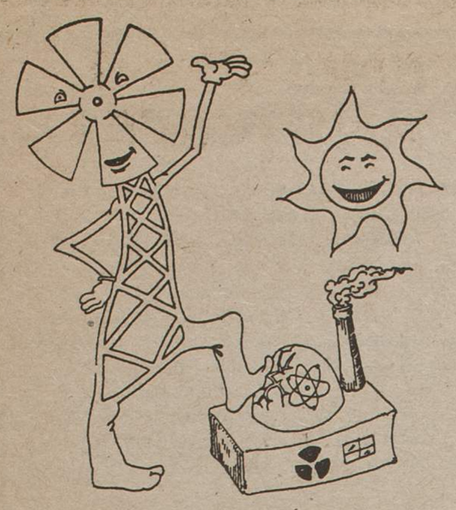

People's Energy Project

POWER FOR PEOPLE, NOT PROFIT!

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A PEOPLE'S SOLAR PROJECT

By Rasa Gustaitis
Pacific News Service

San Bernardino, Ca.

Last July, someone turned a valve, letting water flow into solar collector pipes, then down into a giant tank buried under a vacant lot in one of this smoggy city's bleakest neighborhoods. By nightfall, 10 restored homes and 10 brand-new greenhouses will warm up with a unique solar energy system.

By nightfall, 10 restored homes and 10 brand-new greenhouses warmed up with a unique solar energy.

Among those who cheered was Valerie Pope, 44, who six years ago was a struggling welfare mother and who now heads one of the most imaginative and vigorous self-help organizations in any high-rime, low-income urban community; and Nate Rekosh, 65, a retired aerospace engineer, who helped launch the U.S. missile program and who is now pioneering what is probably the first solar prcject intended to serve urban poor people.

The central heat and hot water system conceived by Rekosh is designed to do several things: lower utility bills for homeowners of the 10 buildings, help them grow healthy food economically, upgrade a neighborhood and create jobs for previously unemployable people.

When Pope and Rekosh first sought funds for it, they met with rebuffs from grant-dispensing officials accustomed to hearing from large firms and institutions, not from predominantly black community groups like theirs, the West Side Community Development Corp. (CDC).

But their persistence finally sprang loose some start-up money, which led to more. Now they are reaping praise from city, state, and federal officials who see Rekosh's design as possibly adaptable to public, subdivision and military housing.

The 10 solar heated homes, among hundreds that the Veterans Administration (VA) and Federal Housing Administration (FHA) had repossessed in the neighborhood, have been rehabilitated, and are ready to go on the market as reasonably priced shelter. They have sparked further upgrading in the area.

The ex-convicts, parolees and other outcasts who worked on the homes and solar system as trainees in a program for the jobless are on their way up to $7.50 an hour. And the CDC is about to embark on broader and grander projects, again involving solar energy.

NECESSITY PLUS IMAGINATION

'[illegible]gan with economic neces-[illegible] mixed with some rare imag-[illegible]n and drive.'

Eight years ago, Pope was struggling to rear her three children on welfare in this city of 100,000 where the job market has been depressed for year and unemployment of minority youths is about 40 percent. In the process, she and Sharon Cooper, a mother of five, led the formation of a welfare rights groups that fought for jobs, school integraion and more fairness in public aid programs.

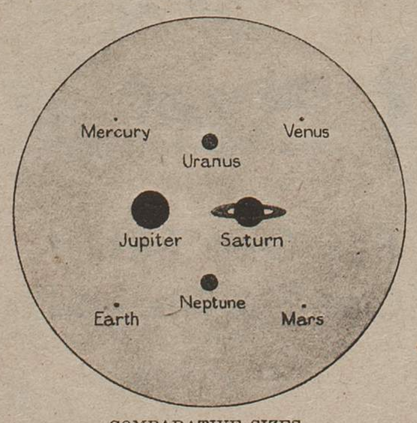
The abundance of vacant, vandalized houses in the area offered a chance for concrete action. The homes had been built for employes of Norton Air Force Base and the local electronics industry. But in 1958, after major job cutbacks, most were sold to black families in fast-buck operations, without adequate credit and income checks. Most of the homes soon reverted to banks, the FHA and the VA. Some had been sold several times again, and finally abandoned.

Pope and Cooper persuaded the VA to make their newly formed CDC the broker-managers of 20 of these properties. "It was the first time the VA had ever done such a thing," Cooper said. The VA agreed to provide money for materials.

A month of picketing and a trip to Washington yielded a $5,000 start-up grant from the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, a job training program. Richard Cole, a black general contractor who specialized in rehabilitation because he was often excluded from new projects, took charge of the job. The city provided administrative staff.

The group set high standards : "Poor people don't have money for upkeep," Cooper said. "We decided plumbing had to be better than usual. All paint had to be washable. Roofs had to last. Insulation had to be good."

Spending $3-7,000 on each four-bedroom, two-bath house, the group put them into shape and sold them at an average of $10,250 each. They are now worht $18,000 but no new owner has sold.



COMPARATIVE SIZES
The sun is represented by the large outer circle.

To make sure none defaulted, as previous owners had, the CDC provided careful income and credit checks. Afterwards, it offered counseling in case of financial stress.

It was in the counseling-- in trying to help families stretch tight incomes to the utmost-- that Pope hit on the solar power idea. She looked at a collector someone had built as an experiment, but found it too ugly. "I had read that people were fighting solar as detracting from the value of property," she said. "So I knew we had to build it so it would add to property value."

At this point, Nate Rekosh walded in. He had grown restless fishing and tending roses during two years of retirement. Over a long and diverse career with the space program, the missile program and the Army Corps of Engineers, Rekosh had accumulated knowledge he wanted to use, but he had no outlet. Then he heard about Valerie Pope and the CDC.

ENERGY

SUN POWER

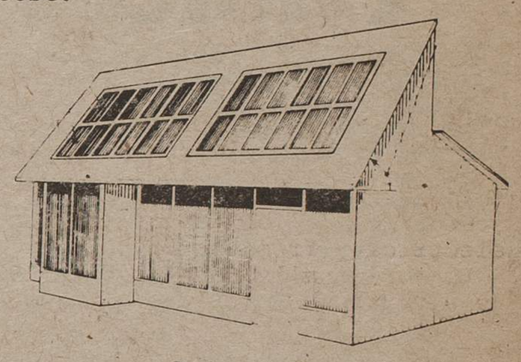
Energy from that heavenly source of light and life may be brought down to earth without sky-high costs -

Parking his Lincoln Continental some distance away from the CDC's storefront office in a near-abandoned shopping center, Rekosh walded over to see Pope. He was soon hard at work on the solar project.

Partly because Pope is an avid gardener, they decided to place the solar collectors atop truncated telephone poles, integrated into the roofs of a string of connecting greenhouses. The water tank, big enough to last through four sunless days, was to be buried in an empty lot. The lot itself would become a park with gazebo.

The system was designed to work as a closed loop, storing water in the 5,000-gallon tank, ready to be pumped into the homes as needed.

With the homes insulated to maximum efficiency, Rekosh says, owners can expect at least 45% savings on utility bills. The solar system is designed for 85% efficiency, and would probably generate more heat than needed most of the time in San Bernardino's sunny climate. In the future, the surplus could be adapted for cooling or generation of electricity.



NEIGHBORHOOD SOLAR HEATING AND FOOD GROWING PAVILION, SAN BERNARDINO, CALIFORNIA

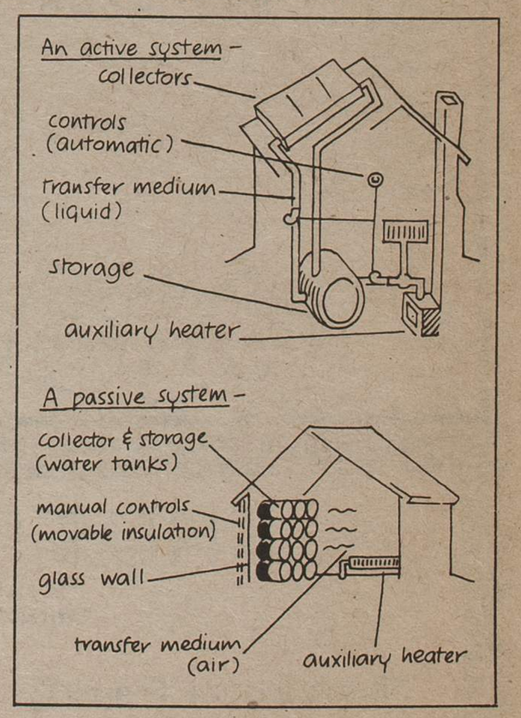
In case not enough sun shines to meet the homes' demand, however, a standard back-up gas heating system goes on automatically. Sophisticated computerized checks and measurements were built in since the system in a research model. Therefore, Rekosh says, the total cost of $99,000 is far beyond what future copies would cost.

Solar House

The CDC is now seeking approval to install a similar system for a public housing apartment project. It expects the cost to be at least 10% less. The city is looking favorably on the new plan.

"They're the only ones in town doing anything, other than the city," said Gary Van Osdel, San Bernardino's director of community development.

"Their earlier project has seemingly had a very positive effect," he said. "Because they had local people working and were known, they didn't experience the same kind of vandalism and theft others have. They were able to sell at a more reasonable price. And they've brought some stability into the neighborhood."



As for the solar project, he said, "Solar R and D (research and development) is usually done by large firms, corporations. And here's this lettle bitsy, grassrooty thing. That alone is totally amazing."