate sister villages, they often functioned as one with villagers frequently visiting each other. People from Red Earth Farms would often walk for a mile to come to DR community events. The following is a conceptual diagram showing the town layouts of DR and Red Earth Farms.

