

# Urban Planning Project

by Jane Lohmann

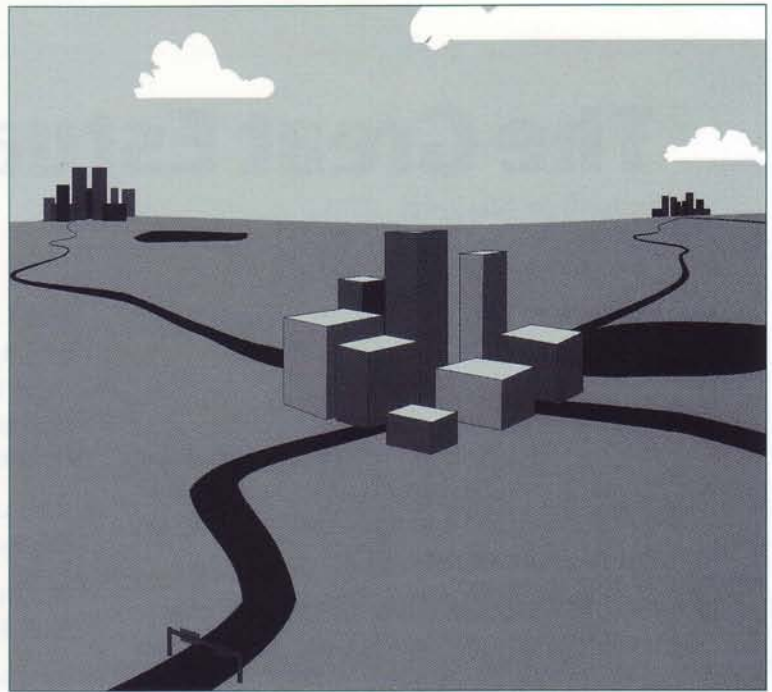
**Objective:** To encourage students to think about the necessary and complicated nature of urbanization.

**Materials:** Paper, colored pencils.

Cities are often criticized as sources of environmental pollution while their beneficial aspects are often overlooked. The article by Eirik Blom on the following page is a commentary on how environmentalism and “low impact living” are often romanticized and misrepresented. Begin this activity by distributing copies of the Blom article and having a discussion with the class about the merit of the author’s ideas.

Have each student spend time in the library researching the basics of urban planning and the history of urbanization. Why are there cities in the first place? What are their advantages and disadvantages? Are there any benefits, from an environmental point of view, to expanding upward rather than outward?

Students should compile a list of materials cities need to operate (land, water, energy, building material, transportation, etc.) and a list of waste products cities must dispose of (sewage, trash, toxic waste, smog, etc.). How is this list different in composition and degree from a similar list compiled for suburban and rural settings? Meaningful comparisons can be made among the amount of natural resources used to house, heat, and transport inhabitants of these different areas. Who has a greater impact on the environment—the inhabitant of an urban, suburban, or rural area?



After the students have developed a basic understanding of the obstacles faced in urban planning, have them design their ideal cityscape employing the following parameters:

1. One million inhabitants.
2. 100,000 commuters entering and leaving the city every day.
3. Water source is a reservoir 200 miles away.
4. City occupies land bordering a major river.
5. 30% of work force in manufacturing, 45% in service industry.

Using these basic guidelines, students should attempt to make informed estimates about the amount of resources needed to keep the city going and the waste products that must be disposed. How much water do 1,000,000 people need every day? How much trash do they produce every day? How much does it weigh? How much space does it take up? Where should it go?

Help the students think about all aspects of a city—parking spaces, roads, railroads, water mains, housing, industry, energy, waste disposal, food, etc. Keeping all this and more in mind, have the students make a plan of their ideal city.

## An Elitist View of Nature

By EIRIK A. T. BLOM

Several years ago I indulged myself in an ecology class at a local community college. As part of the course we took a field trip to a self-sustaining, environmentally friendly "homestead." To fans of a kinder and gentler relationship with the natural world, it was a wondrous place. In this day and age it is nearly impossible to live completely independently of your fellow humans, but these folks had used their three acres to come as close as most of us could stand. The garden produced vegetables, the chickens donated eggs and the goats threw in milk and lawn maintenance. The woodlot provided fuel and the water came from a well. Electricity was hushbanded and the car was a model that barely admitted it used gas. An archaeologist excavating here would assume he had found a rare pre-plastic era site, and there was no garbage. Everything was mulched, composted, re-used or recycled. Everyone fell in love with the place. This is the way people ought to live, in harmony with the world and its natural forces, not apart from the land, but part of it. This was the way to restore the quality of life. It would mean a virtual end to pollution, the garbage crisis, toxins in the food supply, dependence on imported energy, the paving of the landscape, the suburbanization of America, and the destruction of habitat. This quiet, kind, centered couple on their three acres had shown us the future.

Back in the classroom I listened uneasily to a hour's hymn singing about the marvel of what we had just seen, and an earnest debate on how best to bring the message to the rest of the country. I was hesitant to raise my hand because that couple was living exactly the way I wanted to. They had put my fantasy into practice. Still, I felt the need to inject one small reservation.

It's bunk. Codswallop. A hoax. A self-important, elitist recipe for environmental disaster. Fortunately, the probability that more than a few people will adopt this lifestyle is about the same as that of Pat Robertson becoming Secretary of the Interior. I hope.

Ignore for a moment the fact that there are a great many Americans who would rather have open-heart surgery than milk a goat and drink the results, or who think compost is the glutinous mess you put on waffles to keep the berries from rolling off, or who believe recycling is what the Redskins do with aged running backs. Just look at the numbers.

There are about 4,800,000 people in our fair state. That means we need 2,400,000 three-acre homesteads, which comes to 7,200,000 acres. The state only has 6,200,000 acres of land. If we use every square inch for homesteads, including those rocky slopes where the only thing you can grow is exhausted, and the sweltering marshes inhabited by mosquitoes so big they keep rabbits for pets, we do not have room for all our homesteading citizens. Maybe the rest would hit the road (what road?), because we would have used the space currently occupied by their employers.

Even if you could impose this lifestyle on an unwilling populace, it would be the end of natural habitat in the state. The forests would be fragmented into a million tiny clumps and the longest riparian corridors would be only a few hundred feet. There would be more endangered species than there are minivans in Columbia.

It's hyperbole, but the point is legitimate. We don't have the land to spread out evenly across the

state. Or the continent. You could fill up a large chunk of the West just settling the folks from California. New Jerseyites would take over Nebraska, a cultural clash that would be fun to watch. Before long we would look like China or India, with every piece of livable land occupied by tiny "farms" which get smaller with each generation as the family plot is divided among the children.

The class was not willing to surrender without a fight. The idea was good, we just needed to work out the kinks. Obviously not everybody could be homesteaders. The problem was to decide who would qualify for a life in the country. The argument dragged but the conclusion was inevitable: We were the chosen ones. The new Homestead America theme park would be occupied by People Like Us. People Not Like Us would remain in the urban and suburban trap. We were, after all, the ones who understood the problem, who revered the natural world, who were qualified to be its caretakers. We would protect it from them.

By this time it was clear that we were not talking about saving the environment. We were talking about getting ours, with all the appropriate tax breaks and subsidies to reward the virtue of our lifestyle. What we had done was justify a self-indulgent and elitist view of nature to preserve our dreams. What we did not want was to admit that we had it backward. Instead of moving people onto the land, we should be moving people into the cities. Including us. Especially us.

Preserving the environment

means getting people out of it. The model for the future is not Oregon or West Virginia, it is Japan. Japan is an island with a serious space problem. Their solution has been to grow up, not out. Houses are tiny, bowling alleys are five stories high and narrow, and there is no place to park a car in Tokyo. Granted they had no choice, but they have created a model for using space efficiently.

America is also an island, just a bigger one. Eventually we will run out of land and be forced to surrender the American dream that everyone who works hard can have three acres and a rancher. And once we run out of space, there is no place to go. We cannot invade Mexico — Mexico is invading us. Canada is huge, but only the southern 100 miles is habitable. Our island is not as large as we think.

Environmentalists need to continue the fight against the expansion of suburban and exurban sprawl. We cannot turn farms into three-acre lots and forests into wooded communities forever. But self-sustaining homesteads full of goats and chickens and runner beans are no more environmentally friendly than tract houses, and the argument that it is right for me but not for you is too obviously hypocritical to be persuasive. Environmentalists cannot, like Congress, exempt themselves from the effects of their policies. And they cannot expect to win the battle for public support from the porch of a cabin in the woods.

Eirik A.T. Blom's homestead is a town house in Bel Air.