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GREEN & GLOBAL; NATIONAL BUILDING MUSEUM EXHIBIT TAKES A WORLD VIEW OF SUSTAINABLE LIVING

Patricia Lowry Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- The first thing you notice about the National Building Museum's "Green Community" exhibit is that it looks a lot different from other shows. Almost everything, from the patterns in the cork floor to the exhibit panels to the tubular time line of green technology dating to ancient Rome, is in the shape of a circle. And that puts you in the round frame of mind right from the get-go, thinking planet Earth and recycling, and thinking outside the rectangle.

Before you begin to circle through this innovative, globe-trotting exhibit, you have to think about how to get there. Will you bike, take the bus or automatically reach for your car keys? An interactive floor leading to the exhibit depicts a street with three lanes; choose one and as you walk along it lights up and reveals the impact your decision is having on the environment.

The exhibit also works hard to find engaging ways to communicate a large amount of complex and sometimes technical information that can be hard to digest. There's more than a spoonful of sugar here, though, in its backlit transparencies that bring vibrancy and immediacy to static images, in its short films and interactive video screens, and in its novel methods of presentation.

"Green Community" is housed in galleries on the second floor of the National Building Museum, which tonight is the site of the military inaugural ball, one of 10 presidential inaugural balls in the district. The museum is the former Pension Building, designed in the 1880s on what today we would call green principles. Surrounded by offices, the extraordinary Great Hall, designed for public events and dominated by soaring Corinthian columns, is flooded with natural light.

The core of "Green Community" shares the stories of 14 communities around the world that are taking the lead in five areas -- transit-oriented planning, brownfield and grayfield redevelopment, land conservation, smart use of natural resources and minimizing waste. Most of these places could qualify under more than one heading.

??Transit-oriented planning: Probably the most controversial -- although the exhibit doesn't hint at this -- is Masdar City, a new town under construction next to Abu Dhabi International Airport, UAE. Designed by the British architectural firm Foster + Partners, this walled-to-keep-out-the-wind city in the desert will be a zero-emissions center for the development of new ideas in energy production in a country that is the world's fifth-largest oil producer.

Masdar City's street grid is sited to take advantage of sun and wind exposures; canals will cool the air through water evaporation. Vernacular adaptations learned from historic cities include narrow streets shaded by human-scale buildings, but some of those buildings will be more futuristic than traditional.

To minimize construction costs, Masdar City will be built on a raised plinth that contains city services. An elevated light rail system will cross town diagonally, but it doesn't connect to anything outside the city. Inside, cars will be banned and replaced by on-demand personal rapid transit vehicles that can travel to any part of town.

Skeptics worry Masdar City's impact will be largely symbolic, a "green billboard at the airport," as one put it.

??Brownfield redevelopment: Atlantic Station, a new neighborhood on a former steel mill site in Atlanta, was close to public transit but separated from it by an interstate highway. A new pedestrian bridge has changed that, but to see if it and a car-sharing program are improving the health of residents, Emory University and the Centers for Disease Control will conduct a two-year study.

??Land conservation: On the northwest edge of sprawling suburban Chicago sits the Liberty Prairie Reserve, more than 5,000 acres of publicly and privately held forests, grasslands, farms and trails. Within it, too, is Prairie Crossing, a 22-year-old suburban community of energy-efficient homes, shops and charter school, linked to Chicago through two older rail lines. Taking their cues from the surrounding landscape, Prairie Crossing residents cultivate their yards with prairie grasses and wildflowers. In open prairie areas, as the natives did centuries ago, the fire department stages controlled burns to encourage regeneration.

??Smart use of natural resources: The greening of Greensburg, Kan., is better known than most of the "Green Community" examples because it was triggered by 90 percent of the town's destruction by a tornado in 2007. The town destroyed by wind now will harness it for energy by building turbines in agricultural land, which remains in production. The new town will be compact and walkable, and maintain a strict boundary with the surrounding farmland.

??Minimizing waste: In San Francisco, home of one of the country's most aggressive recycling programs, residents even turn in their food scraps and yard waste, which travel to a processing plant that converts them to nutrient-rich compost, which is sold to vineyards near the city.

In a film produced for the exhibit, this section also looks at the green community that has grown on the Internet through sites such as Freegan.info. Freegans -- think "free" and "vegans" -- are people who avoid purchasing anything associated with consumer culture, using strategies that include dumpster-diving and scrupulous recycling. Guerilla gardeners (guerillagardening.org, for one) plant food, flowers and trees, often without permission and often in neglected patches of public land.

Around the show's perimeter are examples of places that have found sustainable ways to make use of the planet's natural resources -- earth, wind, water and fire. Among the projects highlighted here is California University of



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