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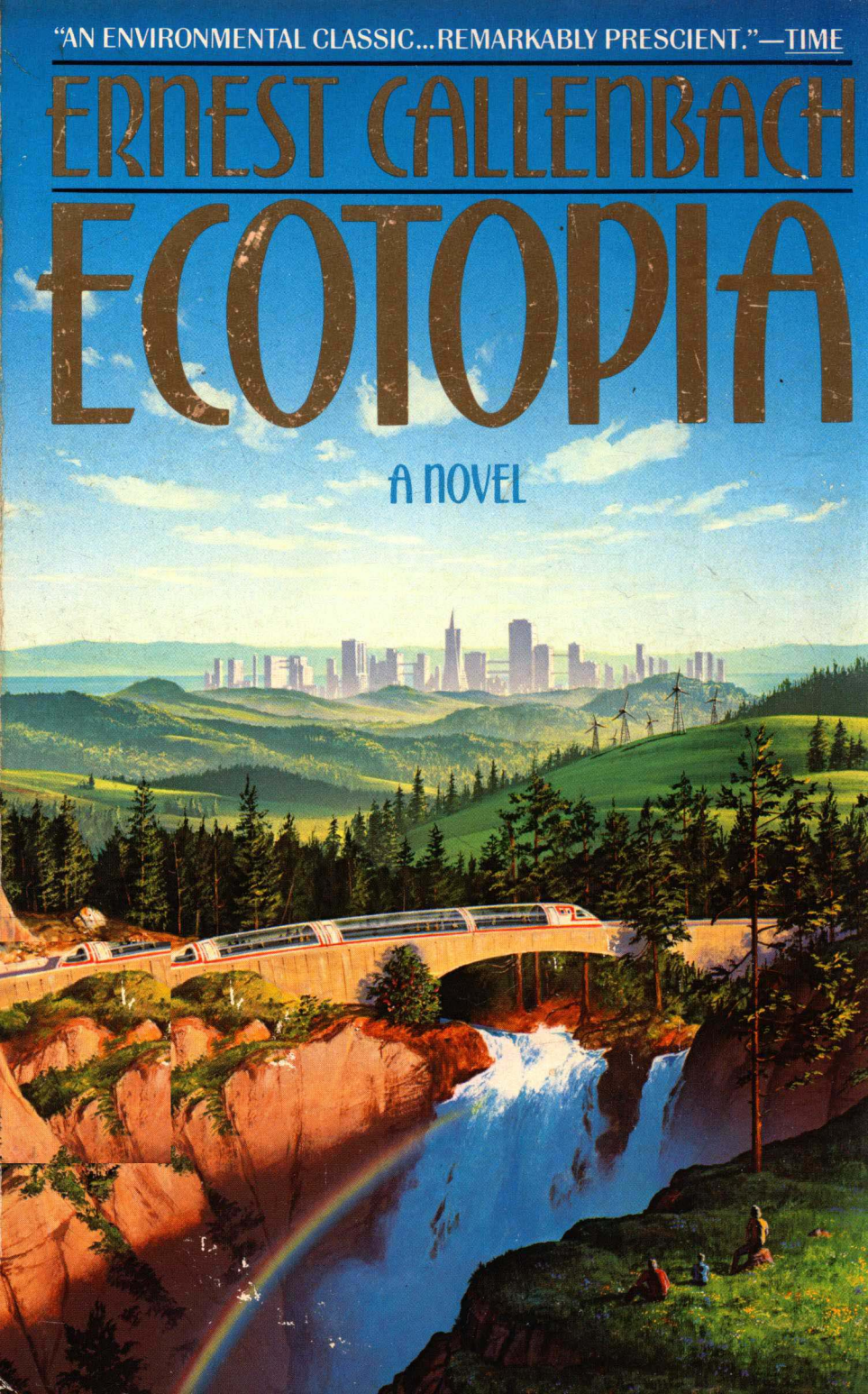
ERNEST CALLENBACH

ECOTOPIA

A NOVEL



Ernest Callenbach

ECOTOPIA

The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston

BANTAM BOOKS
NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

RL 10, IL age 14 and up

ECOTOPIA
A Bantam Book

PRINTING HISTORY
Banyan Tree Books edition published January 1975
Condensations in OREGON TIMES *published*
October 1975 and November 1975
Condensations in HARPER'S WEEKLY *published May 1976*
Bantam edition / October 1977
13 printings through April 1989
Bantam trade edition / April 1990

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Callenbach, Ernest.
Ecotopia : the notebooks and reports of William Weston.
p. cm.
Reprint. Originally published: Berkeley, Calif. : Banyan Tree Books, 1975.
ISBN 0-553-34847-7
I. Title.
PS3553.A424E35 1990
813'.54—dc20 89-17692
CIP

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ECO-
from the
Greek *oikos*
(household or home)

-TOPIA
from the
Greek *topos* (place)

In nature, no organic substance is synthesized unless there is provision for its degradation; recycling is enforced.
BARRY COMMONER

WESTON'S NEXT ASSIGNMENT: ECOTOPIA

The *Times-Post* is at last able to announce that William Weston, our top international affairs reporter, will spend six weeks in Ecotopia, beginning next week. This unprecedented journalistic development has been made possible through arrangements at the highest diplomatic level. It will mark the first officially arranged visit by an American to Ecotopia since the secession cut off normal travel and communications.

The *Times-Post* is sending Weston on this unique and difficult investigative assignment in the conviction that a candid, on-the-spot assessment of Ecotopia is essential—20 years after its secession. Old antagonisms have too long deterred close examination of what has been happening in Ecotopia—a part of the world once near, dear and familiar to us, but closed off and increasingly mysterious during its decades of independence.

The problem now is not so much to oppose Ecotopia as to understand it—which can only benefit the cause of international good relations. The *Times-Post* stands ready, as always, to serve that cause.

(May 3) Here we go again, dear diary. A fresh notebook with all those blank pages waiting to be filled. Good to be on the way at last. Alleghenies already receding behind us like pale green ripples on an algae-covered pond. Thinking back to the actual beginnings of this trip—almost a year ago? Those careful hints dropped at the White House like crumbs for the President's vacuum-cleaner mind to suck up. Until finally they coalesced into some kind of ball and came out as his own daring idea: okay, send some unofficial figure

out there, purely informal—a reporter not to closely identified with the administration, who could nose around, blow up a few pretty trial balloons—can't hurt! A tingly moment when he finally broached it, after a big Brazil briefing session. That famous confidential smile! And then saying that he had a little adventure in mind, wanted to discuss it with me privately. . . .

Was his tentativeness only his habitual caution, or a signal that if anything went wrong the visit (and the visitor) were politically expendable?

Still, an important opening in our foreign policy—lots of weighty arguments for it. Heal the fratricidal breach that rent the nation—so the continent can stand united against rising tides of starvation and revolution. Hawks who want to retake "lost lands of the west" by force seem to be growing stronger—need neutralizing. Ecotopian ideas are seeping over the border more dangerously—can't be ignored any longer, might be detoxified by exposure. Etc.

Maybe we can find a hearing for proposal to reopen diplomatic relations; perhaps trade proposals too. With reunification a gleam in the eye. Even just a publicizable chat with Vera Allwen could be useful—the President, with his customary flexibility, could use it to fend off both hawks and subversives. Besides, as I told Francine—who scoffed, naturally, even after three brandies—I want to see Ecotopia because it's there. Can things really be as weird there as they sound? I wonder.

Have been mulling over the no-nos. Must stay clear of the secession itself: too much bitterness could still be aroused. But fascinating stories there, probably—how the secessionists filched uranium fuel from power plants for the nuclear mines they claimed to have set in New York and Washington. How their political organization, led by those damned women, managed to paralyze and then supplant the regular political structure, and got control of the armories and the Guard. How they bluffed their way to a stand-off—helped, of course, by the severity of the national economic crisis that struck so conveniently for them. Lots of history there to be told someday—but now is not the time. . . .

Getting harder to say goodbye to the kids when I take off on a long trip. Not that it's really such a big deal, since I sometimes

miss a couple of weekends even when I'm around. But my being away so much seems to be beginning to bother them. Pat may be putting them up to it; I'll have to talk to her about that. Where else would Fay get the idea of asking to come along? Jesus—into darkest Ecotopia with typewriter and eight-year-old daughter. . . .

No more Francine for six weeks. It's always refreshing to get away for a while, and she'll be there when I get back, all charged up by some adventure or other. Actually sort of exciting to think of being totally out of touch with her, with the editorial office, in fact with the whole country. No phone service, wire service indirect: uncanny isolation the Ecotopians have insisted on for 20 years! And in Peking, Bantustan, Brazil there always had to be an American interpreter, who couldn't help dangling ties from home. This time there'll be nobody to share little American reactions with.

And it is potentially rather dangerous. These Ecotopians are certainly hotheads, and I could easily get into serious trouble. Government's control over population seems to be primitive compared to ours. Americans are heartily hated. In a jam the Ecotopian police might be no help at all—in fact they apparently aren't even armed.

Well, ought to draft the first column. Mid-air perhaps not the worst place to begin.

WILLIAM WESTON ON HIS JOURNEY TO ECOTOPIA

On board TWA flight 38, New York to Reno, May 3. As I begin this assignment, my jet heads west to Reno—last American city before the forbidding Sierra Nevada mountains that guard the closed borders of Ecotopia.

The passage of time has softened the shock of Ecotopia's separation from the United States. And Ecotopia's example, it is now clear, was not as novel as it seemed at the time. Biafra had attempted

secession from Nigeria but failed. Bangladesh had successfully broken free of Pakistan. Belgium had in effect dissolved into three countries. Even the Soviet Union has had its separatist "minority" disturbances. Ecotopia's secession was partly modeled on that of Quebec from Canada. Such "devolution" has become a worldwide tendency. The sole important counterdevelopment we can point to is the union of the Scandinavian countries—which perhaps only proves the rule, since the Scandinavians were virtually one people culturally in any event.

Nonetheless, many Americans still remember the terrible shortages of fruit, lettuce, wine, cotton, paper, lumber, and other western products which followed the breakaway of what had been Washington, Oregon, and Northern California. These problems exacerbated the general U.S. economic depression of the period, speeded up our chronic inflation, and caused widespread dissatisfaction with government policies. Moreover, Ecotopia still poses a nagging challenge to the underlying national philosophy of America: ever-continuing progress, the fruits of industrialization for all, a rising Gross National Product.

During the past two decades, we as a people have mostly tried to ignore what has been happening in Ecotopia—in the hope it will prove to be mere foolishness and go away. It is clear by now, however, that Ecotopia is not going to collapse as many American analysts at first predicted. The time has come when we must get a clearer understanding of Ecotopia.

If its social experimentation turns out to be absurd and irresponsible, it will then no longer tempt impressionable young Americans. If its strange customs indeed prove as barbaric as rumors suggest, Ecotopia will have to pay the cost in outraged world opinion. If Ecotopian claims are false, American policy-makers can profit from knowledge of that fact. For instance, we need to assess the allegation that Ecotopia has no more deaths from air and chemical pollution. Our own death rate has declined from a peak of 75,000 annually to 30,000—still a tragic toll, but suggesting that measures of the severity adopted in Ecotopia are hardly necessary. In short, we should meet the Ecotopian challenge on the basis of sound knowledge rather than ignorance and third-hand reports.

My assignment during the next six weeks, therefore, is to explore Ecotopian life from top to bottom—to search out the realities behind the rumors, to describe in concrete detail how Ecotopian society actually operates, to document its problems and, where that is called for, to acknowledge its achievements. By direct knowledge of the situation in which our former fellow-citizens now find themselves, we may even begin to rebuild the ties that once bound them to the Union they so hastily rejected.

(May 3) Reno a sad shadow of its former goodtimes self. With the lucrative California gambling trade cut off by secession, the city quickly decayed. The fancy casino hotels are now mere flophouses—their owners long ago fled to Las Vegas. I walked the streets near the airline terminal, asking people what they thought of Ecotopia out here. Most replies noncommittal, though I thought I could sometimes detect a tinge of bitterness. "Live and let live," said one grizzled old man, "if you can call what they do over there living." A young man who claimed to be a cowboy smiled at my question. "Waaal," he said, "I know guys who say they've gone over there to get girls. It isn't really dangerous if you know the mountain passes. They're friendly all right, so long as you aren't up to anything. Know what, though? The girls all have guns! *That's what they say. That could shake you up, couldn't it?"*

Had a hard time finding a taxi driver willing to take me over the border. Finally persuaded one who looked as if he had just done 20 years in the pen. Had to promise not only double fare but 25 percent tip besides. For which I got a bonus of dirty looks and a string of reassuring remarks: "What ya wanta go in there for anyhow, ya some kind of a nut? Buncha goddamn cannibals in there! Ya'll never get out alive—I just hope I will."

CROSSING THE ECOTOPIAN BORDER

On board the Sierra Express, Tahoe-San Francisco, May 4. I have now entered Ecotopia—the first known American to visit the new country since its Independence, 19 years ago.

My jet landed at Reno. Though it is not widely known, the Ecotopian government prohibits even international flights from crossing its territory—on grounds of air and noise pollution. Flights between San Francisco and Asia, or over the pole to Europe, must not only use a remote airport 40 miles outside the city, but are forced to follow over-water routes; and American jets for Hawaii must fly via Los Angeles. Thus to reach San Francisco I was compelled to deplane at Reno, and take an expensive taxi ride to the train station at the north end of Lake Tahoe. From Tahoe there is frequent and fast service.

The actual frontier is marked by a picturesquely weathered wooden fence, with a large gate, obviously little used. When my taxi pulled up, there was nobody around. The driver had to get out, go over to a small stone guard-house, and get the Ecotopian military to interrupt their card game. They turned out to be two young men in rather unpressed uniforms. But they knew of my coming, they checked my papers with an air of informed authority, and they passed the taxi through the gate—though only after making a point of the fact that it had required a special dispensation to allow an internal combustion engine to pass their sacred portals. I replied that it only had to take me about 20 miles to the train station. "You're lucky the wind is from the west," one of them said. "If it happened to be from the east we might have had to hold you up for a while."

They checked my luggage with some curiosity, paying special attention to my sleeping pills. But I was allowed to keep everything except my trusty .45 and holster. This might be standard garb in New York, I was told, but no concealable weapons are permitted in Ecotopia. Perhaps noticing my slightly uneasy reaction, one of the guards remarked that Ecotopian streets are quite safe, by day

or night. He then handed me a small booklet, *Ecotopia Explains*. This document was nicely printed but with rather quaint drawings. Evidently it had been prepared chiefly for tourists from Europe and Asia. "It might make things easier to get used to," said the other guard, in a soft, almost insinuatingly friendly tone that I now begin to recognize as a national trait. "Relax, it's a free country."

"My friend," I countered, "I've been in a hell of a lot stranger places than this country and I relax when I feel like it. If you're finished with my papers, I'll be on my way."

He snapped my passport shut, but held it in his hand. "Weston," he said, looking me in the eye, "you're a writer. We count on you to use words carefully while you're here. If you come back this way, maybe you'll be able to use that word 'friend' in good faith. We'd like that." He then smiled warmly and put out his hand. Rather to my surprise, I took it, and found a smile on my own face as well.

We drove on, to the Tahoe station of the Ecotopian train system. It turned out to be a rustic affair, constructed of huge timbers. It might pass in America for a monstrous ski chalet. It even had fireplaces in the waiting rooms—of which there are several, one a kind of restaurant, one a large, deserted room with a bandstand where dances must be held, and one a small, quiet lounge with leather chairs and a supply of books. The trains, which usually have only two or three cars but run about every hour, come into the basement of the station, and in cold weather huge doors close behind them to keep out the snow and wind.

Special facilities for skiers were evident—storage racks and lockers—but by this time of year the snows have largely melted and there is little skiing. The electric minibuses that shuttle from the station to ski resorts and nearby towns are almost empty.

I went down to my train. It looked more like a wingless airplane than a train. At first I thought I had gotten into an unfinished car—there were no seats! The floor was covered with thick, spongy carpet, and divided into compartments by knee-high partitions; a few passengers were sprawled on large baglike leather cushions that lay scattered about. One elderly man had taken a blanket from

a pile at one end of the car, and lay down for a nap. Some of the others, realizing from my confusion that I was a foreigner, showed me where to stow my bag and told me how to obtain refreshments from the steward in the next car. I sat down on one of the pillows, realizing that there would be a good view from the huge windows that came down to about six inches from the floor. My companions lit up some cigarettes, which I recognized as marijuana from the odor, and began to pass them around. As my first gesture of international goodwill, I took a few puffs myself, and soon we were all sociably chatting away.

Their sentimentality about nature has even led the Ecotopians to bring greenery into their trains, which are full of hanging ferns and small plants I could not identify. (My companions, however, reeled off their botanical names with assurance.) At the end of the car stood containers rather like trash bins, each with a large letter—M, G, and P. These, I was told, were "recycle bins." It may seem unlikely to Americans, but I observed that during our trip my fellow travelers did without exception dispose of all metal, glass, or paper and plastic refuse in the appropriate bin. That they did so without the embarrassment Americans would experience was my first introduction to the rigid practices of recycling and re-use upon which Ecotopians are said to pride themselves so fiercely.

By the time you notice you are under way in an Ecotopian train, you feel virtually no movement at all. Since it operates by magnetic suspension and propulsion, there is no rumble of wheels or whine or vibration. People talk, there is the clink of glasses and teacups, some passengers wave to friends on the platform. In a moment the train seems literally to be flying along the ground, though it is actually a few inches above a trough-shaped guideway.

My companions told me something about the background of these trains. Apparently the Boeing Company in Seattle, at the time of Independence, had never taken seriously the need to diversify its output from airplanes into other modes of transportation. The world market for new planes had become highly competitive, however, and luckily the Ecotopian government, though its long-range economic policies called for diversification and decentralization of production in each city and region, took temporary advantage

of the Boeing facilities to help build the new national train system. While the Germans and Japanese had pioneered in magnetic-suspension trains with linear motors, Boeing began production on the system only a year after Independence. When I asked how the enormous expense of the system had been financed, my companions laughed. One of them remarked that the cost of the entire roadbed from San Francisco to Seattle was about that of ten SSTs, and he argued that the total social cost per person per mile on their trains was less than that for air transport at any distance under a thousand miles.

I learned from my booklet that the trains normally travel about 360 kilometers per hour on the level. (Use of the metric system is universal in Ecotopia.) You get a fair view of the countryside at this speed, which translates as about 225 miles per hour. And we only attained that speed after about 20 minutes of crawling up and over the formidable eastern slope of the Sierra Nevadas, at what seemed less than 90 miles per hour. Donner Pass looked almost as bleak as it must have to the Donner pioneer party who perished there. We made a stop at Norden and picked up a few late-season skiers—a cheerful bunch, like our skiers, but dressed in raggedy attire, including some very secondhand-looking fur jackets. They carried homemade knapsacks and primitive skis—long, thin, with flimsy old-fashioned bindings. The train then swooped down the long canyons of the Sierra forests, occasionally flashing past a river with its water bubbling blue-black and icy between the rocks. In a few minutes we slid into Auburn. The timetable, which graphically lays out the routes and approximate schedules of a complex network of connecting trains and buses, showed three stops before San Francisco itself. I was glad to notice that we halted for less than 60 seconds, even though people sauntered on and off with typical Ecotopian looseness.

Once we reached the valley floor, I saw little of interest, but my companions still seemed fascinated. They pointed out changes in the fields and forests we passed; in a wooded stretch someone spotted a doe with two fawns, and later a jackrabbit caused great amusement. Soon we entered the hilly country around San Francisco Bay, and shot through a series of tunnels in the grass-

covered, breast-shaped green hills. There were now more houses, though rather scattered—many of them seeming to be small farms. The orchards, fields and fences looked healthy and surprisingly well cared for, almost like those of western Europe. Yet how dingy and unprosperous the farm buildings looked, compared to the white-painted farms of Iowa or New England! The Ecotopians must be positively allergic to paint. They build with rock, adobe, weathered boards—apparently almost anything that comes to hand, and they lack the aesthetic sense that would lead them to give such materials a coat of concealing paint. They would apparently rather cover a house with vines or bushes than paint it.

The drabness of the countryside was increased by its evident isolation. The roads were narrow and winding, with trees dangerously close to the pavement. No traffic at all seemed to be moving on them. There wasn't a billboard in sight, and not a gas station or telephone booth. It would not be reassuring to be caught in such a region after dark.

An hour and a quarter after we left Tahoe, the train plunged into a tube near the Bay shore, and emerged a few minutes later in the San Francisco main station. In my next column I will describe my first impressions of the city by the Golden Gate—where so many earlier Americans debarked to seek their fortunes in the gold fields.

(May 4) General impression: a lot of Ecotopians look like oldtime westerners, Gold Rush characters come to life. God knows we have plenty of freaky-looking people in New York, but their freakishness is self-consciousness, campy, theatrical—a way of showing off. The Ecotopians are almost Dickensian: often strange enough, but not crazy-looking or sordid, as the hippies of the sixties were. Fanciful hats and hairdos, jackets, vests, leggings, tights; so help me, I think I even saw a codpiece—either that or the guy was supernaturally endowed. There's a lot of embroidery and decorations made of small shells or feathers, and patchwork—cloth must be terribly scarce they go to such lengths to re-use it.

And their manners are even more unsettling. On the streets there are electrical moments when women stare me directly in the eyes;

so far I've looked away, but what would happen if I held contact? People seem to be very loose and playful with each other, as if they had endless time on their hands to explore whatever possibilities might come up. There's none of the implicit threat of open criminal violence that pervades our public places, but there's an awful lot of strong emotion, wilfully expressed! The peace of the train ride was broken several times by shouted arguments or insults; people have an insolent kind of curiosity that often leads to tiffs. It's as if they have lost the sense of anonymity which enables us to live together in large numbers. You can't, therefore, approach an Ecotopian functionary as we do. The Ecotopian at the train ticket window simply wouldn't tolerate being spoken to in my usual way—he asked me what I thought he was, a ticket-dispensing machine? In fact, he won't give you the ticket unless you deal with him as a real person, and he insists on dealing with you—asking questions, making remarks to which he expects a sincere reaction, and shouting if he doesn't get it. But most of such sound and fury seems to signify nothing. There may be dangerous lunatics among the harmless ones, but I haven't seen any yet. Just hope I can preserve my own *sanity.*

THE STREETS OF ECOTOPIA'S CAPITAL

San Francisco, May 5. As I emerged from the train terminal into the streets, I had little idea what to expect from this city—which had once proudly boasted of rising from its own ashes after a terrible earthquake and fire. San Francisco was once known as "America's favorite city" and had an immense appeal to tourists. Its dramatic hills and bridges, its picturesque cable cars, and its sophisticated yet relaxed people had drawn visitors who returned again and again. Would I find that it still deserves its reputation as an elegant and civilized place?

I checked my bag and set out to explore a bit. The first shock hit

me at the moment I stepped onto the street. There was a strange hush over everything. I expected to encounter something at least a little like the exciting bustle of our cities—cars honking, taxis swooping, clots of people pushing about in the hurry of urban life. What I found, when I had gotten over my surprise at the quiet, was that Market Street, once a mighty boulevard striking through the city down to the waterfront, has become a mall planted with thousands of trees. The "street" itself, on which electric taxis, minibuses, and delivery carts purr along, has shrunk to a two-lane affair. The remaining space, which is huge, is occupied by bicycle lanes, fountains, sculptures, kiosks, and absurd little gardens surrounded by benches. Over it all hangs the almost sinister quiet, punctuated by the whirr of bicycles and cries of children. There is even the occasional song of a bird, unbelievable as that may seem on a capital city's crowded main street.

Scattered here and there are large conical-roofed pavilions, with a kiosk in the center selling papers, comic books, magazines, fruit juices, and snacks. (Also cigarettes—the Ecotopians have *not* managed to stamp out smoking!) The pavilions turn out to be stops on the minibus system, and people wait there out of the rain. These buses are comical battery-driven contraptions, resembling the antique cable cars that San Franciscans were once so fond of. They are driverless, and are steered and stopped by an electronic gadget that follows wires buried in the street. (A safety bumper stops them in case someone fails to get out of the way.) To enable people to get on and off quickly, during the 15 seconds the bus stops, the floor is only a few inches above ground level; the wheels are at the extreme ends of the vehicle. Rows of seats face outward, so on a short trip you simply sit down momentarily, or stand and hang onto one of the hand grips. In bad weather fringed fabric roofs can be extended outward to provide more shelter.

These buses creep along at about ten miles an hour, but they come every five minutes or so. They charge *no* fare. When I took an experimental ride on one, I asked a fellow passenger about this, and he said the minibuses are paid for in the same way as streets—out of general tax funds. Smiling, he added that to have a driver on board to collect fares would cost more than the fares could pro-