# Realizing Utopia – Ecovillage Endeavors and Academic Approaches

**BOOK** · DECEMBER 2012

**12 AUTHORS**, INCLUDING:

# Realizing Utopia

## Ecovillage Endeavors and Academic Approaches

Edited by
MARCUS ANDREAS
FELIX WAGNER

# Realizing Utopia

## Ecovillage Endeavors and Academic Approaches

Edited by
Marcus Andreas and Felix Wagner

## Contents

**From the Field**

*The rights to all photos in the following essays are held by the contributing authors.*

Marcus Andreas and Felix Wagner

## Introduction

The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) recently predicted that, in the face of climate change, resource scarcity, and radical social change, we will see a profound and far-reaching "Great Transformation"[1] in our economies, our lifestyles, and our communities. Since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the concept of sustainable development has been central to both imagining and realizing this new future. Among the many places where sustainability has emerged as a force for shaping the future are ecovillages, which can offer a unique window into the grassroots origins and development of the concept.

The WBGU points in particular to the important role of "pioneers of change" in driving wider society towards the Great Transformation. The role of pioneers is both to show us what life could be like beyond the horizon and to inspire us get on board with their utopian[2] journey. As pioneers of real change, ecovillages reveal the materials, mechanisms, and ideals behind the Great Transformation. They demonstrate that a good life with a low ecological footprint is possible, even in industrialized countries.[3]

This issue of *RCC Perspectives* examines ecovillages from a variety of perspectives and works to fill a gap in the literature, as ecovillages have been rather uncharted territory for academic research thus far. Moreover, the volume addresses the long-held aim of sustainability research: inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation. In fact, the essays emerged from an effort to open up interdisciplinary space for discussion: a workshop called *"Realizing Utopia: Ecovillage Endeavors and Explorations*," organized by the volume editors and held at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) in Munich in October 2011. In this particular space were gathered academics,

---

1   German Advisory Council on Global Change (Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen, WBGU), *Welt im Wandel: Gesellschaftsvertrag für eine Große Transformation* (Berlin: WBGU, 2011), accessed 08 October 2012, http://www.wbgu.de/hauptgutachten/hg-2011-transformation/.
2   The term "utopian" is not meant negatively; instead, it is a guideline for a better society and alludes to an improved quality of life. In his analysis of Earthaven Ecovillage, the anthropologist Joshua Lockyer points out that the journey toward utopia, not the destination, unlocks the transformative potential. This is the sense in which we ascribe a utopian horizon to the endeavour to achieve sustainability. "Utopian thinking today requires no apologies," as Lockyer put it.
3   Cf. S. Tinsley and H. George, *Ecological Footprint of the Findhorn Foundation and Community* (Forres, UK: Sustainable Development Research Centre, 2006).

ecovillage representatives, a journalist, and other interested participants. The workshop took the form of a "world café,"[4] and the participants worked together to address the question of how future collaborative research on ecovillages should look. While answers were manifold, participants emphasized the importance of *bridge-building*, as well as the creation of a win-win-win situation for research, activism, and society as a whole. One point in particular was met with consensus: the need to produce "mutually enjoyable and relevant collaborative research."

This volume reflects the topics discussed at this workshop, with a primary focus on the cultural contribution of ecovillages. The essays are organized into three sections: those that provide a glimpse of ecovillages **on the ground**, those that offer insights for moving **toward a (utopian) future**, and those that examine ecovillages **from the (research) field**.

Part I takes us on a tour of what ecovillages look like in reality. The first contribution, by Michael Würfel, presents an authentic insight into life in his ecovillage, Sieben Linden,

---

4    A style of conducting workshops that enables an open and creative conversation in order to surface
     collective knowledge, share ideas and insights, and gain a deeper understanding of the subject and the
     issues involved.

and raises the question as to whether this can be considered a model. Then, journalist and ecovillage resident Diana Leafe Christian gives a lively and highly personal glimpse of life in her community, Earthaven. Next, Bill Metcalf, a renowned historian of intentional communities, illuminates, albeit briefly, the history of intentional communities and clarifies some common preconceptions about them. Finally, geographer Louise Meijering gives us an overview of the ideals and practices of ecovillages in Europe, offering a brief bird's-eye view of the landscape, followed by a closer look at three case studies.

In Part II, the essays present some takes on the potentiality of ecovillages and the utopia they are working towards. First, Mara-Daria Cojocaru provides a philosophical examination of the concept of utopia. Volume editor Felix Wagner then proposes what it could mean and take to develop a culture of sustainability, a proposal to which his fellow volume editor, Marcus Andreas, responds in a subsequent commentary. Journalist Geseko von Lüpke concludes the section with an elaboration of the idea of the "Great Turning" and suggests the role that ecovillages, as "islands of the future," could play in its realization.

Finally, Part III looks at contemporary research on ecovillages. Felix Wagner begins the section with a review of studies concerned with ecovillages, giving us a panoramic snapshot of the research landscape to date. In the following essay, he and his colleagues Sandra Menda and Marcus Andreas explain their own initiative to foster transdisciplinary research and education to achieve a culture of sustainability, Research in Community. The next contribution, by geographer Jenny Pickerill, takes a look at the relationship between buildings and eco-culture. Richard Franke's contribution complements Wagner's research review in providing us with an overview of studies specifically pertaining to the venerable Ecovillage at Ithaca, as well as interesting insights into the impact of research on village life. Then, Anna Kovasna reflects on her dual position as an academic and an activist within what is currently the world's largest ecovillage study, "Ecovillages for Sustainable Rural Development," an investigation of ecovillages in the Baltic Sea region. The final contribution, by the volume editors, takes us back to where we started, with Sieben Linden and its potential as a model for similar projects and as a hub for testing out utopian ideas.

As a whole, this issue is an invitation into the world of ecovillages. We welcome readers aboard—let us combine our efforts and sail together toward the Great Transformation.

**On the Ground**

Michael Würfel

## The Ecovillage: A Model for a More Sustainable, Future-Oriented Lifestyle?

Sieben Linden ("Seven Lindens") is an intentional community. Roughly 135 people, a third of them children, live in this place and share in making decisions about many matters that affect their lives together. They don't do everything as a group, and they do not pool their money or earnings, but they adhere to mutual agreements and have provided assurance that they value and respect each other.



**Figure 1:**
A shot of Sieben Linden.

When visiting Sieben Linden—by taking part in seminars, information days, or by volunteering—you find a settlement of both wooden trailers and rather large houses. Many houses have solar panels, and signs explain the techniques of straw bale insulation and innovative heating systems. Groups of children dart busily between the houses or romp about on the playground; teenage girls are so absorbed in their conversation that they don't even glance at the guests; adults on bicycles avoid the potholes in the gravel path, maybe with a ladder on their shoulders. Most of them appear "completely normal"; others are barefoot—in November.

This essay was originally written in German and has been translated for *RCC Perspectives* by Brenda Black.

When there is no construction work, it is quiet. There is no noisy traffic, and no dogs barking behind the garden fences; both are completely absent here. The community occupies a sprawling piece of land, so the residents don't seem to live in particularly close quarters with each other. "A mix between village and close community" is a common description of Sieben Linden. The group is made up of very different people with quite different ideas of living, but who are united in a belief that an effort has to be made to live sustainably.

Sieben Linden calls itself an "ecovillage," and its goal is to set an example as a viable and sustainable way of life. The ecovillage aims to use only as much energy, space, and raw material as necessary, so that sufficient resources remain for every other person on the planet to also have the possibility of living in such a way. This is the vision of its inhabitants. Whether they manage to achieve this goal, even in rudimentary form, depends on how one calculates it and with how much generosity. For example, in a study conducted by the University of Kassel in 2004, the village's ecological footprint, in terms of its $CO_2$ equivalents, was less than a third of the German average. It is also true that the inhabitants of Sieben Linden live according to certain restrictions: how many square meters each person may inhabit, which environmentally unsound building materials are forbidden, which food products are not local enough for their collective grocery purchases—all of these have been determined by the inhabitants.

While these agreements exist, our ways of life are not uniform. Some residents wish to live as self-sufficiently and environmentally friendly as possible; others wouldn't mind buying organic frozen pizza if the community's tiny store would carry it. In the early years these differing ideas were particularly clear. The subgroup Club99 built a low-energy house using donated materials entirely through their own efforts—by hand, without electricity, without power tools. The subgroup 81fünf, on the other hand, had a readymade eco-house delivered. These various approaches have not caused polarization within the community, and even today differences can be seen—for example, while some residents travel on vacation by bicycle, even riding thousands of kilometers, others book flights to Thailand for a two-week trip and are, nonetheless, not expelled from the village for the environmental damage this causes. This tolerance (for a dedicated eco-community, it can be considered tolerant indeed) makes Sieben Linden interesting to the diverse range of people it attracts. Informational sessions about the community are attended by retirees and families with small children, by artists and

young professionals with the ink still fresh on their diplomas, by IT specialists and drywall builders, and by spiritualists and hands-on farmer types. In Sieben Linden they see the possibility of becoming part of the solution rather than staying part of the problem; they want to become involved in something, rather than constantly trying to justify living ecologically to their friends, colleagues, and neighbors.

Structures for decision making have existed since the founding of the project in 1993 and have been constantly developed in the search for the ideal combination of effectiveness and direct democracy, in which everyone has a say. At present, elected "counsels" make decisions about their particular area of responsibility, for example food or construction. Anyone can present themselves as a candidate for these unpaid village council positions. Regardless, anyone can contribute to decisions; they can also challenge existing ones, if they can win enough support from the residents to veto it. Such challenges are seldom necessary, however; in fact, there has never been a veto since the system of counsels was instituted two years ago. The rules Sieben Linden establishes are supported by an overwhelming majority; there are not even clear procedures yet about what to do if these rules should be broken. The ecovillage has no police; and neither is it a typical village with a church, influential farmers, or an elite group of local personalities.

There aren't exactly many ecovillages around—not in Germany, not elsewhere. For whom, then, can Sieben Linden serve as an example? Is it a suitable model for urban Joe Consumer (urban, for that is the majority of the world's population)? Only few people seem to be willing to venture a life in close cooperation with others, whether in the form of intentional communities, multi-generational households, or political communes. This suggests that a place like Sieben Linden might not function as a practical example to ecologically interested city dwellers in single apartments, to people who don't even live in a shared household.

I am a Sieben Linden resident, and to justify the question of this article even more, I admit that it would be easy to find city dwellers who live more ecologically than me, if I consider only my own actions separately from the community. I neither raise my own vegetables nor abstain from drinking coffee, which requires huge quantities of water in order to grow. I sometimes drive, and I recently, once again, ordered a new computer hard drive. The solar panels that provide me with electricity and hot water were

built by other members of the ecovillage. And, above all, I don't live in a well-insulated eco-house. At the same time, in cities you find neighborhood initiatives that create carless zones, housing communities that renovate and improve the energy efficiency of their older buildings, and commuters who choose the train and bus.

However, I don't believe we fail as a model. Even though no Sieben Linden resident would suggest that everyone wanting to make a difference should move to an ecovillage, communal living and self-governing obviously make possible sustainable solutions that might not otherwise be feasible. In Sieben Linden we easily and with minimal administrative hassle share cars and lawnmowers, and we can finance and install shared solar panels, because we live close to one another and, therefore, can jointly use these devices. The division of labor possible in such a large group also allows for a good deal of providing for its own needs: there are people who like to plant vegetable gardens or who harvest firewood and plant new trees in the forests, while others pursue their professions as kindergarten teachers, accountants, or construction workers. This saves time and transport and caters to a feeling of responsibility that a more anonymous life lacks. I have met urban teenagers who sincerely believed that if they would stop littering, the street sweepers wouldn't have any work—hence, littering is ok. In an ecovillage, you know very well for whom you are causing extra work when you don't care for the place and the things.

As a matter of fact, I can hardly imagine Sieben Linden would achieve such a high score on sustainability without the underlying communal attitude of the project. But the obvious that I just described isn't the whole story, and I tend to believe that there is something to consider about our place even for people who have not yet given much thought to "community" before.

I would take into account that our ecovillage is an object of fascination, and not just for people who have already decided to live in the community. Many of the thousands of visitors per year, many of whom come only for a seminar or workshop, find themselves enchanted by it. When they get on the train to return home, they find the "outside world" suddenly seems quite strange: the people are so odd, so withdrawn, they don't express any feelings; and the towns they return to seem to be designed primarily for advertising and shopping "opportunities." In Sieben Linden, they recall, there was quiet; there were people running around barefoot with open faces.

Those who become better acquainted with the ecovillage often say that in Sieben Linden they rediscovered a connection to their place in the world, that they felt acknowledged and valued as a human being again.

From such statements one might conclude that communal living, with its holistic approach, is itself a stepping stone on the path to sustainability. Perhaps the most obvious examples of ecological living in an ecovillage, such as those described above, are only the tip of the community living iceberg. Thus, Sieben Linden is once again an interesting example, and not for saving energy or water, but of society and culture. The idea below the iceberg's tip is that, as long as we live increasingly individualistic lives and increasingly independent of our fellow human beings, we will never manage a really sustainable lifestyle. Humans of the future must be able to get along with each other—only then will the "heart energy" flow so that they can mutually support one another in the transformation of their lives and in the realization of ecological ideas. Mainstream culture is a culture of individualism, and it glorifies a division of society into many small pieces, each with their own giant ego. And as long as all you need to be super cool is a new smart phone, you aren't really going to worry about your ecological footprint.

When the old and the young, geniuses and simpletons, rich and poor no longer come together and speak with one another, they are mutually resentful of the rest of the world, rather than working together to improve it, or at least to treat it well. In this "ecovillage," on the other hand, I have discovered that I come into contact with many more types of people than I did during my life in the city. Sieben Linden is large enough to permit diversity—this is where the term "village" kicks in, meaning there are many more group members than just a few. I do suspect that, as a community, we seem to outsiders a group of very like-minded people. But in my pre-communal life, among three and a half million Berliners, I sought out as acquaintances only those few who were relatively similar to me. I noticed the wide variety of lifestyles and cultures around me existed, but that was all. I didn't stop to listen to what motivated my citymates, and I didn't have to make any joint decisions with them. In Sieben Linden I do both, and my understanding keeps growing.

Sieben Linden offers a chance to learn to be more aware and tolerant of others. Is this what makes the ecovillage exemplary? Is this what we can put on the scale upon which

our worth is weighed politically, socially, and culturally? Indeed, I believe it is. However, it will be much more difficult to present more concrete results here than when we talk about our solar panels or composting toilets. We can point to a few successes: we manage to make decisions without first repeating ourselves for days on end. We have grasped the fact that there's another element to communication besides the content—that is, the interpersonal relationship, which needs to be resolved just as much as conflicts of obvious, material nature. We have experienced how valuable shared silence is during assemblies and in meditation.

For those who live here, however, it is also clear what still needs to be improved, in spite of all our efforts: being able to value and respect others even when we would do something differently; being patient with people who still do not understand the obvious; putting our own interests and the belief that we "know how to do it better" aside in order to concentrate on common goals; and speaking out about what hinders us from contributing. Humility. Inhaling. Exhaling.

The sense of cooperation and togetherness—of which the whole world could use so much and that we in Sieben Linden are theoretically capable of making a reality—is still very much a work in progress, or so it seems to me. I don't think this is a bad thing; indeed, I would find it most uncomfortable to have to serve as the definite example of bettering humankind. And such a work in progress is fascinating; I would rather talk about our problems than our successes, because I hope to see them solved. I don't think that we will manage this alone. Rather than declaring us a completed prototype or model, I wish the world were interested in the laboratory that we are, in which much is brewing and bubbling; and I would rather have support in this research to find better ways of living together than to have to convince others that we know better how to do things right.

What might result from this could then, eventually, provide something that could more obviously qualify as an example for the world around our tiny village.

### *We Never Lock Our Doors*
*Ecovillage resident and author Diana Leafe Christian on life in an ecovillage*

*I live in a tiny house in a small community in the southern Appalachian Mountains of the United States. Here we have no televisions; no SUVs (and no garages); no air conditioners, toaster ovens, electric hair dryers, or furnaces; and no electricity from a local power company, piped-in city water, or connection to a municipal sewer system.*

*What we do have are well-insulated houses with passive solar heating and woodstoves as back-up—so we're warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Our houses are built with various natural building materials: clay, straw, adobe bricks, and earthen plaster. Our electricity comes from solar panels, our water from springs, wells, and rainwater catchment tanks. We use homemade composting toilets and graywater recycling systems. Three small, onsite organic farms sell us and our neighbors biodynamic vegetables, garlic, eggs, milk, butter, and lamb. An orchard and a trout pond also provide us with food.*

*Together we are creating a village of wonderful neighbors, who help each other all the time. We have our own self-governance system and conduct mediations, with friends as mediators, when there are conflicts. We have an active social life, with work parties, potluck dinners, game nights, movie nights, dances, and study groups on nonviolent communication. We even employ ourselves and our neighbors through onsite cottage industries, such as a fruit and berry nursery, two herbal businesses, two construction companies, a woodworking and excavation shop, a bookseller, a solar design/installation business, and onsite lodging for visitors. We hold intellectual examinations of leftist politics, the Occupy Movement, alien technologies, Spiral Dynamics, and Integral Theory. Conversations about insulation and thermal mass, biofuel and biochar, the best designs for a compost toilet, and whether someone can borrow your wheelbarrow, your power*

*tools, or your truck can be heard at any given time. We recycle everything. We never lock our doors. We live extremely simple lives. And, in terms of quality of life, we believe we're rich.*

*Our community, Earthaven, is an ecovillage.*

*An ecovillage combines ecological and, sometimes, spiritual values and practices. It promotes sharing land resources and other assets, as well as cooperative self-governance. Ecovillagers believe that if they can inspire and encourage enough people to also adopt this way of life, it can lead to a more ecological future for everyone.*

*I believe ecovillages are important because they offer another way to understand what we must do to transform our world into a saner, healthier, more humane and more livable place for humans and all the world's creatures. Traditionally, environmental activists have campaigned for legislative and lifestyle changes and protested against harmful laws and practices. Ecovillagers make the same point from another angle. They're essentially saying, "How we are living in our ecovillage is what the sustainable future on our planet could look like." They practice Buckminster Fuller's advice: "To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."*

*Yet ecovillages are not, and certainly don't claim to be, exemplary models of what they're attempting to learn and teach. They are essentially "works in progress," learning as they go, making mistakes, and correcting course accordingly. Ecovillagers are undertaking a profound quest: to show us what it might be like to leap from the dominant paradigm of materialism and environmental callousness to that imagined future paradigm in which people live simple, satisfying, cooperative lives in balance with the natural world, harming nothing and no one. It may seem naïve, even arrogant, and perhaps impossible. But it is what we ecovillagers hope to accomplish.*

Bill Metcalf

## Utopian Struggle: Preconceptions and Realities of Intentional Communities

I have been personally involved with and often living in intentional communities for 40 years, and I have been actively researching and writing about them for over 30 years. My interest started by looking at what worked, or didn't, within contemporary intentional communities. To that end, I have visited and conducted research in over one hundred intentional communities in Europe, North and South America, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand.

Over time, however, my research and writing has shifted to looking more at the history of these social experiments and the historical lessons to be learned from them. I have found that many people try to create or live within an intentional community but know nothing about the rich history of the movement. So they foolishly "reinvent the wheel." While this history has been reasonably well researched and written up in the United States and the United Kingdom, it has not, until recently, been so well researched in other parts of the world, including my own country, Australia—and that is now my mission.

---

**Intentional Communities Defined**

**Intentional community:** *Five or more people, drawn from more than one family or kinship group, who have voluntarily come together for the purpose of ameliorating perceived social problems and inadequacies. They seek to live beyond the bounds of mainstream society by adopting a consciously devised and usually well thought-out social and cultural alternative. In the pursuit of their goals, they share significant aspects of their lives together. Participants are characterized by a "we-consciousness," seeing themselves as a continuing group, separate from and in many ways better than the society from which they emerged.*

**Ecovillage:** *An intentional community where environmental sustainability is sought, along with social justice, equality, peace, and so forth.*

Definitions from Bill Metcalf, *The Findhorn Book of Community Living* (Findhorn: Findhorn Press, 2004), 9–10.

---

Throughout history, most political and religious leaders have opposed intentional communities, because they are seen, often correctly, to be a challenge to the status quo. At times, this opposition has led to their violent suppression. In other cases, governments have promoted intentional communities, such as in Australia in the 1890s, New Zealand in the 1970s, and Palestine/Israel for much of the past century. Many urban areas now promote "cohousing," a popular form of intentional community. Most intentional communities, however, exist partly inside and partly outside the dominant culture and offer little direct political threat. Members living more empowered, comfortable, equitable, secure, and interesting lives with smaller ecological footprints are the real cultural and, therefore, political threat.

**A Brief History**

Intentional communities can be found throughout most of recorded history. The earliest was probably Homakoeion, developed by Pythagoras in about 525 BCE in what is now southern Italy. Several hundred members, inspired by intellectual and mystical paths, became strict vegetarians, eschewed private property, lived and ate together, and sought to create an ideal society. We know little about their governance, shared visions, and ideals, other than the importance of numerology.

Scholars suggest the Essenes, which started in the second century BCE near the Dead Sea, were an intentional community—and they suggest Jesus spent time there. What is certain is that, after Jesus died, his followers adopted communal living as a way to survive oppression and promote Christianity. Christian monasteries developed in the fourth century CE and persist today as one of the most common forms of intentional community.

Numerous heretical communal groups developed, including the Cathars in eleventh-century and the Waldenses in twelfth-century France, the Brethren of the Free Spirits in thirteenth-century and Anabaptists in sixteenth-century central Europe, and the Diggers in seventeeth-century England. All were violently persecuted by religious and political powers. In spite of that, Anabaptist intentional communities thrive today in North and South America, Europe, Japan, and Australia as Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites, and Bruderhofs. The first intentional community in the United States was probably Swanendael, established in 1663 by Mennonites fleeing persecution in Europe. Since

then, five hundred other historical intentional communities in North America have been researched by scholars such as Yaacov Oved and Foster Stockwell. Laird Schaub, of the Fellowship for Intentional Community, estimates that over three thousand intentional communities thrive in North America today.[1]

During the nineteenth century, a flurry of people theorized and wrote about utopianism, imagining how to create intentional communities to solve a wide range of social, economic, and political problems resulting from rapid industrialization. Out of this intellectual foment, hundreds of intentional communities were formed across Europe, North and South America, Australia, and New Zealand. This international movement saw people moving between continents: New Australia members moved from Australia to Paraguay, Doukhobors moved from Russia to Canada, Moravians moved from Central Europe to England and the United States, and Kalevan Kansa moved from Finland to Australia.

In short, intentional communities have been recorded over two and a half millennia and are anything but a modern phenomenon.

**Preconceptions and Realities**

Most people know little about intentional communities, and what they think they know is often wrong. This could be because, while there have been many films and novels about intentional communities or ecovillages, most present grossly inaccurate pictures, which have no connection to the lifestyle or ideals of the majority of actual communities, either today or in the past.

As I write this in early 2012, two just-released popular movies portray intentional communities: *Wanderlust* shows a rural hippie commune obsessed with sex and banal clichés, while *Martha Marcy May Marlene* features a cult. There have been many other films showing versions of intentional communities, almost always inaccurately. A quick list that comes to mind includes *Black Bear Ranch, Bliss, Deckchair Danny, Easy Rider, Flashback, I Love You Alice B Toklas, Monkey Grip, Not Quite Paradise, Operation Grandma, Sweet Mud, Taking Woodstock, The Ballad of Jack and Rose, The Beach, Together,* and *Witness.* Only *Together,* set in a Swedish urban commune, bears any resemblance to reality.

1   Laird Schaub, "Good News in Hard Times," in *Communities Directory*, ed. L. Schaub (Rutledge, MO: Fellowship for Intentional Community, 2010), 11–13. And email communications.

Numerous novels have also featured intentional communities, generally inaccurately. Some that come to mind are *After the Party, Child of the Wind, Curtain Creek Farm, Drop City, Ecotopia, Elsewhere, Free Amazons of Darkover, In Watermelon Sugar, Island, Names for Nothingness, Passing Remarks, Ripe Tomatoes, Spirit Wrestlers, The Bell, The Dispossessed, The Fifth Sacred Thing, The Hippie Trip, Walden Two, Woman on the Edge of Time,* and *Young Hearts.* One could read all these novels but still have no accurate image of what real intentional communities are like.

I have often been interviewed about intentional communities, and I have faced weird questions based on bizarre preconceptions. Here, I will attempt to dispel these.

*Preconception: Intentional community members are young.*
In the mid-1980s, my colleague Frank Vanclay (now at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands) and I undertook a census of intentional community members in Australia. We found that the average age was late 30s and increasing by about half a year per year. We also found as many participants over 50 as under 30. Other research suggested this age profile applied worldwide in secular intentional communities. Of course, average age cannot increase forever, and we hypothesized that it would level off at about 55 years.

My recent, unpublished demographic research across several countries suggests that the ages of adults in intentional community range from early 20s to mid 90s. Mean ages vary from the low 30s to early 60s, depending on the group's longevity, with urban groups being younger than rural ones. The mean age in most long-lasting intentional communities is now either stable in the mid-50s or slowly decreasing. While this data is very rough and further research is needed, it confirms that the intentional community movement is for mature adults rather than young people.

*Preconception: These groups last only a short time with high membership turnover.*
I have observed that intentional communities follow a developmental pattern similar to that of small businesses: many more are imagined and planned than ever start. Of those that do start, about half collapse within two years, with perhaps half the remainder collapsing before the end of five years. Most small businesses and intentional communities that make it to five years prosper indefinitely. Just as some businesses become multi-national conglomerates, some intentional communities become large,

multi-million-dollar operations, such as Findhorn Foundation (UK), Damanhur (Italy), and Twin Oaks (United States).

Ben Zablocki found that "membership turnover is high, but not extraordinarily high, compared with that of other organizations. . . . Hospital nurses and factory workers both turnover a bit faster than commune members. University professors, civil servants, and prison warders, at the other extreme, turn over quite a bit more slowly."[2] In my research, I observe intentional communities becoming ever more stable with more permanent memberships.

*Preconception: Most are led by "gurus" who exploit members, and become cults.*
During 30 years of research I have only encountered a few gurus, and only two or three created what is commonly called a "cult." Many leaders are charismatic, but members rarely lose their critical faculties. In a few rare intentional communities, leaders exploit members, but this is probably less common as compared to in the general workplace.

Nevertheless, there have been so-called cult problems, including Jonestown in Guyana, where 918 members died in 1978; Branch Davidian Adventists in the United States, where 74 members died in 1993; Solar Temple in France, Switzerland, and Canada, where 74 people died between 1994 and 1997; and Heaven's Gate in the United States, where 39 members died in 1997. Most of these deaths resulted from the direct or indirect actions of their charismatic, perhaps messianic, leaders.[3]

In any case, *cult* is a pejorative term with little basis in sociological reality, perhaps saying more about the describer than that described.

*Preconception: Members engage in "free love."*
In *The Findhorn Book of Community Living*, I wrote, "People who approach an intentional community with voyeuristic hopes are generally disappointed."[4] While there used to be considerable sexual experimentation within intentional communities, this is now rare. Even in a well-known intentional community said to practice "free love," most members are in long-term relationships, albeit often with several people. Intentional

2   Ben Zablocki, *Alienation and Charisma* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 155.
3   John Hall, *Apocalypse Observed* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
4   Bill Metcalf, *The Findhorn Book of Community Living* (Findhorn: Findhorn Press, 2004), 100.

communities may challenge social norms but, with some exceptions, are remarkably conventional in sexual matters and sometimes more moralistic than the wider society.

Rape and child abuse occasionally occur in intentional communities, but far less often than in the wider community. Often, if other members within an intentional community observe such behavior, they stop it. A rare exception is in communities where a charismatic leader has people so under her or his control that exploitation is tolerated and becomes the norm. Such activities can even be portrayed as part of God's plan or some such thing. While rare, when such cases come to the media's attention, all intentional communities are tarred with the same brush.

*Preconception: Members are impoverished, living on lentils and brown rice; or they live rich lives, exploiting others.*
The average income within intentional communities is almost always lower than that received by similar people in the wider society. Some intentional community members do live in poverty, but this is rare and often associated with factors such as mental health.

Also, some intentional community members receive welfare, to which they are legally entitled regardless of where and how they live. My research showed that the percentage of intentional community members on welfare is slightly higher than in the general population, but this is because people trying to live on a limited pension find that it goes much further within an intentional community. On a limited pension, one can enjoy a better lifestyle within an intentional community than would have been possible elsewhere, because sharing resources usually lowers living costs.

Moreover, while members generally consume less than those within the host society, they do not experience this as poverty. In fact, research, such as by Michael Corr and Dan MacLeod, shows that while people living in intentional communities have less disposable income, their access to and ability to enjoy material things is higher than in the general population.[5] For example, an intentional community of 20 people might have five televisions. So, while each person "owns" only one quarter (five-twentieths) of a television, each has a choice of five TVs to watch.

---

5    Michael Corr and Dan MacLeod, "Getting it Together," *Environment* 14, no. 9 (1972): 2–10.

"Voluntary simplicity" is often a motivator for joining an intentional community, and members report richer and better lives even though (or perhaps because of) their reduced consumption and ecological footprints. Recent research by Graham Meltzer also found this to apply to cohousing groups, a particularly popular urban form of intentional community.[6]

**Why Do Intentional Communities Succeed or Fail?**

The majority of intentional communities, like the majority of other social organizations, do not last very long. When people invest so much time, passion, energy, and resources into a social experiment, why do they fail? And why do other intentional communities thrive for a very long time? Of course, we must also ask whether a group has "failed" just because it shut down.

The longest lasting intentional community in the world is Sabbathday Lake, a Shaker community established in New York State (USA) in 1783. Bon Homme, a Hutterite colony in South Dakota (USA), is 138 years old, while the oldest Kibbutz, Degania in Israel, is 102 years old. Besides these exceptionally long-lived intentional communities, many others are into their second or third generation. Scotland's Findhorn Foundation celebrates its 50th birthday this year; Twin Oaks, in the United States, is 45; and several Australian intentional communities, such as Dharmananda and Moora Moora, are now celebrating 40th birthdays. So why do some persist and prosper?

In my earlier research (*From Utopian Dreaming and Shared Visions, Shared Lives*), I identified that the key factor was not that members agreed on everything, avoided conflict, or even liked each other, but that they shared a common vision. Intentional communities, like any other social form, experience conflict. There are two ways for an intentional community to successfully resolve conflict. A few have a strong, charismatic, often theocratic leader, who resolves matters on behalf of the group. Far more often, however, members will work through a form of consensus to come up with a solution that might not please everyone but with which everyone can live. In some places, such as at Findhorn Foundation, meditating members visualize the outcome; at ZEGG in Germany, members employ a method they call Forum; members in other

---

6   Graham Meltzer, *Sustainable Community: Learning from the Cohousing Model* (Victoria: Trafford, 2005).

intentional communities simply let an issue sit for a time, with people discussing and thinking about it, before reaching consensus.

Consensus does not mean that each member has a right of veto (although they do), but that everyone shares the vision and is committed to reaching the optimum decision for the group, rather than just for themselves. This process works remarkably well in most communities.

**Conclusion**

Several thousand intentional communities thrive around the globe, and the number is rapidly increasing. While some have a religious ethos, the vast majority are secular. A strong environmental ethic is held by most members of most intentional communities, and that is why some are called ecovillages. Intentional community members are demographically similar to people living conventional lifestyles, but they consume less energy and resources, and appear to be happier with their lifestyle. Members also experience similar problems faced by other people, but often are able to reach better solutions because of shared visions and strong communal bonds. Intentional communities are not "utopias," but they are on a utopian quest in trying to achieve if not a perfect society, then at least a much better, more sustainable world in which to live.

We should offer support and wish them well.

**Bibliography**

Corr, Michael and Dan MacLeod. "Getting it Together." *Environment* 14, no. 9 (1972): 2–10.

Hall, John. *Apocalypse Observed.* New York: Routledge, 2000.

Meltzer, Graham. *Sustainable Community: Learning from the Cohousing Model.* Victoria: Trafford, 2005.

Metcalf, Bill. *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality: Cooperative Lifestyles in Australia.* Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1995.

———. *Shared Visions, Shared Lives: Communal Living Around the Globe.* Forres, UK: Findhorn Press, 1996.

———. *The Findhorn Book of Community Living.* Findhorn: Findhorn Press, 2004.

Metcalf, Bill, and Frank Vanclay. *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyles in Australia.* Brisbane: Institute of Applied Environmental Research, Griffith University, 1987.

Oved, Yaacov. *Two Hundred Years of American Communes.* Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988.

Schaub, Laird. "Good News in Hard Times." In *Communities Directory,* edited by L. Schaub, 11–13. Rutledge, MO: Fellowship for Intentional Community, 2010.

Stockwell, Foster. *Encyclopedia of American Communes* 1663–1963. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1998.

Zablocki, Ben. *Alienation and Charisma.* New York: Free Press, 1980.

Louise Meijering

## Ideals and Practices of European Ecovillages

In the context of the current global economic crisis, it seems that people are increasingly looking for more sustainable ways of living.[1] Ecovillages provide people with a way to pursue a more sustainable lifestyle. In this paper, I aim to introduce the sustainability ideals and practices of ecovillages.[2] I begin with an introduction to intentional communities in Europe in general, and ecovillages more specifically. Then, I introduce three ecovillages in more detail, and discuss the sustainability ideals and practices that these communities have adopted. I end the paper with a brief discussion in which I place the findings of my research in a broader perspective.

### Intentional Communities in Europe

When I started my PhD research in 2002, an overview of intentional communities in Europe did not exist. Therefore, in 2003, I created a database of 473 intentional communities located in Europe at the time.[3] Although I attempted to locate as many intentional communities as possible, it is likely that the most secluded communities have not been included in the database, as they would prefer to remain unknown to outsiders. The spatial distribution of the European communities in the database is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Distribution of intentional communities in Europe.

---

1   R. Jackson, "Economics in an Ecovillage Future" (keynote, 3rd International Ecovillage Conference, Tokyo, 2009).
2   This paper is based on Chapters 2 and 5 of my PhD thesis, which are called "Data and Methods" and "Ecological and Communal Groups: Organic Examples," respectively. Parts of the paper have been taken verbatim from these chapters. See L. Meijering, "Making a Place of Their Own: Rural Intentional Communities in Northwest Europe." (PhD diss., Royal Dutch Geographical Society/University of Groningen, 2006).
3   For a more detailed account of how I collected the data, see my PhD thesis (footnote 2) and Meijering et al, "Intentional Communities in Rural Spaces," *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 98, no. 1 (2007): 42–52.

When comparing the distribution of communities within Europe, it is striking that the communities are highly concentrated in the Northwest. Relatively few communities—in both number and proportion with the regional population—were found in southern and, especially, eastern Europe (see Table 1). It is possible that I overlooked communities in the South and the East, which could have been related to factors such as a linguistic barrier (I do not speak or read eastern European languages). However, it is also possible that there are only a few communities in these parts of Europe. This could be due to lower involvement in civic activity in general, as described by Lewicka.[4] Furthermore, in the former Eastern Bloc countries, the low incidence can be attributed to the legacy of the formerly prevalent communist/socialist political ideology, which did not allow intentional communities. As it takes time to develop an awareness of the possibility of creating intentional communities, this legacy may be an inhibiting factor. Because of the strong concentration of intentional communities in northwest Europe, I decided to focus on that area in the rest of my research.

*Table 1: Number of intentional communities per region in Europe.[5]*

|  | Population *(in millions)* | Number of intentional communities | Intentional communities per million |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Europe*** | **729.90** | **473** | **0.648** |
| Northwest | 275.07 | 395 | 1.436 |
| East | 304.30 | 14 | 0.046 |
| South | 150.53 | 64 | 0.425 |

**\* The three regions consist of the following countries:**
  • Northwest: Austria, Belgium, Channel Islands, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom;
  • East: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine;
  • South: Albania, Andorra, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Macedonia, Malta, Montenegro, Portugal, San Marino, Serbia, Slovenia, and Spain.

4   M. Lewicka, "Ways to Make People Active: The Role of Place Attachment, Cultural Capital, and Neighborhood Ties," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 25 (2005): 381–95.
5   Source: Population Reference Bureau, *2005 World Population Data Sheet*, 2005.

When analyzing the data I had gathered on intentional communities, I identified "eco-logical communities"[6] as a distinct type.[7] Ecovillages largely define themselves in terms of environmental ideals, such as sustainable lifestyles, and are predominantly located in remote areas. They often remain involved in the wider society by organizing courses for interested outsiders, for example on organic farming, or through participating in the efforts of environmental organizations, such as Friends of the Earth.

**Three Examples: Toustrup Mark, Chickenshack, and Tweed Valley**

In this paper, I discuss three examples of rural ecovillages: Toustrup Mark on Jutland in Denmark, the Chickenshack Housing Cooperative near Tywyn in Wales, and Tweed Valley Ecovillage, a project in the Scottish Border region that has not yet secured land.



**Figure 2:**
View of
Toustrup Mark's
kindergarten.

Toustrup Mark was founded in 1971 as a rural hippie commune. Originally, its main aims were to live and work together, to share resources and be self-sufficient, and to be involved in politics, the environmental movement, and cultural activities, such as

---

6   These communities should not be confused with the ecological communities as studied in ecology. In the rest of the paper, I will use the term ecovillages to avoid confusion.
7   See also Meijering et al., "Intentional Communities in Rural Spaces," 42–52.

concerts. Over time, however, these ideals diminished. The houses continue to be commonly owned, however. Furthermore, communal dinners are organized on weekdays, for which every member has to cook or do the dishes once a week. In the preparation of the meals, they use predominantly organic ingredients. Currently, the community is an attractive place for young families who want to raise their children in a protected, rural environment (see fig. 2). At the time of the fieldwork, in October 2005, the community had 80 adult members, most of who were aged between 30 and 65 years.



**Figure 3:**
Chickenshack's
main building.

Chickenshack was established in 1995 and is located in a remote area in North Wales. At the time of my research, in August 2005, the community had six adult members. The community is a housing cooperative, which functions as a company with several shareholders. An important goal is to provide affordable housing through the cooperative structure (fig. 3). In addition, the members want to live in harmony with nature and to exert as little damage on the environment as possible, goals they pursue through efforts such as organic gardening and the use of solar panels. The community wants to develop into a model for eco-friendly building and living and to run a visitor center that will enable visitors to see how a truly sustainable lifestyle can be pursued in practice (see below).

The ideas of Chickenshack resemble those of Tweed Valley Eco-Village, the initiative for which arose in 1996. A core group of around eight people tried to buy land to build an ecovillage near Innerleithen in the Scottish Border region. Their intention was to create a community with a low environmental impact through building their own low-cost houses, sharing vehicles, and generating energy on-site. Ideally, the community would become a prototype of a sustainable housing project, with an information center for visitors. However, at the time of writing (October 2012), I could not find proof

that Tweed Valley has been realized, so it seems the efforts to build the community have either not yet been successful or been abandoned.

*Ecovillage Ideals*
The sharing of values around environmental sustainability maintains the commitment of these ecovillages' members to their communities. The values are translated into practice through, for instance, generating and using energy from renewable sources, self-sufficiency in nutrition, organic agriculture, organic gardening, and permaculture.[8]

Besides environmental sustainability, ecovillages typically also attempt to practice communal sustainability, which can be phrased as living together in harmony. One respondent from Tweed Valley described this as follows:

> To be able to grow with other families. Besides the frustrations, it will mostly provide security, a sense of belonging, and a feeling that you're cared about, and [that you care about] other people. Distancing oneself from the meaningless, Western, capitalist way of life through creating a home with a sense of place and belonging. (Tweed Valley, female member, 40s)

Similarly, Van Schyndel Kasper has argued for the inclusion of the element of community into the definition of a sustainable lifestyle in ecovillages.[9] She goes even further by suggesting that a community ethic is a necessary characteristic of not only ecovillages, but also of a sustainable society.

Early members of Toustrup Mark felt connected to the broader hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which was politically committed to pacifism and equality between poor and rich. Chickenshack and Tweed Valley also underline this last point through their goal of providing affordable housing for everyone. The most characteristic aspect of the ideologies of ecovillages is that they are often not restricted to only political, environmental, or communal ideals, but rather embrace a combination of all three.

8   A term that contracts the words "permanent" and "agriculture" and can be defined as "the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems, which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way." See B. Mollison, *Permaculture: A Designer's Manual* (Tyalgum: Tagari, 1988), ix.
9   D. Van Schyndel Kasper, "Redefining Community in the Ecovillage," *Human Ecology Review* 15, no. 1 (2008): 12–24.

The ideals of sustainability identified above largely resonate with those described by Kirby.[10] He used a case study of an ecovillage to construct five dimensions of "a life lived according to the principles of sustainability": (1) a connection with the natural world, (2) with community, and (3) with the cultivated land; (4) intergenerational sustainability; and (5) a sense of personal integration.

*Sustainability Ideals in a Changing Society*
Ecovillages are strongly committed to contributing to "a better world" and are active in creating lifestyles that present alternatives to mainstream society. The interest in such alternatives has increased as the values of ecovillages have become more accepted and appreciated in mainstream society. According to Ray and Anderson,[11] a large group of people identify with formerly countercultural values and practices, such as authenticity, activism, (global) ecology, women's rights, and self-actualization.[12] Such societal changes have contributed to a convergence of lifestyles of ecovillagers and society, as colleagues and I have argued elsewhere.[13]

These communities also make efforts to communicate their ideals to the outside world. For example, at the time of the field research, Chickenshack's members had quite ambitious plans with respect to functioning as a model for "green living." They intended to organize permaculture courses, trainings in personal development, outdoor pursuits, outdoor weekends for disabled children, and a demonstration of the use of hemp as an environmentally friendly insulation material. In the following quote, one Chickenshack member described how they intended to be an example for society:

> Best-case scenario: we get our act together, and we develop this café, [build it in a green way,] and the garden, and the field into something that is really a great demonstration. Customers would come and stay here, and pay for some teaching. . . . It means that this place would become, over the years, a perfect example of the greenest way of living in sort of . . . mainstream culture. (Chickenshack, male member, 40s)

10  See A. Kirby, "Redefining Social and Environmental Relations at the Ecovillage at Ithaca: A Case Study," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2003): 331.
11  P. H. Ray and S. R. Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000).
12  Self-actualization here refers to the personal drive to reach one's full potential, which is also often associated with the highest level of psychological development in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs.
13  See also L. Meijering et al., "Constructing Ruralities: The Case of the Hobbitstee," *Journal of Rural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2007): 357–66.

The other community members mentioned similar ambitions. With their attempts to create intellectually independent and alternative spaces, ecovillages can be seen as part of social movements.[14]

Besides a more tolerant, diverse society that is open to ecological ideas, the communities have also become more accepted as a result of a certain degree of conformity to more mainstream ideals by the community members. The main process of adaptation that was recognized by community members was that of individualization:

> Especially in the [70s and] 80s, people had much more in common. We were closer to each other. Now it's sort of [similar to the broader] society. . . . I think it's because we work more. . . . At that time, we still had the big kindergarten, there were more people working there and [also on the buildings], so [people did] more together at this place. [They] had more energy for doing crazy things: big parties and stuff, you know. [N]owadays people use most of their energy for their own things: work, family, whatever. . . . You can see the same preferences in society. People are getting more and more individualistic. (Toustrup Mark, male member, 50s)

As this quote illustrates, gradually, the communities conformed to the capitalist, materialist values they had originally rejected.

**Practicing Sustainability**

The underlying ideological foundations of ecovillages are relatively stable and unchanging, but how they are practiced varies over time and between groups. A characteristic of all three communities is that no individual plot of land is privately owned, although the members have private apartments or houses. As a member of another community (not discussed in this paper) put it:

---

14  P. Chatterton, "Making Autonomous Geographies: Argentina's Popular Uprising and the 'Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados' (Unemployed Workers Movement)," *Geoforum* 36, no. 5 (2005): 545–561; D. Pepper, "Utopianism and Environmentalism," *Environmental Politics* 14, no. 1 (2005): 3–22; R. Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia: Establishing Intentional Communities as a New Social Movement* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1997).

> The joint ownership of the soil should be unifying, ... everybody should contribute
> to [the community's] continuity. (Eden, female member, 40s)[15]

The statement might easily apply to the ecovillages under discussion, as well. In the
three communities, there is also some sort of common built space. In Toustrup Mark,
the common building is centrally located and easily accessible from most apartments.
It functions as the main meeting place for the community, such as for the daily com-
munity dinners, kindergarten, and workshops. In Chickenshack, the common house
consists of a kitchen and two sitting rooms. While it is typically an informal meeting
place, official meetings are also held, albeit irregularly, there. The outdoor spaces are
common land in Chickenshack; whereas in Toustrup, over time, individual families
have begun to claim their own private gardens behind their houses—although the
land is still collectively owned, it is privately used. One member thought that the apart-
ments might also be privatized:

> I think the next big discussion will be about privatizing the apartments. [Now,]
> we use a lot of energy discussing things like, why don't you paint your windows?
> Why can't I get a new washing machine? We could stop that discussion [through
> making] it your own, and instead use our energy for doing up the common places.
> In that way, I think it's a good idea. (Toustrup Mark, male member, 30s)

Ecovillages tend to practice their ideals in their everyday lives, which creates a sense of
togetherness between the members. Examples of practices are work days, in which
the community works together on a project, and various social activities, such as com-
munal dinners, parties, meditation, music, sports, theater, and gardening. Gardening
is an important step towards becoming self-sufficient and independent from the formal
economy.[16] Ecovillages strive to become "organic places," where "organic" refers both
to a commitment to protect the environment, as already described, and to transform
the communities into self-contained places where all aspects of life can take place.
The ecovillagers in this study search for possibilities to combine working and living
in the community, in order to increase the functioning of their ecovillages as small,

---

15  This quote is from a member of Eden, a different community that I also studied for my PhD research.
Although I do not focus on Eden in this paper, the quote is another good illustration of what is going on in
the three communities in this paper.
16  C. Ergas, "A Model of Sustainable Living: Collective Identity in an Urban Ecovillage," *Organization &
Environment* 23, no. 1 (2010): 32–54.

independent societies. According to the respondents, this should result in a stronger sense of commitment to the place.

## Ecovillages as Role Models

The ecovillages discussed in this paper focus on sustaining the environment through living simple, community-oriented lives in rural surroundings. They aim for ecological sustainability through such practices as generating solar energy, raising animals, and growing their own food. Besides ecological sustainability, the communities also strive for communal sustainability, which refers to sharing one's life with other people and practicing a common ideology together. Within the communities, open discussions about their uniting ideologies were not shunned. However, some basic values, such as the common ownership of land, were never discussed because they formed the fundaments of the communities. While maintaining such basic ideals, the ways and extent to which these were practiced were flexible and subject to change, often influenced by trends in mainstream society. For instance, all communities were confronted with increasing individualization. Communal activities, such as parties and work days, became less important over time and were replaced with activities for individual families. Such developments were not always approved, but were perceived as inevitable and a sign of practical flexibility.

My PhD research was embedded in debates on ruralism and, therefore, I focused on ecovillages in rural areas in this paper. However, many ecovillages are located in urban settings as well. Perhaps the most well-known example of a European urban ecovillage, at least when considering its original ideals, is the "free state" of Christiania in Copenhagen.[17] Similar to their rural counterparts, its members wanted to create an alternative to consumer society and be self-sufficient.

Ecovillages are guided by the desire to contribute to a "better world" by functioning as examples for mainstream society. They are involved in society through the organization of courses, such as vegetarian cooking or organic gardening. Ecovillages have increasingly become part of mainstream society, because countercultural values—such as

17  H. Donkers and S. van Poppel, "Christiania 2.0: Deense vrijplaats maakt doorstart," *Geografie* 21, no. 2 (2012): 6–10.

protecting the environment, authenticity, communal living, and personal growth—have become more accepted in the mainstream.[18] Members of ecovillages want to exemplify how to live sustainably and can be seen as "eco-role models."[19] Thus, it seems that eco-villages have the potential to contribute to a society that is more sustainable.

## Bibliography

Chatterton, P. "Making Autonomous Geographies: Argentina's Popular Uprising and the 'Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados' (Unemployed Workers Movement)." *Geoforum* 36, no. 5 (2005): 545–61.

Donkers, H., and S. van Poppel. "Christiania 2.0: Deense vrijplaats maakt doorstart [Christiania 2.0. Danish Freestate Starts Continues]." *Geografie* 21, no. 2 (2012): 6–10.

Ergas, C. "A Model of Sustainable Living: Collective Identity in an Urban Ecovillage." *Organization & Environment* 23, no. 1 (2010): 32–54.

Jackson, R. "Economics in an Ecovillage Future." Keynote speech at the 3rd International Ecovillage Conference, Tokyo, 2009.

Kirby, A. "Redefining Social and Environmental Relations at the Ecovillage at Ithaca: A Case Study." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2003): 323–32.

Lewicka, M. "Ways to Make People Active: The Role of Place Attachment, Cultural Capital, and Neighborhood Ties." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 25 (2005): 381–95.

Meijering, L. "Making a Place of Their Own: Rural Intentional Communities in Northwest Europe." PhD diss., Royal Dutch Geographical Society/University of Groningen, 2006. Netherlands Geographical Studies (NGS): 349.

Meijering, L., P. P. P. Huigen, and B. van Hoven. "Intentional Communities in Rural Spaces." *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 98, no. 1 (2007): 42–52.

Meijering, L., B. van Hoven, and P. P. P. Huigen. "Constructing Ruralities: The Case of the Hobbitstee." *Journal of Rural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2007): 357–66.

18  P. H. Ray and S. R. Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People are Changing the World.* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000).
19  See C. Ergas, "A Model of Sustainable Living," 50.

Mollison, B. *Permaculture: A Designer's Manual.* Tyalgum: Tagari, 1988.

Pepper, D. "Utopianism and Environmentalism." *Environmental Politics* 14, no. 1 (2005): 3–22.

Population Reference Bureau. *2005 World Population Data Sheet.*

Ray, P. and S.R. Anderson. *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World.* New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000.

Schehr, R. *Dynamic Utopia: Establishing Intentional Communities as a New Social Movement.* Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1997.

Van Schyndel Kasper, D. "Redefining Community in the Ecovillage." *Human Ecology Review* 15, no. 1 (2008): 12–24.

**Toward the Future**

Mara-Daria Cojocaru

## Realizing Utopia? Reconstructing Its Normal Potential

> *Hope without a utopian dimension is liable to be too unambitious for our own good.[1]*

Invoking the concept of utopia today requires taking into account a whole series of difficulties. One is subject to exhaustive battles on the matter of definitions, for, as Richard Saage observes,[2] there is no consensus in the academic literature about the meaning of the term. Because of its arbitrary usage and association in everyday speech with unworldliness both in thought and action, particularly with regards to the organization of human society, the term also easily arouses suspicions of political and intellectual irresponsibility. If one is prepared to take on this challenge and, rather than becoming bogged down with defending one's position on the discursive front line, instead focuses on recognizing the utopian potential as something that can be *expressed*—that is, *realized*—most impressively in the lived practice of human beings, one is confronted with the challenge of implementing "the utopian project" to its fullest extent, at least theoretically. What this means, in which philosophical and political tradition the corresponding sketches of a better society are to be understood, and to what degree utopia asks to be implemented in reality, will be outlined in the following essay.

## A Necessarily Brief Digression on the History of the Term

It would not necessarily be doing the utopian project a favor to refer to the origins of the name in a text referred to by its author as "a truly golden little book, equally beneficial and entertaining, about the best kind of a republic and the new island Utopia,"[3] and, above all, to place too much emphasis on the scholarly wordplay that calls it a *non-existent* place

1    Malcolm Schofield, *Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 200.
2    "Whoever discusses political utopias today needs to know that there is no consensus regarding what this concept means." Richard Saage, "Wie zukunftsfähig ist der klassische Utopiebegriff?" in *Utopisches Denken im historischen Prozess: Materialien zur Utopieforschung,* ed. Richard Saage (Berlin: Lit, 2006), 79.
3    This is one possible translation of the full Latin title, *De Optimo Reipublicae Statu deque nova insula Utopia Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus,* of the work which is best known as *Utopia,* first published in 1516 in Leuven by Thomas More.

(ou-topia). For in order to make the concept of utopia productive as a normative interpretation of human life and its future—that is, to use the utopian method to consider how we should live—it makes sense to assume that what is meant in utopias more generally speaking is obviously the *good* place (eu-topia).[4] Less obvious, however, is the question of what role the minutely detailed descriptions of a humanly possible way of life often found in such utopian sketches might play—whether they are actual plans for action, or whether they serve primarily to illustrate criticism of current circumstances, regardless of their inherent desirability and philosophical import.

Detailed utopian outlines for alternative ways of life are problematic insofar as they must always be seen in the context of the tradition of philosophical reflection about human ways of existing, a tradition within which Thomas More situates himself: namely, the dialectical observation of the possibilities and limits of a society, which is permeated with the attempt to realize the virtues of an essentially rational human nature. This form of philosophical reflection usually gains momentum during periods seen as urgently in need of criticism. It is possible to equate the beginning of this normative reflection upon human existence with the beginning of political philosophy per se and mark its starting place with Plato's *Republic*. This modification of our understanding of the term's history is not meant to throw the intellectual ball back onto the field on which philosophers have been competing for the most successful footnote for centuries; rather, we hope to avoid a discussion of a philosophically unprofitable political novel (namely, More's *Utopia*), which, in the end, is mainly interesting for the history of ideas. By doing so, we also hope to make clear that the full scope of the utopian project is expressed in precisely this philosophical attempt to combine ethics and politics with epistemology and metaphysics into an individually and politically relevant conception of "the good life," a term explained later. It is precisely because the utopian project, as a contribution to the societal process of self-definition, cannot be adequately reduced to the utopian tradition as a literary genre that some of the aspects of a philological analysis will be omitted. In addition, the details of specific alternative ways of life will not be considered. Rather, we will try to map the philosophical and normative dimensions of the utopian project to embed humankind into nature as a whole.

---

4  More's famous wordplay works by exploiting the homophonic character of the Greek prefixes *eu*, meaning "good," and *ou*, meaning "not"; "topia" is derived from the Greek *topos*, meaning "place." Hence, [/ ju·to·piə/] can be interpreted as either the "good place," or "no place"—i.e., nowhere and, thus implying the inexistence (and impossibility) of said best republic.

**Reconstructing the Normative Potential of Utopia**

The utopian project, Ionel Cioarâ suggests, continues to be important today: "Announcing the imminence of an ideal world and the appearance of the plenary man, utopia throws into discussion the ontological status of the human way of existing, raising questions related to human destiny and human condition, questions always sent by philosophy on an intellectual debate-ground, so that we can be sure that it is not dead yet."[5] If it is true that utopia is not dead, one must ask where precisely efforts to realize it are most alive. Is it in the alternative communities of people seeking alternative lives? Is it in the dreams of each and every person before they succumb to the normalcy of everyday life? Is it in the bold visions of scientists and politicians, or is it in the realm of some socially and culturally grown set of wishes, desires, and ideals of how to live? Here, it shall be argued that the utopian project is manifested in its most essential form wherever people are more or less systematically pursuing the question of human existence in such a way that it points to the possibilities of humans reaching their full potential in a world that is ideally arranged, rather than negating these possibilities on the basis of supposedly "realist" insights into human nature as crooked and wicked. On the contrary, *perfection* and *harmony* are normatively derived from the human self-understanding as a being endowed with the faculty of reason. Here is not the place (nor is it actually necessary for our purpose) to define what counts as reasonable and/or rational; suffice it to say that any utopia will ideally include its own conception of reason that is basic to its anthropological and philosophical findings. It goes without saying that, based on this assumption, the location of a utopian project is at the same time always a place where philosophical clarification should occur. Even so, at present, the required quasi-utopian efforts are lacking within mainstream philosophy, and so is the integration of those disciplines that would be able to evaluate individual aspects of the practical implementation of alternative, utopian approaches to life.

In spite of the present disenchantment with utopia, "utopian" should for the time being be understood as simply endorsing the goal of extensively improving the individual ethically in accordance with his or her both recognizable and malleable *human nature* and the pursuit of *political ideals,* such as freedom, justice, and the absence of social conflict. At the same time, said improvement or perfection should be accomplished

5    Ionel Cioarâ, "The Critique of Utopian Reason: An Abstract," *Annales Philosophici* 1 (2010): 10.

within, rather than outside of, one human society or another; it is thus an inherent characteristic of utopian thinking that reflection upon fundamental political questions leads the theorist to conceive social and cultural requirements and institutions, both material and immaterial, which are thought to be conducive to the normative ideal that is being pursued politically.[6] Insofar as utopias reflect upon the entirety of human practices—everything from questions of nutrition, education, and leisure activities to work, politics, and worldview—and insofar as the ethical dimension is inextricably intertwined with the political, utopias belong more to the ancient or premodern tradition of political philosophy than to the modern. Utopian projects refer to an alliance between ethics and politics, which defines the question of the normativity of human existence in terms of the good or well-lived or correct life.[7] By this is meant a focus on living life consciously and giving meaning to life as a whole, both through participation in the affairs of society and through one's individual lifestyle—that is, identifying meaningful relations between, for example, the private and the public, the individual and society, and humans and nature. The assumption *that* we strive for the "good life" functions as a quasi-anthropological premise, which precedes and informs the theory.

The good life is thus considered in connection with the entire scope of human practices: family, education, work, social life, economy, culture. It is important to keep in mind that the goal of attaining happiness in life by exercising one's virtuous character is a goal that does not have a functional relationship with something else in the way that, for example, making money functions in relation to the intent of pursuing further goals in a market society. In the attempt to define the good life outside of such relations, psycho-

6   George Kateb, "Utopias and Utopianism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 7, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 213.

7   Central to such an idea is the concept of *eudaimonia*, which has achieved prominence in the history of philosophy in part because of the notorious difficulty of translating it. "Happiness" is inadequate to convey the meaning of this term, which contains the components *eu* (good, well) and *daimōn* (deity, divine or supernatural being, fate). Cf. the entry "Eudaimonia" in Christoph Horn and Christof Rapp, eds., *Wörterbuch der antiken Philosophie* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2002), 158. It is inadequate if it is not qualified as a substantial and ultimate end of human action and life as a whole, contrary to momentary feelings of satisfaction or the occurrence of luck, which is independent of an agent's actions. In order to capture the aim of eudaimonist ethical approaches today, it is commonly said that they focus on "the good life," which, again, is not referring to a comfortable, "happy-go-lucky" life or to a life of luxury. This presupposes that there is actually an answer to the question of what sort of life can be said to be a good or well-lived life and that we should organize the whole of our practices in such a way that they will lead us toward it. Of course, different eudaimonist ethics differ in their accounts of what the good life *actually* is. Nevertheless, utopia is eudaimonist in the sense that utopian projects, too, agree that the question of the good life for human beings should be examined, can be answered, and should have consequences for the way in which we organize life, individually and socially or, rather, politically. It is in this sense that I refer to "the good life" here, too.

logical—that is, character-related—goods and virtues become normatively relevant and significant. At the same time, it is not the purpose to allow the unqualified, subjective well-being to become the highest good. Typically such theories are concerned from an objectivist perspective with questions that are important for our life. For this reason, and because of their expansive nature in which ethical assumptions are part of a greater philosophical system, theories of the good life cannot be integrated without difficulty into, for example, liberal theory, which largely fails to explicitly consider problems of (private) questions of the good (life). Utopian projects, as they are understood for this discussion, are characterized politically by their attempt to bring the authorship of one's own life into a harmonious relationship with a collective identity. The question of who exerts more influence upon the other—the individual upon society or society upon the individual—may be answered differently, but in all cases utopias share the idea that the individual, as an active person, is connected to society holistically, and her task is to comprehend these connections and, thusly informed, to translate her actions into the practice of the good life. Normative concepts such as *virtue* and *responsibility* offer practical orientation here.

Utopias are further characterized by the *perception of a crisis*, from which an alternative system must arise. Famous examples are the crisis of the Greek city-state in the time of Plato, the crisis caused by the rise of the bourgeoisie in the time of More, and the crisis-filled period of industrial upheaval in the time of the early socialists.[8] One might mention further the crisis of optimism about modernization in the so-called postmodern period and the crisis of the environment and the nation-state today. The outline of a better society is thus a diagnosis that each of the respective contemporary practices are proceeding in a manner that is blatantly *false*; it is therefore to be assumed that the alternative is held to be *correct*, based on a series of assumptions that must be explained for each case. A sense of crisis or a widespread feeling of discontent with the social situation is, thus, a necessary precondition for utopian thought.[9] It defines its critical impulse, once again in respect to politics.

8   Cf. Burghart Schmidt, *Kritik der reinen Utopie: Eine sozialphilosophische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1998), 62.
9   Regarding a sense of crisis as "estrangement" cf. Lucy Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3, 9 and chapters 1 and 3.

Even though utopian criticism—which normally takes place externally[10]—unfolds and is executed by exploring human practices and nature as they seem to be given at a particular point in time, it is notable that it does not propose to change the situation in the same way changes affecting society as a whole are usually negotiated, namely politically. Eventually utopia, as a rule, dispenses with political and societal confrontations, since the declared goal is harmony—that is, the absence of precisely these threatening conflicts. Thus, utopian projects frequently fail to suggest any good political strategy for realizing a collective identity, even when they may seem to offer convincing alternatives with respect to one's private life. This type of anti-politics—which one may, with Saage, reduce to the formula "administrating instead of ruling"[11]—is presumably the primary reason why utopian thinking is often accused of having a tendency to develop totalitarian structures. However, this accusation is not necessarily justified. The utopian project does indeed occupy a special position insofar as it concentrates more on (re)constructing new modes of societal interaction than on investigating concrete ways of accomplishing its goals within the given political system; in so doing, it is necessary to leave room for new, yet-to-be-devised political orders. According to Burghart Schmidt, one could argue that a utopian sketch of a better society must differentiate itself fundamentally from the type of planning that instrumentally serves clearly defined goals that are proclaimed to be without alternative and often disguised as inherent necessities.[12] Utopias should thus be best understood as contributions, often creative, to the normative self-defining of a society; one must accept that in this process there is not a constant reflection upon the political middle.

The resulting open-endedness should not, however, lead to the assumption that the concrete, nameable normative intentions and goals of the agents involved are irrelevant. On

10  Criticism of a system can always take place either externally or internally. Internal criticism focuses on the contradictions or the double standards of societal practices, which, however, are felt to be basically correctable. External criticism, by contrast, compares the criticized practice with a radically different one. This radical change does not necessarily have to consist of presenting a way of life that is of a completely different nature. The comparison can, as for example in the *Theory of Justice* of the early John Rawls, be accomplished by simply using a completely different way of deriving the rules that determine the basic structure of the existing society. Alternatively, one may suggest realizing a not-yet-existing, but definite and extensive set of positive and negative freedoms, or returning society to a state of affairs from the past under the banner of conservatism. Utopias typically compare the society they criticize to something that has not yet ever been realized in reality; that is, they practice external criticism. Cf. Samuel Clark, *Living Without Domination* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 16. For the opinion that John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* can, in some ways, indeed be considered utopian, see Schofield, *Plato,* 203.
11  Richard Saage, *Politische Utopien der Neuzeit* (Bochum: Winkler, 2000), 263 and 275.
12  Cf. Schmidt, *Kritik der reinen Utopie,* 59. Regarding this distinction between plan and utopia, Schmidt argues further that plans can be equated to social engineering, whereas utopia serves the process of tentatively communicating goals and exploring possibilities of realizing them (65).

the contrary, as Lucy Sargisson points out, "Let us assume for a moment that it is possible to prove that a good society once existed without intent. . . . Such a place would not be a utopia. It would be a happy accident."[13] This note about the connection between *action* and *meaning* as intention in contrast to mere behavior is valuable for examining those elements of utopian thought that are rooted in philosophical or philosophically reconstructable conceptions of human self-understanding as agents. Sargisson concludes: "The challenge for utopian studies, then, is not to abandon intent but to explore, interrogate and better understand its limitations, implications and consequences."[14]

Utopian intent, however, will almost certainly run into limitations, insofar as the scope of social imagination is not endless. As a matter of fact, utopia must ultimately draw on shared knowledge: about human nature and the good life, about the expectations concerning the future and the ecological dependencies of humankind, and about the explication and practice of normative political principles. Shared knowledge is relevant to the plausibility of the reasons for action that follow from any utopian project. Epistemically speaking, the fact that utopian outlines draw on a store of pre-theoretical knowledge (both descriptive and normative in nature) is decisive. Insofar as they operate representatively in the mode of possible human experience, they are to be understood as fundamentally realistic (i.e., consonant with our everyday experiences). Insofar as they go beyond that into the realm of the scarcely possible, exaggeration makes up a constitutive component of every utopia, for by doing so, their emotional importance, among other things, may be conveyed. As George Kateb writes, "Almost all utopian works contain curiosities or excess, which may often be explained as compensatory responses to especially terrible features of the real world."[15] It is not characteristic of utopias, however, that they completely "withdraw themselves from the sphere of the prevailing societal norms and institutions" (contrary to Saage's suggestion).[16] *Rather, they use this as their starting point and attempt to overcome them creatively, as well as to expand the area of our normative knowledge by creating additional options for action.*

13  Lucy Sargisson, "Reflections: Can Utopianism Exist Without Intent?" *Journal for Cultural Research* 13 (2009): 94.
14  Ibid.
15  Kateb, "Utopias and Utopianism," 214.
16  Saage, "Wie zukunftsfähig ist der klassische Utopiebegriff?" 79.

Whether the narrative that underlies the utopian project is commensurate with the store of shared knowledge of a society is determined in part by the concept of knowledge it is based on and what pressure to act is to be generated by it. Utopian projects, as already mentioned, are always based on an understanding of reason, rationality, or planning that is appropriate from the perspective of the author. When the corresponding theoretical elaborations are lacking, one helpful clue as to the kind of concept of knowledge that is being used is how much importance is placed on intellectual reflection and understanding on behalf of the recipient and how much on shaping her environment. This decision is generally dependent on the conception of history used; this, in turn, is a determining factor as to whether one is dealing with a spatial or temporal utopia in any given case.

*Spatial utopias* are those that, although they anchor their normative plot of the good life to the world of lived experience by means of critique, do not precisely name the location and, in particular, the time of their realization. They draw their value through understanding themselves "as a detached reference, as an informing power, as rather more of an heuristic device than any form of directly applicable instrument."[17] *Temporal utopias*, by contrast, are to be understood as a connecting link between theory and praxis that consists of at least three components—social criticism, a plan for a better world, and a fixed, nameable anchoring in place and time—and as a reference to locations that merely do not yet exist. The contemplative spatial utopia was superseded by the activist temporal utopia as a normative paradigm in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century against the backdrop of the increased possibilities for action (due to technological innovation) and the likewise increased need to take action (due to the social upheaval). The latter—that is, the temporal utopia—draws its strength from the conditions of feasibility and a modern *idea of progress*.[18]

There are various theories concerning the origins of this concept, which differs from the mere awareness of progress[19] that might be seen to be present in antiquity in rudimentary form as a consciousness of human ability.[20] One can argue with Hans Blumenberg

---

17  Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984), 14.
18  Ibid., 14–17.
19  Evelyn Gröbl-Steinbach, *Fortschrittsidee und rationale Weltgestaltung: Die kulturellen Voraussetzungen des Politischen in der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1994), 273.

that the idea of progress arises from the recognition that we cannot expect to be provided with any divinely preordained fortunate course of events—even if the fact that concepts such as "hope of salvation, hope in the hereafter, transcendence, divine judgment, worldly abstinence and worldly corruption" are still comprehensible suggests that the process of secularization connected with this idea is not yet completed.[21] Accordingly, humans must plan and take responsibility for their future themselves. They manage this by means of "theoretical penetration and mastery of nature."[22] The function of this idea is particularly important, not least because the philosophy of history that is connected with it has become unfamiliar to us. The idea of progress, at any rate

> provides a narrative portrayal of the entire course of history, it tells how the human race worked its way up to the current state of civilization, based on the assumption that reason plays a fundamental role and that humans naturally possess this capacity, which allows them to control and change the world in the sense of an ever improving future. The idea of progress is a creation of the philosophy of history from the Enlightenment.[23]

With this idea of progress—one which has fundamentally shaped modernity and which at the same time represents a "constant self-justification of the present by means of the future which it turns into"[24]—an ethical design for the world is created through the

20  But: "No concept of progress evolved in the fifth century. Perceptions of improvement related to numerous advances that affected several areas of life. The improvements were either experienced directly or—in the case of primitive times—reconstructed on the basis of experience. We are dealing here with the progress of certain things in certain respects. . . . Only a few manifestations of ability went beyond what could be empirically observed. We are dealing essentially with an increase in technical ability, in the Greek sense of *techne*—the expert performance of tasks in such fields as art, craftsmanship, and shipbuilding, as well as in military, political, constitutional, and educational affairs. . . . And the consciousness of such improvements was concentrated in the 'technicians' (not in a bourgeois public). The repercussions were of course felt farther afield—in the widening scope for constitutional and legal improvement; in political planning, warfare, and shipping; and in the rapid growth of material resources. However, this did not lead anyone to suppose that some universal process of improvement, involving the whole of humanity, was in train. Above all, certain important areas were excluded. No improvement was expected, either in the present or in the future, in general morality, general knowledge, or social and economic conditions; if such a notion was entertained at all, it related to improvements in individual *poleis*, arising, perhaps, from good constitutional organization or legislation—in other words, from institutional expertise—or from war and conquest. These were thus for the most part precarious and reversible benefits, not the outcome of regular, objective tendencies." Christian Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, trans. David McLintock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 204–05.
21  Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 11.
22  Gröbl-Steinbach, *Fortschrittsidee und rationale Weltgestaltung*, 273.
23  Cf. Gröbl-Steinbach, *Fortschrittsidee und rationale Weltgestaltung*, 274.

fusion of cognitive, moral, aesthetic, and political motivations, which are based on the fundamental human need for a meaningfully structured cosmos.[25] At the same time, the intensity of the promise (of salvation)—that perfection is possible in the here and now—itself becomes a problem. For one thing, the distance to, and thus the intellectual implementation of, this idealized conception as a regulative idea is lost. The expectation becomes more and more real in correspondence with the degree to which the utopian elements of the philosophy of history are given up. "The scientific conception of the world in modernity no longer takes its interpretation from an outmoded philosophy that carries on the structure of eschatology in its design for history, but rather from the progress made by science and technology."[26]

Thus, due to the infiltration of the utopian spirit into the everyday reality of lived experience, the normative, critical purpose of a utopia is stripped of its reflective moment and becomes, in a sense, a natural outgrowth of the structures that have been created—society changes independently of its members for the better, the meaning of which, however, is no longer recognizable. Accordingly, in the light of such an indisputable but hard to understand idea of progress, the question of whether this is how we want to live is asked whenever we have difficulties in developing stable patterns of action within and in endorsement of our social and political arrangements. This is especially so when socio-political developments are accompanied by damage to sensitive areas, such as social justice and/or the environment, which cannot be simply interpreted as collateral damage.[27] Unsurprisingly, a great number of contemporary utopian projects are motivated by topics of *sustainable* or *ecologically responsible* ways of living, which provide meaning and significance to collective forms of life. It goes without saying that these normative terms are and must themselves be objects of intellectual reflection, so that, for example, clarifying the relationship between humans and the environment and the corresponding political principles must be an integral part of our actual practices.

In summary, whenever utopian projects consider questions of negotiating individual and collective identities; of individual happiness and societal harmony; and of reasonable

---

24  Hans Blumenberg, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 43. Cited in Gröbl-Steinbach, *Fortschrittsidee und rationale Weltgestaltung*, 275.
25  Cf. Gröbl-Steinbach, *Fortschrittsidee und rationale Weltgestaltung*, 276.
26  Ibid., 280.
27  Ibid., 281.

rules, virtue, and their origins, they count as serious (if creative) contributions to the problem of how we as human beings should live in the future. This is true regardless of where exactly such a society is located, for every utopia is characterized by elements that offer answers to precisely the above questions. Of particular social and philosophical interest is a mention of what served as the basis for the proposal, what understanding of human nature, what concept of knowledge and rationality, what model of history is being adopted, and how the corresponding theoretical and practical knowledge should be communicated and realized in the structures of everyday life. Finally it should be pointed out that a utopian project is not to be disqualified merely because it does not seem to be advocating one's own already established political positions.[28] Utopian projects desire in principle to restructure the temporary conditions of human existence and take part in the struggle for the right to authoritatively interpret the relationship between humans and their environment; their value is not based on whether they reflect or visualize one's own political preferences. "The expected response to a utopia is not just to say 'that sounds wonderful,' but to change one's beliefs about what is really possible for us: that is, to expand one's political imagination."[29]

## Where Do We Go From Here?

Up to this point, it has been made clear that historically the utopian-normative potential was not primarily concerned with articulating design goals for the human environment. This dimension came only late in its development, as Cioarâ suggests: "From the beginning of modernity until late in our epoch, utopia will estrange itself more and more from the sphere of pure ideas, aiming to turn into a world accessible to man."[30] Hence the history of utopia is scarcely to be considered a collection of preliminary studies on city planning or the organization of ecovillages.[31] However, it is also clear that utopian projects, by reflecting upon all relevant and conceivable forms of human practices, are always reaching towards the actual lived practice that is implicit in their theory.

---

28  Murray Bookchin succumbs to this mistake when he classifies Plato's *Republic* as not a utopia, because, according to his interpretation, it portrays neither a communist society nor "in any sense of the term a democracy." Cf. Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005), 182.
29  Clark, *Living Without Domination,* 18.
30  Cioarâ, "Critique of Utopian Reason," 15.
31  Similarly, Schmidt suggests that, since its beginning, utopia, especially in the sense of an urban utopia, has always been a loaded term. Its immediate feasibility is subordinate to its effectiveness as a form of political confrontation. Cf. Burghart Schmidt, *Kritik der reinen Utopie*, 65.

Indeed, the external environment has therefore always had one of two narrative functions. First, it *illustrates*, however metaphorically, the thought experiment. But because of its partly inconclusive or aporetic character—that is, one which ends in an irresolvable, but not to be relinquished uncertainty—a utopian narrative must be understood not so much as a concrete plan or set of policy recommendations, but as a call to decide for oneself about the plausibility and the desirability of the postulated ideals. Second, it serves a top-down instrument for enlightening society, using the resources of social technologies. The task of realizing a utopian project of contemporary relevance that doesn't peter out into either aporia or a frenzy of social-technological activity remains unfinished, arguably both practically and theoretically. In particular, efforts of societal self-organization from recent decades, in rural as well as in urban areas, present valuable reflections and areas of experimentation regarding the human hope for a better future or, rather, for the good life. The multiplicity of worldviews that, as is to be expected, results from this may be precisely the part of the experiment that is important for society as a whole—given that bridges connecting these particular utopian locations to the general public sphere remain, enabling the public to also realize utopia in the sense of noticing and reflecting upon it. The columns supporting these bridges could be an interest in informed and critical exchange between those who have sought out the location of a concrete project and those who wish to examine such projects conceptually.

Felix Wagner

## A Culture of Sustainability
*With commentary by Marcus Andreas*

### Introduction

Sustainability and societal change have long been topics of public debate. The German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) declared sustainability the focus of the year 2012, hosting various activities and events related to the subject.[1] Also, numerous research collaborations have emerged to tackle this topic.[2] The majority of these aim to provide technical solutions for the problem of climate change. But there are also other approaches. For example, since 1999, "socio-ecological research," which aims to develop strategies for social sustainability by connecting ecological transformation with social justice and economic demands, has been a frequently sponsored approach.[3] It appears, however, this socio-ecological perspective has not yet reached the more general public. According to a survey presented in *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (20 October 2011), 43 percent of the German population is familiar with the term "sustainability," of which 18 percent have no understanding of its meaning and only 4 percent associate sustainability with a responsibility to future generations, alongside environmental protection. In other words, social aspects of sustainability were missing entirely from respondents' understanding of the term. While one could interpret this as a result of an insufficient implementation of the United Nation's Education for Sustainable Development initiative,[4] it is also a reflection of how science and politics approach this topic. From a technical perspective, there are currently numerous promising initiatives to address climate change and promote the development of an ecologically sustainable society. However, in comparison, there is little research and knowledge concerning the possible structures for a

1   See http://www.bmbf.de/en/17858.php.
2   Such as FONA (Framework Programme Research for Sustainable Development), NaWis (Verbund für Nachhaltige Wissenschaft [Network for Sustainability Studies]), and EcoRnet (Ecological Research Network).
3   See http://www.sozial-oekologische-forschung.org/.
4   See http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/.

society that is sustainable on all levels. In general, research focuses on single aspects of sustainability and not on the entirety of such a collective lifestyle.

How do the three pillars of sustainability—environment, economy, and society—come together in the daily routines of a society? At Research in Community we call this societal way of living a "culture of sustainability." We are not alone in our use of this term and in this search for a viable communal lifestyle. As early as 2002, the German federal government wrote the following in a chapter entitled "Developing a Culture of Sustainable Development" from its national strategy for sustainable development:

> Sustainable development is not simply the technocratic route to efficient methods of business, production that does [not] cause waste, and a healthy life. Technical innovations are important, but on their own they are not sufficient to act as the driving force for sustainable development. Sustainable development has a lot to do with the imaginative and creative vision of how we want to live in the future. In this sense, it is a creative task, which challenges the creative potential of our society on the basis of values, social models and our cultural tradition as a whole. Sustainable development does not simply mean the continuation of trends from the past. It invites us to leave the old beaten track and find new directions. Over and above the material constraints, the question of how we want to live in the future returns politics to the creative task and social discussion on this question to the crucial point at which sustainable development becomes relevant.[5]

Researchers at the Institute for Interventional Research and Cultural Sustainability in Austria have discussed and presented "concepts, perspectives, and positions" on the argument that "sustainability is a cultural question."[6] More and more advocates of the sustainable development model support the idea of adding "culture" as a fourth pillar to illustrate the connection between culture and sustainability.[7] The tenor here is that,

---

5   German Federal Government, *Perspectives for Germany: Our Strategy for Sustainable Development* (Berlin: 2002), 21.
6   L. Krainer, ed., *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit: Konzepte, Perspektiven, Positionen* (Munich: oekom-Verlag, 2007).
7   V. Holz and U. Stoltenberg, "Mit dem kulturellen Blick auf den Weg zu einer nachhaltigen Entwicklung," in *Die unsichtbare Dimension: Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung im kulturellen Prozess,* ed. G. Sorgo (Veinna: Forum Umweltbildung, 2011); M. Wehrspaun and H. Schoemps, "Schwierigkeiten bei der Kommunikation von Nachhaltigkeit: Ein Problemaufriss," in *Kultur—Kunst—Nachhaltigkeit: Die Bedeutung von Kultur für das Leitbild Nachhaltige Entwicklung,* eds. H. Kurt and B. Wagner (Bonn: Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft e.V. / Essen: Klartext, 2002), 43–57. cf. O. Parodi, G. Banse, and A. Schaffer, eds., *Wechselspiele: Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit: Annäherungen an ein Spannungsfeld* (Berlin: edition sigma, 2010).

with regard to sustainability, the aspect of "culture" is frequently overlooked, and that true societal change will require increased engagement with this topic.[8] The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) emphasizes this in a chapter in its report from 1999, stating, "The environmental crisis is a cultural crisis."[9]

To date, a universally accepted definition, which unambiguously clarifies what a culture of sustainability is and how it comes about, is lacking. This is not surprising, considering that such a definition ultimately requires the combination of two not-so-straightforward terms. The question of "culture" is entwined in a long conceptual history and discussion.[10] And the term "sustainability" is so diffused that there is no real uniform understanding of it, and its use has become so ubiquitous that it has been referred to as "an empty word,"[11] as well as a "plastic concept"[12] or even an "elastic concept."[13] The elusiveness of the phrase is due in part to the fact that, while conceivable in theory, the concept of holistic sustainable development remains difficult to operationalize and the methodological implementation has so far achieved only mixed success.[14]

**How RIC Understands and Uses "Culture of Sustainability"**

Research in Community (RIC) (see essay by Wagner et al. on page 95) has given itself the goal of building a network to investigate and promote a culture of sustainability. This includes, of course, specifying and defining what is meant by a culture of sustain-

---

8   J. Kopfmüller, "From the Cultural Dimension of Sustainable Development to the Culture of Sustainable Development," in *Sustainable Development: Relationships of Culture, Knowledge and Ethics*, eds. O. Parodi et al. (Karlsruhe: KIT Scientific Publishing, 2011), 44; Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung, *Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit*, 2001; German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), *Welt im Wandel: Gesellschaftsvertrag für eine Große Transformation*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: WBGU, 2011).
9   WBGU, *World in Transition: Conservation and Sustainable Use of the Biosphere* (London: Earthscan, 2001), 170.
10  Cf. A. Reckwitz, *Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien: Aktuelle Tendenzen der Kulturtheorien* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2006); R. Hauser and G. Banse, "Kultur und Kulturalität: Annäherung an ein vielschichtiges Konzept," in Parodi et al., *Wechselspiele*, 21–41; and E. Boesch and J. Straub, "Kulturpsychologie: Prinzipien, Orientierungen, Konzeptionen," in *Theorien und Methoden der kulturvergleichenden Psychologie*,  eds. Trommsdorff and H.-J. Kornadt (Göttingen: Hogrefe, 2007), 27–95.
11  Renn et al., *Leitbild Nachhaltigkeit: Eine normativ-funktionale Konzeption und ihre Umsetzung* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007), 9.
12  P. Heintel, "Über Nachhaltigkeit: Geschichtsphilosophische Reflexionen," in *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit: Konzepte, Perspektiven, Positionen*, ed. L. Krainer (Munich: oekom-Verlag, 2007), 29.
13  M. Vogt, "Konzept Nachhaltigkeit," (lecture, Amerikahaus, Munich, Germany, November 2011), 1.
14  Cf. G. Bachmann, *Zehn Jahre Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie: Der lange Weg zur Langfristigkeit* (Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung, 2012); Kopfmüller, "From the Cultural Dimension of Sustainable Development," 50; and Statistisches Bundesamt, *Nachhaltige Entwicklung in Deutschland* (Wiesbaden: 2012).

ability. In this type of research process, it is inherent that not everything can be clearly defined, because then the search would have already found what it was looking for. This investigation has two elements: figure out, first, how a culture of sustainability can be constructed (i.e., the identification of relevant elements and dynamics of such a social system) and second, how such a culture may develop (in terms of sustainable development). Of course, the research and results for both elements are mutually dependent. We are not concerned so much with finding a definitive definition of a culture of sustainability, but rather with searching for evidence of what already exists and determining whence and whither the search will go.

Culture in the broad sense refers to the aggregation of all social lifestyles.[15] It encompasses how human beings treat themselves and each other, as well as how they treat the natural and the human-made world. This refers not only to physical characteristics, but also to values, norms, attitudes, and worldviews, which in turn affect human lifestyles and daily routines. Culture, therefore, is inherently circular, as Haderlapp and Trattnigg emphasize:

> Culture and the resulting cultural imprinting of a society have a considerable influence on how a society deals with itself, with the environment, and with the future. To this effect, culture could be referred to as both the basis and result of the respective societal values.[16]

Central to this argument is the idea that culture is not a fixed end product, but rather a continuous process of creating, negotiating, and reflecting on social practice, which constantly needs to be revised and, subsequently, realigned. Jürgen Kopfmüller came to this conclusion:

> 'Culture' . . . means the way in which we live or want to live and how we shape social development.[17]

A culture of sustainability brings with it a normative bias. In this sense, the concept of sustainability is the "guiding culture," which lays out the objective and basis of social

15  In contrast to culture in its more narrow sense, which refers to art, literature, music, and theater.
16  T. Haderlapp and R. Trattnigg, "Nachhaltige Entwicklung als kulturelles Projekt und große Erzählung," Parodi et al., *Wechselspiele,* 348.
17  Kopfmüller, "Cultural Dimension," 93.

existence and social action. A culture of sustainability is a societal lifestyle in which the pillars of sustainability (environment, economy, and society) are inherent and can be implemented in daily life. On this topic, Oliver Parodi writes the following:

> In theory, a culture of sustainability is, in my opinion, the result of the concepts of sustainability and, in practice, the true implementation of sustainable development: a collectively borne, mutually understood, and understandable sustainability, which is institutionalized and internalized, and is passed down through conventions, patterns, habits and even feelings.[18]

In its practical form, the guiding principles of sustainability no longer appear to be prescribed patterns of action and interpretation from outside or from above (in the sense of governmental regulation), but have become a common part of the collective representation. As a result, certain interpretations and behaviors become second nature and seem more self-evident and relevant for participants in the community.[19] In this manner, sustainability would evolve from a voluntary concept to something completely normal and self-evident and, thereby, an inherent part of our culture.

From this perspective, RIC does not regard "culture" as another pillar in the model of sustainable development, in terms of a cultural dimension of sustainability. Rather, culture should be understood as a meta-category and, thus, a comprehensive part of all aspects of sustainability.

**Change Toward a Culture of Sustainability**

Now that what is meant by a culture of sustainability has been outlined, an interesting question arises: How could such a culture emerge? There are a plethora of proposals in answer to this question. In its national strategy report for sustainable development, the German government declares the necessity of an "intensive social dialogue" that inspires creative forces instead of existential fears and resignation.[20] This "cultural-political process of reflection, discussion, and change" deals with questions such as:

---

18  Parodi et al., *Wechselspiele,* 99.
19  cf. K. Hörning, "Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit im Netz alltäglicher Lebenspraktiken," in Parodi et al., *Wechselspiele,*  336.
20  German Federal Government, *Perspectives for Germany*, 3.

How do we want to live? What kind of society is sustainable? What can we contribute? Which changes and innovations are necessary, and what should be preserved and revived?[21]

To achieve such a "transcendence of the system,"[22] it is necessary to successfully manage the Great Transformation.[23] This will primarily take place through processes of negotiation and collective decision-making within society. As Krainer put it, "A sustainable culture is a conscious decision-making culture."[24]

It is therefore necessary to clarify who, what, how, and in which areas decisions will be made. The debate around this topic has made it more and more obvious that it is crucial to integrate as diverse actors as possible into this process. According to the WBGU, the key players here are a constitutive state and pioneers of change, which produce social-ecological innovations in social niches.[25] Therefore, a combination of "good governance" models (i.e., top-down) and the commitment and participation of civil society (i.e., bottom-up) is necessary. Science and research can act as both a facilitator and a catalyst by conducting interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary transformation research.

It is clear there is no one starting point for the "Great Transformation," in the sense of an Archimedean point from which the "new world" is created, but rather change is essential—in many places and very different ways.

These changes affect each individual and the society as a whole, creating the context and conditions for each person. This illustrates the interdependence of the different areas, because in turn, individuals and their actions constitute society. Changes for the individual and for the collective need to apply to both external reality (the material, technical, and explicit) and inner reality (individual experience, consciousness, values, and norms).

---

21  Haderlapp and Trattnigg, "Nachhaltige Entwicklung," 359.
22  Krainer, *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit,* 11.
23  "Great Transformation" is the term the German Advisory Council on Global Change proposed for the necessary societal change; WBGU, *Welt im Wandel.*
24  Krainer, *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit,* 93.
25  WBGU, *Welt im Wandel,* 7.

It is important for the process of change that, while the view remains on the "big picture," solutions for specific problems can also be found. The Council for Sustainable Development gave the following advice:

> The more an actor digs into the material, the more they become experts on specific topics and, therefore, the less they are able to communicate sustainability for that which it really is: the key to the vision of a just world, the vision of a humane, tolerant, and solidary society, which deals cautiously with their human and natural resources and places the optimization of interests over their maximization.[26]

Guidelines are necessary for the process of reflection, negotiation, alignment, and the resulting implementation and evaluation to ensure the success of this organizational task.

### The Wheel of Sustainability

The "Wheel of Sustainability" was developed as part of the research at RIC by Felix Wagner and Sandra Mende. It is intended to help illustrate the elements and the dynamics of a culture of sustainability and thereby give guidance for the societal organizational process, which includes reflection, negotiation, implementation, and evaluation. The objective of the Wheel of Sustainability is to encourage reflection on the relationships between different elements of a culture of sustainability and lead to new approaches, which, in addition to offering concrete solutions to specific problems, always have the "big picture" in sight.

The challenge of a culture of sustainability is to bring human needs and lifestyles in alignment with the system requirements of sustainable development.[27] In the Wheel of Sustainability, this is represented as three levels (fig. 1). The outermost level, or the "Level of System Requirements," symbolizes the requirements (and, concurrently, the objectives) of societal sustain-
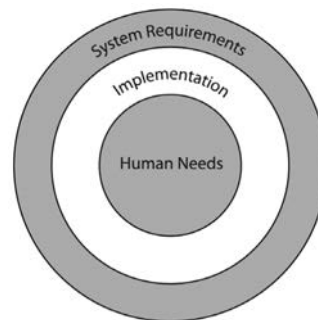


**Figure 1:**
The three levels of the Wheel of Sustainability.

---

26  Council for Sustainable Development, *Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit,* 4.
27  As they have been defined since the publication of the Brundtland Report. World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

able development. The innermost level, or the "Level of Human Needs," represents, from the individual's perspective, those socially shared human needs and living conditions necessary for a certain quality of life. Connecting the first and third levels, the middle level is the "Level of Implementation," corresponding to the design process towards a culture of sustainability.

The content of the levels is specified in Figure 2. The Level of System Requirements constitutes the traditional areas of the sustainability debate (i.e., environment, economy, and society). The Level of Human Needs is filled with examples of relevant aspects of human endeavors. The number and nature of these individual aspects are not definitively defined, but rather are the subject of ongoing debate based on the current research on these topics.

The goal of the research conducted by RIC is to explore and concretize the Level of Implementation. RIC's research classifies elements of social organization that can provide a connection between the Levels of Systemic Requirements and of Human Needs. We divide these into six areas:

*a) Social Structures and Living Together*
This section provides answers to questions such as the following: How do humans coexist (i.e., as a small family, in neighborhoods, or communally)? What does the "culture of coexistence" look like, in terms of dealing with each other, communication, rituals, and daily activities? How is social cohesion organized, and how does cohesion—and, with it, belonging, connectedness, and sense of community—evolve? Is it supported by cooperation in social networks and in the work area?

*b) Technical and Physical*
This area includes all technological transformations, from supply and disposal to mobility and production, to information technology. It also includes physical transformations of architecture, urban planning, product design, and so forth.

*c) Arts and Aesthetics*
This refers to the deliberate inclusion of creativity in the organizational process, in both the technical/physical and the social areas. It is about experiencing sustainability through all the senses and the perception of their (potential) aesthetics, with regard

to the attractiveness of sustainability. Fundamental aspects of this area are the artistic exploration and mediation of the complexity of sustainable systems and the relationship between humans and the environment.[28]

*d) Values and Norms: Collective Representations*
This area takes into consideration the explicit and inherent values, norms, and ideals upon which social existence and action are based. Which worldviews determine how we deal with ourselves, with others, and with the natural world? What are the rules and patterns followed by the "fabric of civilization"?
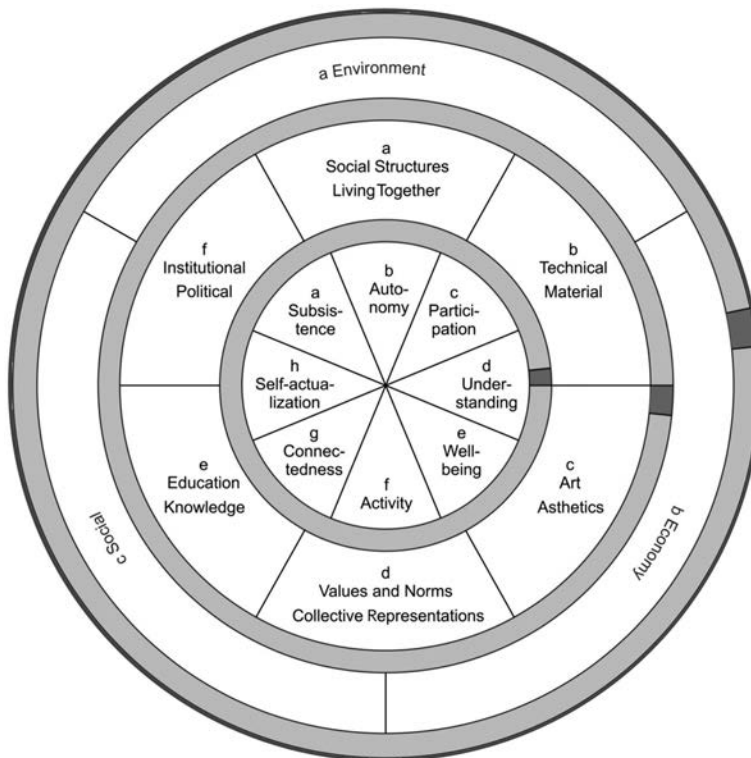


**Figure 2:** Conceptualization of the Wheel of Sustainability.

28  cf. A. Goehler, *Konzeptgedanken zur Errichtung eines Fonds Ästhetik und Nachhaltigkeit,* Publication Series Ecoloy, vol. 10 (Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2012); H. Löschmann, preface in *Toward Global (Environ) Mental Change: Transformative Art and Cultures of Sustainablity,* by S. Kagan, Publication Series Ecoloy, vol. 20 (Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2012); and S. Kagan, *Art and Sustainability: Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

*e) Education and Knowledge*

The handing-down of practical and transformational knowledge on sustainable lifestyles is the topic of this area—the practice of communicating values, standards, and skills to educate sustainable and competent human beings.

*f) Institutional and Political*

Which institutions and what kinds of governance promote sustainability? How can there simultaneously be meaningful institutional regulation and civil participation? This area deals with the processes of decision-making and of negotiating various needs and requirements.

To do justice to the complexity and dynamics of a culture of sustainability, the three levels are considered flexible with respect to one another. This means new combinations of different aspects and elements, which can provide impetus for reflection, are continually emerging. The Wheel of Sustainability can, therefore, encourage the development of new hypotheses about the relationship and implementation of various combinations of the three levels. For example, the combination of "connectedness" from the inner circle, "social structure/living together" from the middle ring, and "environment" from the outer ring is a thematically very appropriate template, because ecovillages are a perfect example of this. Through the social form of a community, they meet human needs for connectedness with others and the natural environment. As studies have shown, life in communities is significantly more ecologically sustainable than the usual individual households.[29]

Local currencies are an example of the combination of "participation" (center), "institutional/political" (middle ring), and "economy" (outer ring). They create an institutionalized system—a regionally stable, or resilient, economy, which often creates spaces of participation and identification for the people involved.

There are not always previously existing examples for the numerous possible combinations (144 possibilities), but innovation can be stimulated through reflection.

---

29  S. Tinsley and H. Gorge, *Ecological Footprint of the Findhorn Foundation and Community* (Forres: Sustainable Development Research Centre, 2006); K.-H. Simon, *Zusammenfassender Endbericht zum Vorhaben „Gemeinschaftliche Lebens- und Wirtschaftsweisen und ihre Umweltrelevanz"* (Kassel: Universität Kassel, 2004).

The Wheel of Sustainability is deliberately an unfinished model that serves as a basis for discussion. First and foremost, the goal is to find a structure that supplies a foundation upon which the organizational process can begin, and in which as many actors as possible can participate.

## Conclusion

On the path towards a viable society, it is of the utmost importance that sustainable development does not merely constitute abstract goals or political assurances and regulations, but becomes part of the societal daily routine. This requires a culture of sustainability. The Wheel of Sustainability provides a tool to guide the organizational process of such a change. The scientific studies of "pioneers of change" can make innovations socially acceptable and inspire the development of new forms. Ultimately, the key to "doing culture"[30] is the actions of all actors involved—this is, how we as a society shape our lives and its structures.

## Bibliography

Bachmann, G. *Zehn Jahre Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie: Der lange Weg zur Langfristigkeit.* Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung, 2012. http://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/uploads/media/Bachmann_Analyse_Zehn_Jahre_Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie_10-05-2012.pdf.

Boesch, E., and J. Straub. "Kulturpsychologie: Prinzipien, Orientierungen, Konzeptionen." In *Theorien und Methoden der kulturvergleichenden Psychologie,* edited by G. Trommsdorff and H.-J. Kornadt, 27–95. Göttingen: Hogrefe, 2007.

German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU). *World in Transition: Conservation and Sustainable Use of the Biosphere.* London: Earthscan, 2001.

———. *Welt im Wandel: Gesellschaftsvertrag für eine Große Transformation.* 2nd ed. Berlin: WBGU, 2011.

German Federal Government. *Perspectives for Germany: Our Strategy for Sustainable Development.* Berlin: 2002.

30  K. H. Hörning and J. Reuter, eds., *Doing culture: Neue Positionen zum Verhältnis von Kultur und sozialer Praxis* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2004).

Goehler, A. *Konzeptgedanken zur Errichtung eines Fonds Ästhetik und Nachhaltigkeit.* Publication Series Ecology, Vol. 10. Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2012.

Haderlapp, T., and R. Trattnigg. "Nachhaltige Entwicklung als kulturelles Projekt und große Erzählung." In *Wechselspiele: Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit; Annäherungen an ein Spannungsfeld*, edited by O. Parodi, G. Banse, and A. Schaffer, 347–75. Berlin: edition sigma, 2010.

Hauser, R., and G. Banse. "Kultur und Kulturalität: Annäherung an ein vielschichtiges Konzept." In *Wechselspiele: Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit; Annäherungen an ein Spannungsfeld,* edited by O. Parodi, G. Banse, and A. Schaffer, 21–41. Berlin: edition sigma, 2010.

Heidemann, F. *Ethnologie: Eine Einführung.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011.

Heintel, P. "Über Nachhaltigkeit: Geschichtsphilosophische Reflexionen." In *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit: Konzepte, Perspektiven, Positionen,* edited by L. Krainer, 37–64. Munich: oekom-Verlag, 2007.

Holz, V., and U. Stoltenberg. "Mit dem kulturellen Blick auf den Weg zu einer nachhaltigen Entwicklung." In *Die unsichtbare Dimension: Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung im kulturellen Prozess,* edited by G. Sorgo, 15–34. Vienna: Forum Umweltbildung, 2011.

Hörning, K. "Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit im Netz alltäglicher Lebenspraktiken." In *Wechselspiele: Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit; Annäherungen an ein Spannungsfeld,* edited by O. Parodi, G. Banse, and A. Schaffer, 333–46. Berlin: edition sigma, 2010.

Hörning, K. H., and J. Reuter, eds. *Doing Culture: Neue Positionen zum Verhältnis von Kultur und sozialer Praxis.* Bielefeld: Transcript, 2004.

Kagan, S. *Art and Sustainability: Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011.

———. *Toward Global (Environ)Mental Change: Transformative Art and Cultures of Sustainability.* Vol. 20 of *Publication Series Ecology.* Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2012.

Kopfmüller, J. "From the Cultural Dimension of Sustainable Development to the Culture of Sustainable Development." In *Sustainable Development: Relationships of Culture, Knowledge and Ethics,* edited by O. Parodi, I. Ayestaran, and G. Banse, 93–120. Karlsruhe: KIT Scientific Publishing, 2011.

Krainer, L., ed. *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit: Konzepte, Perspektiven, Positionen.* Munich: oekom-Verlag, 2007.

Löschmann, H. Preface in *Toward Global (Environ)Mental Change: Transformative Art and Cultures of Sustainablity.* By S. Kagan. Publication Series Ecology, Vol. 20. Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2012.

Parodi, O., G. Banse, and A. Schaffer, eds. *Wechselspiele: Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit; Annäherungen an ein Spannungsfeld.* Berlin: edition sigma, 2010.

Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung. *Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit.* Berlin: 2001.

Reckwitz, A. *Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien: Aktuelle Tendenzen der Kulturtheorien.* Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2006.

Renn, O., J. Deuschle, A. Jäger, and W. Weimer-Jehle. *Leitbild Nachhaltigkeit: Eine normativ-funktionale Konzeption und ihre Umsetzung.* Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007.

Simon, K.-H. *Zusammenfassender Endbericht zum Vorhaben "Gemeinschaftliche Lebens- und Wirtschaftsweisen und ihre Umweltrelevanz."* Kassel: Universität Kassel, 2004.

Statistisches Bundesamt. *Nachhaltige Entwicklung in Deutschland. Indikatorenbericht.* Wiesbaden, 2012.

Tinsley, S., and H. Gorge. *Ecological Footprint of the Findhorn Foundation and Community.* Forres: Sustainable Development Research Centre, 2006.

Vogt, M. "Konzept Nachhaltigkeit." Lecture presented at Amerikahaus, Munich, Germany, November, 2011. http://www.bene-muenchen.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Bilder/RiVo/Vogt_Konzept_Nachhaltigkeit_29-11-2011.pdf.

Wehrspaun, M., and H. Schoemps. "Schwierigkeiten bei der Kommunikation von Nachhaltigkeit: Ein Problemaufriss." In *Kultur—Kunst—Nachhaltigkeit: Die Bedeutung von Kultur für das Leitbild Nachhaltige Entwicklung*, edited by H. Kurt and B. Wagner, 43–57. Bonn: Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft e.V. / Essen: Klartext, 2002.

**Commentary by Marcus Andreas**

I welcome my colleagues's suggestion of a praxis-orientated model that both inspires and encourages reflection on a culture of sustainability. The "Wheel of Sustainability" provokes us to connect ideas in new ways and puts implementation center-stage. Nonetheless, I would like to further elaborate on  the concept of a culture of sustainability and, thereby, also on the Wheel. Although not intended by its authors, the Wheel might lead one to assume that a culture of sustainability can be implemented. It is this notion that I am concerned with, as the concept risks being misunderstood and instrumentalized.

The term "culture" is contentious. In a culture of sustainability, the term is seemingly employed with the kind of monumentalism that hasn't been seen since the beginning of postmodernism. Culture in this sense appears static and homogenous, and we have to make some mental effort to add dynamism and diversity. Moreover, due to the possessive "of," sustainability seems to have a firm grip on culture, even though cultural evolution and sustainable development are mutually dependent—according to the first principle of the 1998 UNESCO conference on culture and development.[31]

But what are the alternatives? Using the plural form, cultures, as a solution is already passé; the modern understanding of culture no longer conforms to the "cookie-cutter" principle,[32] with one cultural cookie here and another one there. And "cultural sustainability" is neither an adequate solution, for culture is not a "nonrenewable resource," which will eventually run out. In an ethnological sense, culture as a resource crops up anywhere there are humans who interact and develop meanings.[33]

Instead, it would be better to refer to a cultural dimension or landscape, including (but not exclusively composed of) the distortions, breaks, and discords of postmodernism. Clifford Geertz speaks of the "various modes of involvement in a collective life."[34] Instrumentalizing this diversity, as something solely in the possession of sustainability,

---

31 Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development, *Action Plan on Cultural Policies for Development* (Stockholm: UNESCO, 2 April 1998), 2, http://www.unesco.org/pv_obj_cache/pv_obj_id_5 BFA265FF63CDC298CB5EB0E309D6F1D1B850000/filename/cultural.pdf. See also http://ifa.de/pdf/abk/inter/unesco_kulturpol_entwick.pdf (accessed 07.03.2012).
32 Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton: Princeford University Press, 1995), 250.
33 Frank Heidemann, *Ethnologie. Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 11.
34 Geertz, *Available Light,* 254.

would take away its playfulness. Nonetheless, we would do well to choose the premises of sustainability as a basis for our involvement in collective life—and ecovillages offer remarkable examples for how to do this. In this regard, the Wheel of Sustainability is a suitable means, not for ontological questions, but for ideas, serendipitous connections, and the pleasure of playfulness.

In my opinion, we will reach a complete, utopian societal transformation[35] when we no longer need to talk about a culture of sustainability. Instead, we will be guided by the ideal of sustainability, without stopping to think about it, just as we are guided by the ideal of peace, without talking about a culture of peace. It is in the process of critical engagement with the concept of utopia that, on the basis of current foresight, it is evident we are unlikely to ever reach such a goal.[36] But we nevertheless need to build up resilience and sustainable pathways. So let the vision of a culture of sustainability inspire us, without limiting our horizons too much. Thankfully, ecovillages are already charting a possible course, but alternative courses are also needed. Culture is not a placeholder between internal needs and cultures requirements; cultures need and take the freedom to blossom and grow in unexpected ways.

Finally, perhaps it would help to recall the original Latin root of the word culture: *Colere,* meaning the cultivation and maintenance of tilled land, as well as its veneration. Thus, we should cultivate the social, ecological, and economic qualities that seem to us worthy of veneration and, in doing so, foster the cultural development of sustainability. At best, we will reap the reward: a culture of sustainability that is blooming.

35  I use the phrase "societal transformation" in reference to the concept outlined by the German Advisory-Council on Climate Change, or WBGU; see WBGU, *World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability. Flagship Report 2011* (Berlin: WBGU, 2011).
36  J. Lockyer, "Sustainability and Utopianism: An Ethnography of Cultural Critique in Contemporary Intentional Communities" (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2007).

**Bibliography**

Geertz, Clifford. *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics.* Princeton: Princeford University Press, 1995.

German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU). *World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability. Flagship Report 2011.* Berlin: WBGU, 2011.

Heidemann, Frank. *Ethnologie: Eine Einführung.* Stuttgart: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011.

Lockyer, J. "Sustainability and Utopianism: An Ethnography of Cultural Critique in Contemporary Intentional Communities." PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2007.

Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development. *Action Plan on Cultural Policies for Development.* Stockholm: UNESCO, 2 April 1998. http://www.unesco.org/pv_obj_cache/pv_obj_id_5BFA265FF63CDC298CB5EB0E309D6F1D1B850000/filename/cultural.pdf.

Geseko von Lüpke

## Ecovillages: Islands of the Future?

Ecovillages have now existed for roughly 40 years. They have multiplied and changed in these four decades, and have organized themselves internationally. But in the eyes of the public, they are still sometimes seen in the light of the old cliché: places for old, long-haired hippies who never really became adults, practice free love, are stuck in their old dreams, and live a backwards life, outside society.

This cliché was probably the primary reason mainstream social science had never really taken the initiative to research the subculture; it seemed there was nothing new and relevant to find. Also, although they have grown enormously in the last two decades, ecovillages were not very open to scientific research or analysis in their early years. They worked in an almost isolated manner on a different future and cloistered themselves in their own subculture. They saw themselves as refugees of a consumerist and violent society, on which they had turned their backs. These "hippies" had only a foggy vision of their future, which they believed they could achieve through either a "back to the roots" approach or a glorification of the "old" life, as described in Vine Deloria Jr.'s book *Only Tribes Will Survive.* Often, though, they did not really know which strategy to follow. The village life was a test site. They did what seemed good, and they follow-ed their intuition, opposing the mainstream, which, in the overdevel-oped Western world, seemed to produce only ecological devastation, war, and despair.

Interestingly, research on ecovillages started at a time of cultural evolution, when the purely materialistic, profit-oriented society had clearly approached its long-foreseen limits. As long as the growth model, based on the heavy use of fossil fuels to keep engines running, was successful, the alternative path seemed to reflect a "counter-development." Ecovillages seemed to be almost "third-world islands" in the middle of "oceans of unlimited possibilities," as the Western world saw itself. But times of crisis open up the possibility to change perspectives and to look beyond the limits of the current paradigm.

Hence, my argument is that ecovillages are "islands of the future" in the presence of grow-ing insecurity, crisis, and collapse. To understand this argument, it is necessary

to take the meta-perspective first developed by American ecologist Joanna Macy and further developed by writer David Korten. Both call the transition we are in "The Great Turning." They don't see the current process of disintegration as a catastrophe or even as doom, but as a phase of cultural and societal change.

What do they mean by a Great Turning? It is becoming more and more obvious that if no transition happens in the coming years, there may soon be a grim future for some, if not all, human societies. But let's reframe that perspective by assuming that, if there are future human societies in two hundred or three hundred years, they will have learned to overcome the present risks and dangers. They will live in a cleaner environment, will have disarmed the huge arsenals of atomic weapons, will have achieved equality between the Global North and South, will have solved the hunger problem, will be powered by renewable energy, and so on. With this vision of the future, how then will these future societies look back on our times? It is highly possible they will talk about the times of crisis and uncertainty that we are currently experiencing as a time of fundamental changes, as a Great Turning.

What I want to make clear is that we are already in the very midst of that change. We—you, me, our science, and our visions—are part of that change. What we are mainly dealing with is not an apocalyptic end of human history. Instead, what we are experiencing are the symptoms of change, the elements of crisis that always occur when a system goes through a major transition. And that change is happening in *three different stages*. In short, the first stage consists of all actions that slow down the process of destruction and collapse; the second entails the analysis and the understanding of the structural causes of the present crisis and the creation of alternative patterns; and the third is a fundamental shift in values and worldviews. Each stage is equally important, and they are interrelated and can facilitate one another.

The **first stage** of change occurs in the public and political resistance to the destruction of natural support systems. This resistance, which can happen within or outside of political parties and through NGOs or local initiatives, can be accomplished with a wide range of actions, such as lobbying, demonstrations or civil disobedience, documenting ecological destruction, public campaigns, internet initiatives, or collecting signatures. It can also be achieved by citizens voting in the interest of future generations or by parliamentarians pushing for tougher environmental laws. The important role of such

actions is that they slow down environmental destruction and give us more time for the necessary process of cultural transition.

The **second stage** of change happens simultaneously with the first. This stage is about revealing destructive patterns in society and economics and the search for alternative structures that will transform society peacefully and evolutionarily. For instance, in this stage, people deal with the structural patterns of transnational corporations, the functioning of industrialized agriculture, and the dynamics of the energy industry, among other issues. In a sense, the stage could be analogized as a massive growth of green vegetation sprouting through the concrete of old systems.

The purpose of seeking alternative structures can thus be seen as "building rafts for the sinking ship." In other words, by building alternative structures, we can slowly create complementary models that can also soften the consequences of a crisis. Already there are countless initiatives around the world attempting to design alternative structures, including anti-neoliberal globalization groups like the International Forum on Globalization and ATTAC (Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financière et l'Aide aux Citoyenne); think tanks and forums, such as the World Watch Institute, Positive Futures Network, the Natural Step, and Bioneers; social entrepreneurialism; and, of course, the analysis of the emergence of alternative communities.

Many of these developments are extremely promising, because of their ability to show that another world, another future is possible. But, as with the first stage, this alone is not enough. These avant-garde projects have to be integrated into mainstream culture, which requires a fundamental shift in values and in the way we perceive our world.

Thus, the **third stage** is about adopting a different perspective on reality. It requires the development of a new worldview; a new self-perception as humans: new values regarding society, the environment, and future generations; and even new forms of spirituality. Since it is our worldviews and value systems that provide the basis for all individual decisions and actions, it is in this third and most fundamental stage that whether we can transform our unsustainable society into a life-sustaining culture will be finally determined. We can already see big changes that have taken place in the last 50 years and that are accelerating in the present. For example, in modern science we are witnessing a fundamental paradigm shift from a mechanistic approach to a

systemic approach of interrelatedness and wholeness. We are also witnessing a growing shift in cultural values away from fundamentalist ideologies and closed-system thinking to worldviews that celebrate a diversity of solutions, open systems, and build on potential personal development. There are fascinating studies by researchers, such as political scientist Ronald Inglehard, Duane Elgin, and sociologist Paul Ray, about the scale of value-shifting in modern societies.

Inhabitants of ecovillages are exhibiting change at all these stages. In the case of the first, they are often part of a protest movement against destructive forces, such as violence or environmental destruction. By virtue of their existence, they are part of the second, model-building stage and are, thus, creating "islands of a possible future." And, without question, their experimental lifestyles make them an integral part of value and consciousness change. They not only talk about different values or an alternative lifestyle, but they actually "walk their talk." Even if they don't always succeed, they serve more or less as working models, as proof that "another world is possible," to borrow the World Social Forum's slogan.

More specifically, I would like to demonstrate how the environmentalism of ecovillages fits the three stages of the Great Turning. First of all, ecovillages adopt practical actions that reduce the size of the community's ecological footprint. For example, Findhorn Foundation recently proved it has the smallest ecological footprint of any community in Great Britain. Ecovillages are able to achieve smaller footprints through practices such as carpooling, sharing electrical devices, self-sufficiency in food production, and attempts to create an independent energy supply through renewable methods.

Secondly, ecovillages have proven to be a sort of low-tech technology developer for the rest of society. A lot of technological innovations have come out of ecovillages' experimentations, such as the cheap radiation detector developed by The Farm in Tennessee; water saving systems like the composting toilets created by Sekem Farm in Egypt; and cheap and energy-efficient building methods, as designed by Germany's ecovillage Sieben Linden.

Thirdly, through their high levels of internal communication, discussion, idea-sharing, and consciousness-raising work, ecovillages often prove to be avant-garde in leading

value-based ecological lifestyles, demonstrating to the rest of society that a reduced use of resources and energy can be combined with an actual growth in quality of life.

Ecovillage activities at the third stage are most interesting, because this is when new ways of thinking, new social tools, and new scientific and social approaches are developed, which lie at the foundation of ecovillage culture. These approaches might also serve the rest of society. For example, interesting in times of economic crisis is the experiment with community-owned, self-governed economic enterprises, in which workers own the enterprises and employ high degrees of collective decision-making. An ecovillage with almost two decades of successful experience with this kind of alternative economics is the German community Niederkaufungen near Kassel. Other interesting new approaches happen on the social level, including alternative forms of social security (e.g., support for people in financial crisis), new ways of caring for the elderly (as practiced in the German ecovillage Tempelhof), and the creation of progressive education projects, such as wilderness kindergartens and sustainability-oriented universities like Gaia University and Heliopolis University.

With this variety of approaches, ecovillages are pioneers for cultural transformation, because they establish a different consciousness. They are change agents that show under which conditions sustainable and environmentally just lifestyles can be established, while increasing quality of life. By collectively discussing and dealing with processes of personal growth in communication and spiritual awareness, they are pioneers in combining inner growth with social and ecological project building. In doing so, they combine what is usually separate: personal development and social change. Moreover, all ecovillages seem to focus on enhancing an individual's personal potential and see this as a precondition for collective transformation.

This is extremely important for contemporary social science and future building, as it makes obvious the reality that a different world cannot be built without new cultural, ethical, and spiritual values. Moreover, these values also have to be practiced. As long as new experiments are conducted in the realm of old paradigms, they won't go beyond the threshold of conventional thinking. And if they do not go beyond this threshold, all experiments will, sooner or later, be consumed by the old system. Only when the values and worldviews of an old, failing system are understood and also transformed can a new world, community, and society be built.

My argument describing ecovillages as "islands of the future" is quite optimistic, maybe even unrealistic. Inhabitants of such alternative communities carry a huge weight on their shoulders; with little support from mainstream culture and the majority of the public, they are trying to build a new world within the old. They are trying to establish new structures almost always by trial and error, and they need to be able to deal with and accept disappointments, crashing illusions, and failing visions. For many ecovillages, this creates a high amount of social stress, burnout, and the feeling of being alone on the path to build a sustainable future. This brings me to my final point: these pioneers need active support from mainstream culture. They need to be supported financially and morally, because in solving collective challenges, they are creating new models and designing a new culture.

# From the Field

Felix Wagner

## Ecovillage Research Review

Research on ecovillages is still a relatively young phenomenon. This is not particularly surprising, given the fact that the term "ecovillage" first came into use during the 1990s. Defining ecovillage research as a specific field that is distinct from research into other forms of intentional communities is also a delicate task. These two factors have probably contributed to the absence thus far of a comprehensive review of the state of research on the subject. Most relevant academic papers offer insights into prior studies, but I am aware of none that offer a complete overview. This review is meant to contribute to filling that gap.

For the review, extensive key word searches were carried out on the Internet, in library catalogs, and in academic databases, the most important words being "intentional communities" and "ecovillages." Initially this search led to few results. Using bibliographies from standard works in the field of community research was more productive. Based on this information, copies of the referenced sources were acquired. In a few cases it was not possible to access a copy; thus, these works were not included in the review. This search process continued until no new works could be discovered. The list acquired from that process was sent to leading academics in the field with the request that they supplement it with any works that had been missed.

I can make no claim to the completeness of this review, as there are undoubtedly works that were not found, particularly if they were not written in English or German.

### Sifting Through the Literature

For the analysis, I incorporated only academic studies (a substantial number of popular and journalistic publications, as well as gray literature produced by the ecovillages themselves, also exist). I only considered the content of works concerned specifically with ecovillages or ecovillage-related aspects of other intentional communities. This

means I did not include works concerned with communities in general (i.e., community research), mostly older studies, in the analysis.

The explicit focus on ecological and social sustainability, which is a defining characteristic of ecovillages, arose in the 1990s. In earlier communities, of course, there had been efforts to live in ways that were ecological and in close contact with nature, but the specific sustainability focus accompanied the emergence of ecovillages. Also, some previously existing intentional communities have altered their focus over time and, therefore, are now considered ecovillages (for example, Findhorn Foundation and Twin Oaks). As already mentioned, it is not always easy to determine whether a particular community is an ecovillage or "merely" an intentional community. Since "ecovillage" is usually a self-designation, there is an increased likelihood of both false positives and false negatives when categorizing such communities.

Therefore, for the review I established clear criteria for determining which studies were to be included: studies specifically dedicated to ecovillages, which appeared in academic papers starting in the year 2000. Because of this decision, sometimes papers that contain relevant information were not considered, because they were written before the emergence of ecovillages. Among works published after 2000, some texts were included that are more closely related to the traditional literature on community studies.

Research about intentional communities is usually concerned with the social aspects of communities, how groups arise and remain together, what roles social bonds and commitments play (Kanter 1972), and how identity is created (Abrams et al. 1976). Also included in this area of research is the work of Zablocki (1980), who has investigated how collective decisions are made and how individuals contribute to the group. Metcalf (1986) focuses on recruitment, socialization, and commitment in communities. Greenberg (1993) studied how children grow up and are educated in intentional communities. All of these contributions to community research look at social themes relevant to ecovillages, but they lack a clear connection to sustainability, which extends beyond the concern with social matters. For this reason they were not included in this review.

A total of 59 studies were used. They were sorted according to date of publication, type of study, academic discipline, content, research questions, results, the communities that were studied, and their methodological implications.

**Tallying up the Results**

The consulted works can be divided into various types of academic studies, as depicted in Figure 1. Taken together, in the majority of cases the texts are theses submitted for an academic degree, with the largest part represented by master's (or diploma) theses. The number of doctoral dissertations has increased substantially in the last several years. The category "other" includes academic studies not already represented, such as unpublished or non-degree works, conference papers, and documents whose category was unclear.
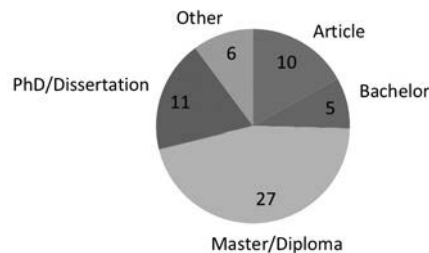


**Figure 1:** Overview of the types of consulted studies.

In Figure 2 the texts are sorted according to the year of publication. It shows clearly that the topic of ecovillages has been the subject of increasing interest to researchers in recent years. While there was a total of nine studies from the years 2000–2004, this number increased in the years 2005–2009 to 38, which is an increase of 322 percent.
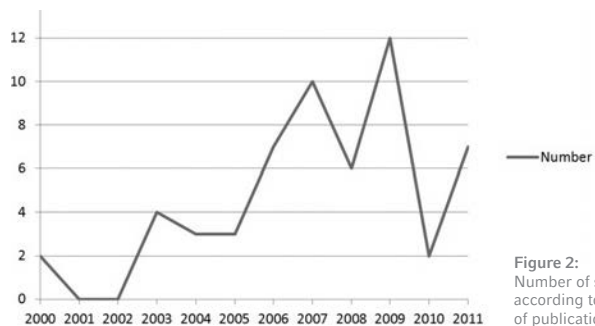


**Figure 2:** Number of studies according to year of publication.

Whether this trend will continue is difficult to predict at present. It remains to be seen whether the drop in 2010 to only two studies represents the decline of this surge of interest, or whether it is simply an outlier.[1] Furthermore, the count of seven studies from 2011 doesn't permit any definitive conclusions. It is possible that not all of the research from these years has appeared on the scene.

*Number of Communities Studied and Methodological Orientation*
Most of the works are case studies, which look at an average of 2.7 communities per study. More than half of these texts are case studies of one particular community. Of the studies that investigated a large number of examples, Meltzer (2000) is well at the

---

1   I know of at least ten studies that are currently still in progress, which suggests that the trend has not taken an overall downward turn.

fore with 18, followed by Dümmler (2007) and Meijering (2006) with nine each. While the standard works of community research from before 2000 are generally quantitative studies with a large sample size, ecovillage research is generally qualitative. Exceptions are Meijering (2006), who analyzed a survey conducted among 496 communities, and Grundmann et al. (2003) who surveyed 113 communities. Additional quantitative studies have been concerned with energy consumption (Brown 2004) or other issues of consumption related to the "ecological footprint" (Simon 2004; Tinsley and George 2006), as well as evaluations of ecological sustainability (Bissolotti et al. 2006). There were also isolated quantitative studies of quality of life (Kiffmann 2009; Mulder et al. 2006). Among the comparative studies, those that compared individual communities were predominant. While direct comparisons with similar forms of habitation from other areas of society have so far been scarce, such comparisons can be found on the topics of energy use and consumption (Brown 2004; Simon 2004).
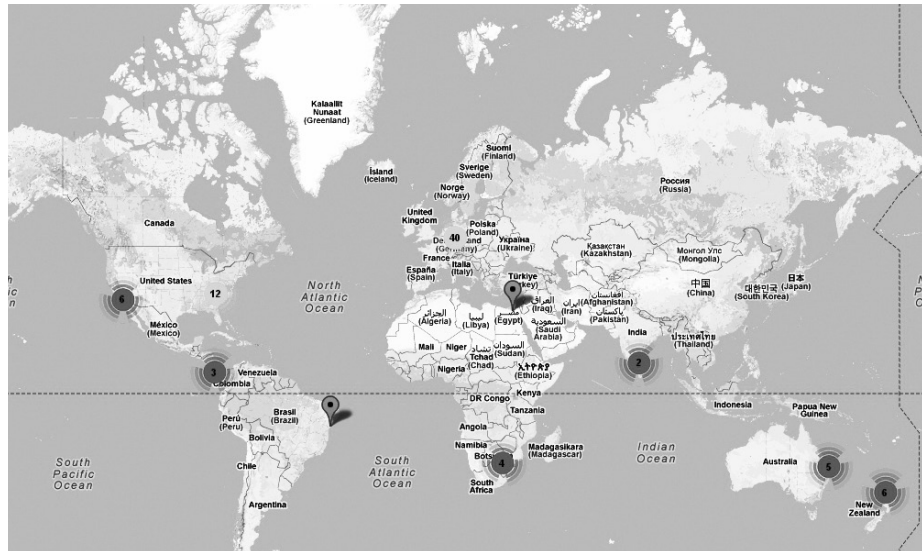


**Figure 3:**
Geographic distribution of the communities examined in the case studies.

*Geographic Distribution of the Ecovillages*

Figures 3 and 4 show the geographic distribution of the ecovillages examined by the reviewed works. The comparative studies with a large number of study objects are not included on the maps. The maps demonstrate that ecovillages exist around the globe, but appear mostly in industrialized nations strongly influenced by Western culture—

namely, in Europe (34) and in North America (19). Significant numbers are also situated in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The large number found in Europe is not necessarily evidence of a particularly large amount of ecovillages worthy of study or of a particularly lively research community, but may be the result of selection bias, because the European research was more accessible to me.



**Figure 4:** Geographic distribution of the case studies in Europe.

*Academic Discipline and Primary Thematic Concerns*

The attempt to categorize the studies based on academic disciplines is made more difficult by the increasing diversity of bachelor's and master's degrees. Therefore, they were divided into broader thematic categories. The balance between the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences is, to date, heavily in favor of the social sciences. Of the 59 studies, 49 took a social science or humanities approach. Only ten studies were categorized in the natural sciences (Bissolotti et al. 2006; Brown 2004; Dowling 2007; DePasqualin et al. 2008; Irrgang 2005; Mader 2009; Mayerhofer 2009; Tinsley and George 2006; Raberg 2007; Simon 2004).

### 1. Social Sciences and Humanities

The studies from the social sciences and the humanities realms can be divided into three categories: a) examinations of the perspectives of individuals, b) sociological investigations, and c) ethnological and cultural investigations. Most of the studies consider a number of common themes. First and foremost is the construction of the vision and mission—that is, the goals, intentions, and ideals being pursued—of each community (Bengis 2008; DePasqualin et al. 2008; Ergas 2010; Holmes 2006; Jones 2011; Mulder et al. 2006; Tolle 2011; van Schyndel Kaspar 2008; Wagner 2007; Wight 2008). Other recurring themes included the evaluation of how well these communities have accomplished their goals and the potential for transferability to other social contexts (i.e., model projects).

*a) Perspectives of Individuals*

Here, mostly psychological aspects came into play. Of primary interest were the motivations to become part of a community (Hübner 2009; Tolle 2011; Wagner 2007). Many studies were devoted to the effects of living in an ecovillage on the individual, including general considerations, such as their well-being or quality of life (Hübner 2009; Kiffmann 2005; Mulder et al. 2006; Simon 2004), and more specific aspects, such as sense of belonging (Kiffmann 2005; Sluiter 2007) and the relationship between humans and nature (Kirby 2003; 2009; Moore and Wight 2007; Wight 2008). Related to this, the construction of identity (Bohill 2010; Fischetti 2008; Kirby 2009; Sluiter 2007) and personality development (Wagner 2008) were also considered. In part, these studies also looked at difficulties individuals in ecovillages face, a topic that is considered explicitly in Dümmler (2007). The Internet survey conducted by Matthias Grundmann et al. (2011) provided demographic information and individual views of the community, as well as the experience of life in communal contexts.

*b) Sociological Investigations*

These texts included, first of all, research concerned with the sociological phenomenon of "the community" (Grundmann et al. 2006). Among these are efforts to create a typology and categorization of communities (Meijering 2006), as well as to generate systematic descriptions (Dierschke 2003). Much attention was dedicated to the emergence of communities, their transformation over time, and their dissolution (Dierschke 2003; Forster and Wilhelmus 2005; Moore and Jones 2011; Jones 2011; Kirby 2003; Meijering 2006; Meijering et al. 2007).

In addition to investigations of the communities as a sociological category, there are also theoretical approaches concerned with their organization. These studies looked at the structure and functionality of their organization as a whole (Brenton 2009; Dierschke 2003; Holmes 2008; Kunze 2003, 2009) and in relation to specific aspects such as decision-making (Jonna et al. n.d.; Kiffmann 2009; Kunze 2003, 2009; Yilmaz et al. 2011) or the admittance and integration of new members (Bengis 2008; Dierschke 2003; Kunze 2003).

The use of technology was also investigated—the state of technology in general (Moore and Wight 2007), as well as specific forms, such as communications technology (Nathan 2009). Communication systems based on interpersonal contact were studied at the community of Auroville (Schwarzin 2010).

Many studies were concerned with the "classic" sociological theme of the balance between the individual and the collective (Forster and Wilhelmus 2005; Holleman 2011; Jones 2011; Kunze 2009; Meltzer 2000). Other recurrent topics were the reconstruction of values and group norms (Nathan 2009; Wagner 2007; Wight 2008), as well as attempts to explain underlying worldviews (van Schyndel Kaspar 2008; Wagner 2008).

In addition to descriptive treatments, there were also various attempts to evaluate how well the ecovillages have accomplished their goals from a sociological perspective (DePasqualin et al. 2008; Ergas 2010; Irrgang 2005; Kunze 2003; Kirby 2003; Mulder et al. 2006). So far these have been largely interpretive; a structured and validated form of evaluating ecovillages is yet to be developed.

Particularly relevant are questions about ecovillages as models or examples, and whether their characteristics can be transferred to other social contexts. Kunze (2009) attempted to determine principles for social sustainability and came up with the following: implementation of sustainability goals, balance between the individual and collective, flexible and responsive organizational principles, the ability to develop, and social and ecological town planning.

Blouin (2007) investigated the question of whether the concept of the ecovillage can be transferred to urban spaces, and if so, how. He concludes that ecovillages cannot serve as models for transforming the entire paradigm of industrialized society, but rather for sustainable solutions at a local level. Other studies concerned with this topic include Centgraf 2009; Dierschke 2003; Fischetti 2008; Grizzuti 2009; Irrgang 2005; Kunze 2003, 2009; Rummer 2005; Sizemore 2004; Simon 2004; and Stüwe 2009.

In order to function as a model, a community must continue proven cultural traditions,[2] while also exploring and testing new ways of living. In transferring knowledge to a broader social context, academic research could help greatly by collecting applicable knowledge from such "experimental places" (Kunze 2003, 2009; Wagner 2008) and guaranteeing greater internal and external validity. So far, little research of this kind has happened, but the amplifying calls for "trans-disciplinary approaches" and "transformation research,"[3]

---

2    Cultural traditions in a wider sense, including also technological and organizational aspects.
3    At least in Germany.

as well as citizen-driven projects that aim to collaborate with academia (e.g., Projekt Lebensdorf[4]), offer hope.

The impact of ecovillages and their interactions with the surrounding region was another frequent topic of study (Centgraf 2009; Joukhi 2006; Meijering et al. 2007; Rummer 2005; Sluiter 2007; Tolle 2011). Shaw (2009) examined a very specific aspect of this: the emotions and conflicts behind the local opposition to the establishment of an ecovillage project in southwest Wales.

Finally, economic studies are almost nonexistent, with Kunze (2003), who at least considered the economic perspective, as an exception.

*c) Ethnological and Cultural Investigations*
Strictly speaking, all of the case studies took, at least methodologically, an ethnological approach in the form of "participant observation," in which the culture (in the sense of the life world) and the everyday lives of the people in the groups examined are described. Among these studies are attempts to describe these cultures and their context in a structured manner, and to determine what form the interaction between the individual and the group takes (Chitewere 2006; Dierschke 2003; Kiffmann 2009; Kirby 2009; Meltzer 2000; Moore and Wight 2007; Sanguinetti 2012). Strünke (2000) examined the supposed connection between autonomy and ecological behavior and concluded that this correlation can be observed in communities.

Cultural studies approaches included examinations of the societal position of ecovillages, similar to the sociological discussions, which considered whether they can be regarded as models and experimental spaces. Concepts used here included ecovillages as utopian places (Bohill 2010; Lockyar 2007) and as manifestations of "counterculture." The latter has turned into the concept of "space of resistance" in the most recent research (Fischetti 2008; Lockar 2007; Meijering et al. 2007).

*d) Architectural and City Planning*
At the junction of the social and natural sciences are investigations of city planning and architecture, as treated in the studies of Loezer (2011) and Tolle (2011), who were interested in sustainable city planning processes.

4   See http://lebensdorf.net.

## 2) Natural Sciences

Studies coming from the natural science perspective were concerned with areas of ecological sustainability, such as energy consumption (Brown 2004), energy supply (Mayrhofer 2009), additional aspects of production (e.g., DePasqualin et al. 2008 on the degree of self-sufficiency), and ecological footprints (Bissolotti et al. 2006; Tinsley and George 2006; Simon 2004). Dowling (2007) looked at sustainable methods of water management in a South African ecovillage. Raberg (2007) examined biodiversity in an ecovillage whose structure and practices are based on permaculture principles. As a general rule, the evaluative studies credit ecovillages with good ecological performance, but also point out areas where there is room for improvement.

For example, the study by Simon et al. (2004) showed that residents of the three examined communities (Ecovillage Sieben Linden, Commune Niederkaufungen, and LebensGut Pommritz) had significantly lower greenhouse gas emissions than the average German citizen. The levels of emissions of the residents of Ecovillage Sieben Linden and Commune Niederkaufungen were also significantly less than those of members of the average ecologically conscious family outside an ecovillage. The study also pointed out that, despite the good performance of the investigated ecovillages, there is still more to be done to make them really ecologically sustainable.

As already mentioned, there have so far been few studies conducted from the perspective of the natural sciences. This is probably due mostly to the fact that ecovillages are viewed primarily as social communities (and this is also their main source of attraction).

## Looking Ahead

Research about ecovillages is a growing field of interest. Various topics have already been raised and relevant findings documented, but there is still a need to connect these results and design further steps for structuring the research field. To address this need, Research in Community (see the following essay) created a database, which is now running in a beta version and welcomes new contributions and corrections (visit www.researchincommunity.net). This is seen as a step to overcome the clear deficit in the evaluation of ecovillages' performance and their relevance to other social contexts.

## Bibliography

Abrams, P., A. McCulloch, S. Abrams, and P. Gore. 1976. *Communes, Sociology and Society.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bengis, L. 2008. "Preliminary Community Formation and the Setting of Boundary Markers in Khula Dhamma Eco-Community, Eastern Cape." Bachelor's thesis, Rhodes Univesity.

Bissolotti, P. M. A., A. G. Santiago, and R. de Oliveira. September 2006. "Sustainability Evaluation in Ecovillages." Presented at PLEA2006: the 23rd Conference on Passive and Low Energy Architecture, Geneva, Switzerland.

Blouin, M. 2007. "The Urban Ecovillage Experiment: The Stories of Six Communities that Hoped to Change the World." Bachelor's thesis, Pomona College.

Bohill, R. R. 2010. "Intentional Communities: Ethics as Praxis." PhD diss., Southern Cross University.

Brenton, P.-E. 2009. "Organizing for Sustainability at a Small Scale: A Case Study of an Ecovillage." Master's thesis, University of Northern British Columbia.

Brown, J. R. 2004. "Comparative Analysis of Consumption Trends in Cohousing and Alternate Housing Arrangements." Master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Castrejon Cardenas, C. 2007. "A Simple Life? The Symbolic Significance of Environmentalism in the Construction of a Community Case Study in the Ecovillage of Las Nubes in Veracruz, Mexico." Master's thesis, University of Tromsø.

Centgraf, S. 2009. "'Ökodörfer bauen!': Regionale Effekte nachhaltiger Modellsiedlungen—Eine Fallstudie im 'Ökodorf Sieben Linden' als Beitrag zur Projektstudie des Vereins Keimblatt Ökodorf." Diplomarbeit, Leibzig.

Chitewere, T. 2006. "Constructing a Green Lifestyle: Consumption and Environmentalism in an Ecovillage." PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton.

DePasqualin, L., M. Haid, L. Krainz, and B. Mandl. 2008. "Systemmodell 'Ökodorf,' Arbeitsgruppe 2." In *Nachhaltigkeit Veränderungsprozesse in Regionen: Berichte aus den Umweltsystemwissenschaften*, edited by Koordinationsbüro für Umweltsystemwissenschaften. Graz: Karl-Franzens-Universität.

Dierschke, T. 2003. "Intentionale Gemeinschaften: Ziele, Kultur und Entwicklung am Beispiel zweier Gemeinschaften." Magisterarbeit, Münster.

Dowling, T. J. 2007. "Sustainable Development in Water and Sanitation: A Case Study of the Water and Sanitation System at the Lynedoch EcoVillage." Master's thesis, University of Stellenbosch.

Dümmler, A. 2007. "Einfach anders leben!? Schwierigkeiten in liberalen Intentionalen Gemeinschaften aus persönlicher Sicht." Magisterarbeit, Freiburg im Breisgau.

Ergas, C. 2010. "A Model of Sustainable Living: Collective Identity in an Urban Ecovillage." *Organization & Enviroment* 23 (1): 32–54.

Fischetti, D. M. 2008. "Building Resistance from Home: Ecovillage at Ithaca as a Model of Sustainable Living." Master's thesis, University of Oregon.

Forster, P. M., and M. Wilhelmus. 2005. "The Role of Individuals in Community: Change Within the Findhorn Intentional Community." *Contemporary Justice Review* 8, 367–79.

Fotopoulos, T. 2000. "The Limitations of Life-Style Strategies: The Ecovillage 'Movement' is NOT the Way towards a New Democratic Society." *Democracy & Nature* 6 (2): 287–308.

Greenberg, D. B. 1993. "Growing Up in Community: Children and Education Within Contemporary U.S. Intentional Communities." PhD diss., University of Minnesota.

Grizzuti, M. P. 2009. "Ecovillage Torri Superiore: Promoting a Sustainable Model for an Alternative Society through Tourism." Master's thesis, King's College London.

Grundmann, M. 2006. *Soziale Gemeinschaften: Experimentierfelder für kollektive Lebensformen.* Berlin: LIT.

Grundmann, M., and I. Kunze. 2011. *Eine Internetbefragung zum Thema Gemeinschaft.* Universität Münster. http://www.unimuenster.de/Soziologie/forschung/gemeinschaftsforschung/docs/internetbefragung_2011.pdf.

Holleman, M. 2011. "Individuality in Community: At the Ecovillage of Ithaca." Master's thesis, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Holmes, V. 2006. "A Critical Analysis of the Gqunube Green Ecovillage Project." Master's thesis, University of Stellenbosch.

Hübner, S. 2009. "Wohlbefindensverständnis und Motivation von Personen in ökologisch orientierten Gemeinschaftsprojekten: Eine Interviewstudie." Diplomarbeit, Technische Universität Berlin.

Irrgang, B. 2005. "A Study of the Efficiency and Potential of the Ecovillage as an Alternative Urban Model." Master's thesis, University of Stellenbosch.

Jones, O. 2011. "Keeping It Together: A Comparative Analysis of Four Long-Established Intentional Communities in New Zealand." PhD diss., University of Waikato.

Jonna, R., J. Neff, G. Livingston, E. Giles, and D. Stutzman. n.d. "Ecovillage and Urban Change in the US: A Comparison of Urban and Suburban Ecovillages." Master's thesis, University of Oregon.

Jouhki, J. 2006. "Imaging the Other: Orientalism and Occidentalism in Tamil-European Relations in South India." PhD diss., University of Jyväskylä.

Kanter, R. M. 1972. *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Kiffmann, V. 2009. "Social Sustainability in Neighborhoods: The Effects of a Social Design and Participatory Decision Making on Residential Quality of Life." Master's thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

Kirby, A. 2003. "Redefining Social and Environmental Relations at the Ecovillage at Ithaca: A Case Study." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23: 323–32.

———. 2009. *Self in Practice in an Ecological Community: Connecting Personal, Social, and Ecological Worlds at the Ecovillage at Ithaca.* Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag.

Kunze, I. 2003. "Bildet Gemeinschaften—oder geht unter: Eine Untersuchung selbstverwalteter, subsistenter Gemeinschaftsprojekte und Ökodörfer in Deutschland—Modelle für eine zukunftsfähige Lebensweise?" Diplomarbeit, Münster.

———. 2009. *Soziale Innovationen für eine zukunftsfähige Lebensweise: Gemeinschaften und Ökodörfer als experimentierende Lernfelder für sozial-ökologische Nachhaltigkeit.* Münster: ecotransfer.

Kunze, I., M. Grundmann, and S. Drucks. 2003. *Fragebogenstudie 2003: Ergebnisse des Fragebogens an Soziale Ergebnisse des Fragebogens an Soziale Gemeinschaften und Klöster in der BRD.* Universität Münster. http://www.unimuenster.de/Soziologie/forschung/gemeinschaftsforschung/docs/gemforsch_Fragebogen2003Web.pdf.pdf.

Lindsey, L. G. 2008. "Cohousing: Its Characteristics, Evolution, and Emerging Typologies." Master's thesis, University of Cincinnati.

Lockyer, J. P. 2007. "Sustainability and Utopianism: An Ethnography of Cultural Critique in Contemporary Intentional Communities." PhD diss., University of Arizona.

Loezer, L. 2011. "Enhancing Sustainability at the Community Level: Lessons from American EcoVillages." Master's thesis, University of Cincinnati.

Mader, C. 2009. "Principles for Integrative Development Processes Towards Sustainability in Regions: Cases Assessed from Egypt, Sweden and the USA." PhD diss., University of Graz.

Mayerhofer, F. 2009. "Potentiale der nachhaltigen umweltverträglichen Energieversorgung in der Oststeiermark und im Südburgenland unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Projektes 'Keimblatt Ökodorf.'" Bachelor's thesis, FH Oberösterreich.

Meijering, L. 2006. "Making a Place of Their Own: Rural Intentional Communities in Northwest Europe." PhD diss., Groningen.

Meijering, L., B. van Hoven, and P. Huigen. 2007. "Constructing Ruralities: The Case of the Hobbitstee, Netherlands." *Journal of Rural Studies* 23: 357–66.

Meltzer, G. 2000. "Cohousing: Toward Social and Environmental Sustainability." PhD diss., University of Queensland.

Metcalf, W. J. 1986. "Dropping Out and Staying In: Recruitment, Socialisation and Commitment: Engenderment within Contemporary Alternative Lifestyles." PhD diss., Griffith University.

Moore, K., and A. Wight. 2007. "Nature, Culture and Machines in the Ecovillage Movement." University of Cincinnati.

Mulder, K., R. Costanza, and J. Erickson. 2006. "The Contribution of Built, Human, Social and Natural Capital to Quality of Life in Intentional and Unintentional Communities." *Ecological Economics* 59: 13–23.

Nathan, L. P. 2009. "Ecovillages, Sustainability, and Information Tools: An Ethnography of Values, Adaption, and Tension." PhD diss., University of Washington.

Raberg, T. 2007. "Permaculture Design in an Ecovillage: In Theory and Practise." Bachelor's thesis, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

Rietzler, K. 2012. "The Role of Scientific Knowledge and Other Knowledge Types in Grassroots Sustainability Initiatives: An Exploratory Case Study of a Low Impact Development Eco-village in Wales." Master's thesis, Universität Freiburg.

Rummer, J. 2005. "Gemeinschaftsorientierte Wohnprojekte und ihre Innovationspotenziale in strukturschwachen ländlichen Räumen Ostdeutschlands." Diplomarbeit, Humboldt-Universität, Berlin.

Sanguinetti, A. 2012. "The Design of Intentional Communities: A Recycled Perspective on Sustainable Neighborhoods." *Behavior and Social Issues* 21: 5–25.

Schwarzin, L. 2011. "Dialogic Interaction for Sustainability: Exploring Complexities and Factors that Shape Interactive Processes." Master's thesis, Wageningen University.

Shaw, K. 2009. "Lammas—A Pioneering Low Impact Development: Conflict and Emotion: Exploring the Feelings and Needs Behind Local Opposition to Lammas, A Proposed Ecovillage to be Developed Near the Southwest Wales Village of Glandwr." Bachelor's thesis, University of Wales.

Simon, K.-H., A. Matovelle, D. Fuhr, K.-P. Kilmer-Kirsch, and P. Dangelmeyer. 2004. *Zusammenfassender Endbericht zum Vorhaben "Gemeinschaftliche Lebens- und Wirtschaftsweisen und ihre Umweltrelevanz."* Kassel: Universität Kassel.

Sizemore, S. 2004. "Urban Eco-villages as an Alternative Model to Revitalizing Urban Neighborhoods: The Eco-village Approach of the Seminary Square/Price Hill Eco-village of Cincinnati, Ohio." Master's thesis, University of Cincinnati.

Sluiter, T. 2007. "Intentional Communities: Creating Alternative Lifestyles in Search of a Better World." Master's thesis, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Strünke, C. 2000. "Selbstbestimmung und Umwelterhaltung: Eine empirische Untersuchung zum Zusammenhang von Autonomie und Nachhaltigkeit am Beispiel alternativer Lebensgemeinschaften." Magisterarbeit, Lüneburg.

Tinsley, S., and H. Gorge. 2006. *Ecological Footprint of the Findhorn Foundation and Community.* Forres: Sustainable Development Research Centre.

Tolle, J. 2011. "Towards Sustainable Development in the Countryside? A Case Study of the First Eco-Hamlet Under Pembrokeshire Planning Policy 52." Master's thesis, Swansea University.

van Schyndel Kasper, D. 2008. "Redefining Community in the Ecovillage." *Human Ecology Review* 15 (1): 12–24.

Wagner, F. 2008. *Wege in eine lebenswerte Zukunft: Möglichkeiten der sozialen Evolution in einer Intentionalen Gemeinschaft am Beispiel des "Heilungsbiotopes Tamera."* Norderstedt: VDM.

Wight, A. R. 2008. "'We are Nature': Exploring Ecovillagers' Perceptions of Nature and Uses of Technology." Master's thesis, University of Cincinnati.

Yilmaz, D., K. Kazbekov, and M. Titiz. 2011. "Decision Making for Strategic Sustainable Development in Selected Swedish Ecovillages." Master's thesis, Blekinge Institute of Technology.

Zablocki, B. D. 1980. *Alienation and Charisma: A Study of Contemporary American Communes.* New York: Free Press.

Felix Wagner, Marcus Andreas, and Sandra Mende[1]

## Research in Community: Collaborating for a Culture of Sustainability

Ecovillages are a perfect example of efforts to create a "culture of sustainability" (see "A Culture of Sustainability" on page 57 of this volume). To fully explore their potential, Research in Community (RIC), an inter- and transdisciplinary research network, was created to promote research on and education for so-called "pioneers

**Figure 1:** This diagram depicts the position and function of RIC, illustrating the so-far-small interface between pioneers of change and science, as well as their common potential for contribution toward social transformation.

of change"[2]—in particular, those who integrate ecological, social, and economic sustainability into a communal lifestyle. RIC aims to motivate pioneers pursuing such goals to work more closely with scientists and researchers. At the same time, it hopes to bring this multifaceted and highly relevant research field to the attention of both students and established academics. Such transdisciplinary collaboration will enable the further creation and transmission of knowledge of and for social transformation.
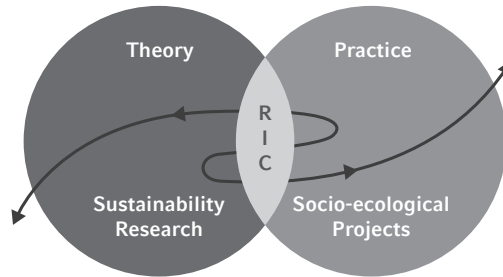
### History

We created RIC in 2007, as we began working on our dissertations about intentional communities, namely ecovillages. We found ourselves confronted with a research field that was still largely undeveloped and unstructured, in spite of the fact that ecovillages offer much potential for academic inquiry into how to achieve sustainability and societal transformation. We believed something had to be done to change this. Since then, RIC has been working to make processes of research on intentional communities smoother, more transparent, and more fruitful for all concerned.

1  Members of the Research in Community Executive Board.
2  German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), *World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability* (Berlin: WBGU, 2011).

In 2011 RIC acquired nonprofit status, further establishing itself as an institution. We have also broadened the scope and reach of our research network, extending our focus beyond ecovillages and incorporating other social and ecological projects, such as Transition Town initiatives.[3]

**RIC's Work to Date**

Since the network's establishment, meetings, colloquia, and workshops have been held regularly. Its first inter- and transdisciplinary research project was carried out in 2009 and 2010 in cooperation with the ecovillage Sieben Linden (see "'For Whom? For the Future!' The Ecovillage Sieben Linden as a Model and Research Project" on page 135). In 2010 and 2011, Andreas, representing RIC, served as an advisor for the "Transition Journey,"[4] a partnership between five European ecovillages sponsored by the European Union with the goal of sharing knowledge and raising awareness to mobilize a social transformation in their respective regions. In addition, RIC researchers traveled around Europe, the United States, and Australia to collect data and to form ties between researchers and people from the global intentional community movement. In order to facilitate research efforts in this growing field, we created a database that includes all the ecovillage research that has been conducted to date, making it easier to access the results of existing studies.

In addition, to advance education in sustainable development, RIC has organized several public workshops and a class on ecovillages at LMU Munich during the 2009–2010 winter semester. Advising students and assisting with research projects are also regular RIC activities. Public interest in RIC is growing, as can be seen in the increasing number of invitations to conferences and requests to give talks and presentations. The highlight of 2011 was the workshop held in cooperation with the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society called "Realizing Utopia: Ecovillage Endeavors and Explorations," which gave rise to this *RCC Perspectives* issue.

---

3   Unlike most ecovillages, Transition Towns are not communities with the intent to create new settlements. Rather, they are existing communities that are trying to make the transition toward more sustainable lifestyles and resilience, especially in response to climate change and peak oil. The movement started around 2006 in the United Kingdom; see http://www.transitionnetwork.org/ for more information.
4   See http://www.siebenlinden.de/pdf/TransitionJourneyBookletFinal.pdf.

Moreover, from the very beginning, RIC has stressed the relevance of scientific re-search to applied projects that are striving for a culture of sustainability, pointing out the advantages of transdisciplinary approaches. In Germany, sustainability has become an increasingly important topic in scientific and educational policy, at least since the above-quoted flagship report by the WBGU and the German Federal Ministry of Educa-tion and Research's declared emphasis on research in sustainable development through its initiative "Project Earth: Our Future."[5] Throughout Germany the terms "pioneer of change," "research for transformation," and "transdisciplinary" are appearing more and more at conferences and in academic papers. It seems to be a particularly ripe point in time, as researchers in various disciplines and politicians of different parties are all in agreement about the need for a societal shift. They all emphasize the important role of citizens in making this happen. How this shift will happen is still unclear, and there are different assumptions about what the new society needs to look like. Even so—and this cannot be emphasized enough—people from all areas of society have come together in the discussion and the search for solutions.

Thus, we are in an exciting time: numerous pioneers of change have emerged and the call for research on these pioneers has been sounded. But, so far, few productive collaborations have been formed. To help remedy this situation, RIC has been an ac-tive participant in various events taking place across Germany.[6] And we have already been recognized for our work. In 2009 we received some funding through the initiative "*Sei ein Futurist*" ("Be a futurist"), and we were nominated for the "*Ideen-Initiative Zukunft*" ("Ideas for a Better Future" initiative), a cooperation between UNESCO and the German drugstore company dm. Most significantly, RIC has been named an of-ficial project of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) for the second time in a row.

### Current and Future Plans

Together with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, we will be convening a symposium on pio-neers of change in October 2013. Researchers and representatives of social and ecologi-cal projects, as well as politicians and research sponsors, will gather to develop concrete

5   See http://www.bmbf.de/de/17858.php.
6   See http://www.researchincommunity.net/index.php?id=3.

ideas for transformation and transformative research. The symposium will commence a series of additional events and research projects to further develop these ideas.

Also, RIC is in the process of designing and establishing a real world "laboratory" for a culture of sustainability,[7] which has taken shape as a transdisciplinary collaboration with the *Projekt Lebensdorf* (Living Village Project), an intentional community that is inspired by ecovillage ideas, but is striving to reach a scale and level of accessibility much greater than is possible within the ecovillage model.[8] This will be the first project to work closely with researchers from the very beginning.

Furthermore, the online presence of RIC will be expanded by adding an interactive platform, which will facilitate the exchange of information and arrangement of research projects. To this end, RIC encourages researchers to become informed about potential topics of investigation and to initiate projects with roots in a multitude of academic disciplines.

Today, RIC is an ideal meeting place for researchers, pioneers of change, politicians, and other members of the general public. For a "great transformation" to take place, all these actors must work together. We are looking forward to what the future will bring.

---

7   Uwe Schneidewind, "Stellungsnahme für das Öffentliche Fachgespräch zum Thema 'Nachhaltigkeit und Transformationsforschung,'"(Deutscher Bundestag, 2012), http://www.bundestag.de/bundestag/ausschuesse17/a18/anhoerungen/Nachhaltigkeits-_und_Transformationsforschung/ADrs_17-281_a.pdf.
8   See www.lebensdorf.net.

Jenny Pickerill

## The Built Ecovillage: Exploring the Processes and Practices of Eco-Housing

### Introduction

The buildings of an ecovillage shape and structure many of its forms and functions. In the main they have been constructed with purpose, using the same ecological and ethical principles employed by the ecovillage as a whole (though obviously this is not always the case). As such, we can use an examination of eco-buildings, often as structures symbolic of the broader ecovillage doctrine and aims, to understand the relationship between ecovillage practices and their impact on mainstream society. Such an examination explores the choices made in how people are building eco-housing themselves and why, what makes eco-housing work, what it is like to live in such dwellings, and what the accompanying constraints and opportunities are. There is an important link between building one's own house and living in eco-housing; that is, in both, one is free to build differently and design for a completely different lifestyle.

These processes and practices of building require a social science analysis. Rather than viewing buildings as technical structures, we can explore the socially and culturally determined choices made by those who have designed, built, and occupied these houses, showing that they represent far more than the materials from which they are constructed. Such a social analysis of eco-buildings can inform our understanding of ecovillages in new ways and enable us to further explore the relationship between ecovillages and mainstream society.

Much of my research has been with those involved in Low Impact Development (LID) in Britain (particularly the Lammas development in Pembrokeshire, Wales), ecovillages worldwide (particularly in Britain, Spain, Thailand, Argentina, and the United States), and a variety of low-cost eco-housing projects (individual and collective). It is important to study ecovillages at a micro-scale (i.e., individual households) in order to fully understand the complex choices people make about their homes, to test the reality of whether the houses actually work, and to appreciate the cultural, natural, and political context in which they are built.

Academics can contribute a great deal to ecovillages: knowledge, time, connections (theoretical and practical sharing), and reflection. A great many different academic perspectives have been used to understand ecovillages, including as autonomous living,[1] sources of grassroots solutions,[2] sites of transition, feminist critiques of mainstream society,[3] planning alternatives,[4] examples of innovative building techniques, embodiments of community and communal living,[5] permaculture in practice,[6] models of alternative livelihoods and anti-consumption practices,[7] and a social movement (environmental, anti-capitalist, and anarchist).

### Learning from Ecovillages

By examining how people build for themselves and live in ecovillages, we can understand the following:

- How to overcome problems encountered in eco-living, by examining the paths taken by participants.
- Why people resist eco-housing. Eco-housing is often cited as being too alternative for most people. The radical end of eco-building is often ignored for being on the "hippie fringe," but we need to look deeper to understand what we can learn from such housing, rather than just disregard it.
- How cheaply we could build houses. Many of the eco-housing projects I have worked with have built houses for just a few thousand British pounds. We should be looking at these examples when talking about affordable housing.

---

1   J. Pickerill and P. Chatterton, "Notes Towards Autonomous Geographies: Creation, Resistance and Self Management as Survival Tactics," *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 6 (2006): 1–17.
2   G. Seyfang, *The New Economics of Sustainable Consumption: Seeds of Change* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillian, 2009); J. Pickerill and L. Maxey, "Geographies of Sustainability: Low Impact Developments and Radical Spaces of Innovation," *Geography Compass* 3, no. 4, (2009): 1515–39.
3   H. Jarvis, "Against the Tyranny of Single Family Dwelling: Learning from Christiania at 40," *Gender, Place and Culture* (forthcoming).
4   S. Fairlie, *Low Impact Development: Planning and People in a Sustainable Countryside* (Oxford: Jon Carpenter, 1996).
5   L. Sargisson, "Justice Inside Utopia? The Case of Intentional Communities in New Zealand," *Contemporary Justice Review* 7, no. 3 (2004): 321–33; J. Fosket and L. Mamo, *Living Green: Communities That Sustain* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2009).
6   J. Lockyer and J. Veteto, eds., *Localizing Environmental Anthropology: Bioregionalism, Permaculture, and Ecovillage Design for a Sustainable Future* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012).
7   K. Halfacree, "From Dropping Out to Leading On? British Counter-Cultural Back-to-the-Land in a Changing Rurality," *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 3 (2006): 309–36.

- What we need houses to do for us. As Lydia Doleman, a self-builder in the United States argues, "Buildings have the capacity to equalize people or segregate them."[8] In other words, the way in which people have chosen to build helps us understand housing needs.
- The importance of diversity in eco-building. We need a broad-based approach to understanding eco-housing, which does not assume that one model fits all. From a geographical perspective, the particularities of place are important in what kind of housing is needed, what climate it needs to cope with, and what resources are available. So we need to embrace diversity in approaches.
- Finally, we can understand the need to combine the technical and structural aspects of eco-housing with the sociological approaches. In other words, there is a lot of feminist scholarship on homes,[9] behavioral approaches to sustainability,[10] and habits and approaches to everyday consumption,[11] which all need to be better connected to debates about eco-housing and ecovillages.

**Theorizing Ecovillages and Eco-Building**

As academics we are able to take a broad and reflective approach to ecovillages. This enables us to theorize about them and, using empirical examples, examine broader practices and patterns. Sometimes these practices are obvious but are not fully acknowledged by participants. Academics can help link together different practices and help understand why ecovillages are developed in certain ways. This is important in helping wider society understand their relevance, but can also help ecovillage participants look differently at the way they do things.

We can explore what I mean here by focusing on just the buildings in ecovillages. An eco-building minimizes resource use in its construction and life cycle, while also providing a comfortable environment in which to live. This can be achieved in numerous ways, and there is a breadth of approaches, ranging from buildings that use technology to reduce their environmental impact, to those which rely upon natural materials and a

8   See http://theflyinghammer.com/.
9   A. Blunt and R. Dowling, *Home* (London: Routledge, 2006).
10  Seyfang, *The New Economics of Sustainable Consumption.*
11  E. Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

low impact lifestyle.[12] For example, some natural buildings can actually have a negative carbon footprint because materials like straw store carbon dioxide.[13] Eco-building thus requires careful consideration of location, materials, resource use, toxicity, durability, reclamation potential, biodiversity, aesthetics, relation to community, and the ongoing dynamic relationships between people and their homes. A well-built eco-building balances our need for comfort with ecological impact. An ecological house that provides no comfort does little to satisfy our human need for a home. As such, eco-building will only be adopted if it offers what people demand from a house and if they can live how they want to within it. Although across cultures there can be different expectations of what houses should provide, across the multiple case studies I have researched there were some commonalities in what people wanted houses to be; these included aesthetically pleasing; comfortable and offering convenient facilities (water, bathrooms, heat, refrigeration); solid and long-lasting; cheap and easy to maintain; financially secure; spacious and flexible in function; private; and a place worthy of investing emotion, time, and money.[14]



**Figure 1:**
An eco-house
in Green Hills,
Scotland

12  S. Roaf et al., *Ecohouse*, 3rd ed. (London: Elsevier, 2007); C. Bird, *Local Sustainable Homes* (Totnes, Devon: Transition Books, 2010).
13  B. Jones, *Building with Straw Bales: A Practical Guide for the UK and Ireland*, 2nd ed. (Totness, Devon: Green Books, 2009).
14  See also J. Williams, *Zero Carbon Homes: A Road Map* (Abingdon, Oxon: Earthscan, 2012).

Eco-buildings can challenge certain assumptions about housing and, as such, challenge people's understanding of what a home should do and represent. Eco-houses are often smaller than conventional housing and require people to share space. They can be less robust than brick or concrete constructions or require more maintenance. They may also require more manual operation, such as wood-stove heating or manual ventilation systems, and contain fewer automated systems, such as air-conditioning. Eco-houses should be designed to meet needs, but also to re-conceptualize what needs are desirable and which are too environmentally costly. This involves challenging social conventions, a task that does not come easily to mainstream society. To explore what I mean by this I will use two examples of housing "needs" that show how a cultural approach to eco-housing opens up new possibilities for understanding eco-building and ecovillages.

*Example 1: Comfort*

Comfort is central to many people's concept of a home, although people define comfort in many different ways. For many, eco-building continues to be viewed as involving a loss of comfort.[15] But living in an eco-house need not mean a Spartan existence. A well-built eco-house can actually be more comfortable, with such features as well-balanced passive heating, providing more even interior temperatures, or solar thermal panels that enable plentiful hot water.



**Figure 2:** Shower blocks in Panya Project, Thailand and El Valle de Sensaciones, Spain.

However, in Britain many examples of low-cost eco-housing appear to involve forgoing certain elements of comfort—most problematically, in the bathrooms. In Spain, Thailand, Argentina, and the United States, eco-houses had prioritized the importance of building well-built and fully functioning bathrooms with hot water, using solar or propane heating. Often the bathrooms were the first building to be finished, and many had large (albeit shared) shower areas (see fig. 2).

15  E. Shove, "How People Use and 'Misuse' Buildings," Presentation at Economic and Social Research Council, London, January 2009.

This contrasted quite dramatically with examples in Britain, where bathrooms were of-
ten the last to be built (and were often unfinished), and few low-cost eco-houses had
ready access to hot water. For example, Green Hill is a small community that has been
in existence since 2001, but they have only a composting toilet and must do their wash in
bowls in the kitchen, the only room with running water. Another example, Landmatters,
has an unfinished bath house with the potential for a solar-heated shower, but nothing
in the bathroom works.

There are a number of very practical reasons why bathrooms are not prioritized in
low-cost eco-housing in Britain, including perceived high costs of installation, a lack
of reliable access to water, and assertive reduction in the use of resources. We could
have readily accepted any of these possible explanations, had the practice not been so
different from other countries. Countries that also struggled with water supply, costs
of installation, lack of plumbing skills, and so on had successfully managed to install
bathrooms. In other words, these are not necessarily valid reasons, since those in
other countries have so easily been able to overcome them.

What, then, can we learn about the importance of comfort in eco-building from these
examples? Houses without bathrooms challenge social norms and add to the challenge
of persuading others that low-cost eco-housing is a comfortable and achievable option.
It is perfectly possible to clean with a bowl of water. What is missing from these eco-
houses is not cleanliness, but rather the comfort and leisure of bathing that social norms
demand. We use bathrooms to satisfy multiple needs: cleanliness, health, comfort, and
convenience.[16] Increasingly, the bathroom is considered much more than a place to
become clean; it is also a site of luxury and leisure, a place to relax and de-stress. At the
same time, it is only relatively recently that we have begun to wash so frequently or have
expectations that showering daily is normal, a habit that is environmentally damaging.[17]

Thus, although the lack of bathrooms could create an image problem for low-cost eco-
housing—i.e., the perception that you can only be environmentally friendly if you give
something up—it is also a potential challenge to what is considered normal and what a
house should provide. Perhaps British eco-housing has gone too far by downgrading the
importance of bathrooms, since examples from other countries demonstrate that you can

16  Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience.*
17  Shove, "How People Use and 'Misuse' Buildings."

build a cheap eco-house and still have a comfortable bathroom. But British eco-housing also illustrates the difficult balance between, on the one hand, the need to re-design buildings to reduce energy use by altering concepts of normality and, on the other hand, ensuring that eco-housing is not perceived as too basic and somehow lacking the essentials of a home. If we eliminate bathrooms from eco-house design, water and energy use will decrease, but will people accept a house without a bathroom? Examining bathrooms allows us to begin to understand the important interplay between buildings, people, and practice and the importance of examining practices and sometimes mundane spaces (such as bathrooms), in order to explore the delicate balance within ecovillages of challenging social conventions, while also appealing to mainstream society.

*Example 2: Aesthetics*
Aesthetics are also key to the mainstream adoption of eco-building. Yet, low-cost eco-housing can be seen as quirky in design, look, and feel. The often sharp contrast between the appearances of eco-housing and other local buildings can limit their adoption by mainstream society. Ensuring that houses fit with expectations for how a house should look, while simultaneously challenging these assumptions and having enough freedom to redesign what a house should do, is a fine balance.

Eco-housing can involve overcoming stigmas in using traditional methods. For example, although extensively and historically used in western Argentina, clay adobe came to be perceived as only for those with low incomes, and its replacement—bricks—became a sign of wealth and status. Contemporary eco-builders at Casa Tierra, an emerging eco-center in rural Argentina, have worked with local communities to successfully revive an interest in traditional techniques, which are more environmentally friendly than brick buildings. However, just because a practice has existed for decades does not make it the best choice. In northern Thailand, for example, the Pun Pun (Chiang Mai) group are trying to teach adobe to local communities, even though bamboo, grass, or wood have been traditionally used. There is an understanding that a house "is where you need to nail it down and tie it up," which is not considered possible with clay adobe.[18] In other cases, such as Earthship in the United States (fig. 4), designs are so contemporary that, although their technical performance is excellent, they fail to be culturally accepted and are not widely replicated.[19]

**Figure 4:** Earthship in the Greater World Earthship Community, Taos, New Mexico, USA.

Thus, the process of bringing in new ideas has to be done carefully and, often, incrementally in order to gain acceptance. As such, we should not underestimate the importance how a house looks and feels in its acceptability and the difficulty involved in challenging traditional ways of building. A social and cultural approach to eco-housing helps us understand the subtleties in the importance of comfort and aesthetics to the growth of eco-housing and ecovillages.

18  Oranratmanee, personal communication with author, 2010.
19  M. Reynolds, *Earthship Volume* 1 (Taos, NM: Solar Survival Press, 1990); M. Reynolds, *Comfort in Any Climate* (Taos, NM: Solar Survival Press, 2000).

**Conclusions and Remaining Questions**

This paper has sought to briefly explore how an analysis of the buildings of ecovillages can enable us to better understand their potential contribution to transforming how mainstream society lives. This focus on the buildings themselves has tended to be neglected by academics interested in ecovillages in favor of work on social processes, community living, emerging economies, and family dynamics. Yet, as hopefully illustrated here, the buildings are some of the most symbolic attributes of ecovillages, and the processes and practices of their construction and occupation signify many of their ecological and ethical principles. As such, they require detailed examination, and there remain many questions about the future of ecovillages and academic research, including the following:

1. **Why do we not talk more about failure?** There is a lack of open discussion about the failure of some eco-building attempts—whether due to a poor choice of materials or innovative techniques that did not stand the test of time. Leafe Christian is perhaps one of the few who has discussed failure thoroughly; though her analysis, again, focused on community dynamics.[20] More open discussion about failure would facilitate the understanding that building is an ongoing and dynamic learning process, as well as support those who make mistakes in continuing to build.

2. **Are we critical enough of ecovillages?** There is a danger that, as sympathetic academics, we may avoid confronting some of the problems inherent in ecovillages, because we do not wish to undermine the efforts of those we support. How can we retain some of this critical enquiry without undermining those we wish to support?

3. **Are we future-proofing our housing and preparing for climate change?** We are building eco-housing that is suitable for today's climate and reduces carbon emissions—both of which are important, but are not enough.[21] We need to be designing houses that will be suitable for the future of unpredictable weather. We should look beyond simply being resilient to climatic events, to how we are prepared to recover and carry on afterwards. In practical terms, this raises questions about whether we should be designing our houses to be more temporary or more durable, training more of us to be able to build our own houses and use more easily available local materials.

20  D. Leafe Christian, *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2003).
21  W. Anderson, *Homes for a Changing Climate: Adapting Our Homes and Communities to Cope with the Climate of the 21st Century* (Totness, Devon: Green Books, 2009).

While there are many lessons we could learn about resilience from ecovillages, we should ask the question, are they also future-proofed enough?

4. **How does gender change how we might build eco-houses and ecovillages?** Building is still dominated by men in both obvious and more subtle ways, and this is influencing how and what is being built. Houses are different when designed and built by women, and there are a growing number of women-only building groups, such as the Mud Girls from Canada.[22] There is also a long-established feminist critique of the design of homes, with scholars long ago arguing that we should design houses without kitchens in order to avoid them being seen as women's spaces.[23] Yet there remains both little awareness amongst eco-builders of and much to be explored in the relationship between gender and eco-building.

5. **How should a concern for social justice influence our approach to eco-housing?** I am not convinced that we are yet really talking about cost, inclusion, and affordability in strong enough terms. We need to more radically explore how encouraging more self-building might begin to deal with some of these issues. In this sense, we are only just beginning to discuss justice in relation to building.[24]

6. **How can we collaborate to better understand ecovillages?** Finally, how can we work better across the different groups involved in ecovillages, while also introducing space for the consideration of some quite cultural elements of housing and home.

Ecovillage living involves considerably more than technical changes to construction; it involves huge cultural shifts in how we consider our house and home. By understanding the roles that culture, history, and place play in contemporary ecovillages, we can see that it is not technology (or the lack thereof) or even politics that hold us back from building more ecovillages—it is deep-rooted cultural and social understandings of how we live and, in particular, what we expect houses to do for us.

As academics we can help this process of understanding what ecovillages do, what we can learn from them, and how we can support them further. We can also help them understand some of their practices and potentially help them improve. By taking a theoretical approach to issues like comfort and aesthetics, we can help understand some of the deeper significance of ecovillage living and, thus, help these practices reach the mainstream.

22  S. Salomon, *Little House on a Small Planet* (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2006).
23  Jarvis, "Against the Tyranny of Single Family Dwelling."
24  R. Burnham, *Housing Ourselves: Creating Affordable, Sustainable Shelter* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1998);
     K. Mason, "Justice in Building, Building in Justice: The Reconstruction of Intra-Generational Equity in
     Framings of Sustainability in the Eco-Building Movement," *Environmental Values* (forthcoming).

## Bibliography

Anderson, W. *Homes for a Changing Climate: Adapting Our Homes and Communities to Cope with the Climate of the 21st Century.* Totness, Devon: Green Books, 2009.

Bird, C. *Local Sustainable Homes.* Totnes, Devon: Transition Books, 2010.

Blunt, A., and R. Dowling. *Home.* London: Routledge, 2006.

Burnham, R. *Housing Ourselves: Creating Affordable, Sustainable Shelter.* London: McGraw-Hill, 1998.

Fairlie, S. *Low Impact Development: Planning and People in a Sustainable Countryside.* Oxford: Jon Carpenter, 1996.

Fosket, J and L. Mamo. *Living Green: Communities That Sustain.* Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2009.

Halfacree, K. "From Dropping Out to Leading On? British Counter-Cultural Back-to-the-Land in a Changing Rurality." *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 3 (2006): 309–36.

Jarvis, H. "Against the Tyranny of Single Family Dwelling: Learning from Christiania at 40." *Gender, Place and Culture* (forthcoming).

Jones, B. *Building with Straw Bales: A Practical Guide for the UK and Ireland.* 2nd ed. Totness, Devon: Green Books, 2009.

Leafe Christian, D. *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities.* Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2003.

Lockyer, J., and J. Veteto, eds. *Localizing Environmental Anthropology: Bioregionalism, Permaculture, and Ecovillage Design for a Sustainable Future.* Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012.

Mason, K. "Justice in Building, Building in Justice: The Reconstruction of Intra-Generational Equity in Framings of Sustainability in the Eco-Building Movement." *Environmental Values* (forthcoming).

Pickerill, J., and P. Chatterton. "Notes Towards Autonomous Geographies: Creation, Resistance and Self Management as Survival Tactics." *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 6 (2006): 1–17.

Pickerill, J., and L. Maxey. "Geographies of Sustainability: Low Impact Developments and Radical Spaces of Innovation." *Geography Compass* 3 no. 4, (2009): 1515–39.

Reynolds, M. *Comfort in Any Climate*. Taos, NM: Solar Survival Press, 2000.

———. *Earthship Volume* 1. Taos, NM: Solar Survival Press, 1990.

Roaf, S., M. Fuentes, and S. Thomas. *Ecohouse*. 3rd ed. London: Elsevier, 2007.

Salomon, S. *Little House on a Small Planet*. Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2006.

Sargisson, L. "Justice Inside Utopia? The Case of Intentional Communities in New Zealand." *Contemporary Justice Review* 7, no. 3 (2004): 321–33.

Seyfang, G. *The New Economics of Sustainable Consumption: Seeds of Change*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillian, 2009.

Shove, E. *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*. Oxford: Berg, 2003.

———. "How People Use and 'Misuse' Buildings." Presentation at Economic and Social Research Council, London, January 2009.

Williams, J. *Zero Carbon Homes: A Road Map*. Abingdon, Oxon: Earthscan, 2012.

Richard W. Franke

## An Overview of Research on Ecovillage at Ithaca

Ecovillage at Ithaca (EVI) is an intentional community on 175 acres (70.8 hectares) of land two miles (1.2 km) west of Ithaca, in the Finger Lakes region of Upstate New York, USA. Currently one hundred adults and 60 children live in 60 houses in two neighborhoods, each organized as a cohousing cooperative with its own by-laws, common house, and self-management procedures. Some parts of the land, such as the access road and the pond, are managed by a village cooperative made up of all 60 households. In 2012 construction began on a third neighborhood of 40 households with a third common house.



Figure 1: Aerial view of Ecovillage at Ithaca showing the layout of the first two neighborhoods and the pond. The long structures are the carports.

EVI began as an outcome of the 1990 cross-country "Walk for a Livable World." The first neighborhood was constructed in 1996, the second in 2003. EVI is not a commune; there is no income sharing and only slight income redistribution (in the monthly operation charges). EVI could be thought of as an "alternative suburb," or as a US middle class neighborhood with an ecological focus and a high awareness of community, wherein people interact and help each other more than in a typical US suburb.

**Research and Documentation of Ecovillage at Ithaca**

EVI is one of the best-studied ecovillages in the world, and we make a lot of information about the community publicly available. We currently have nineteen documents about the community in the publications section of our website.[1] Several additional studies are summarized in the document "EVI in Publications," found in the same location. This document includes three books, seven academic journal articles, eleven dissertations, and a few miscellaneous publications. A webpage entitled "Short Articles" contains links to ten newspaper or magazine articles with significant content about EVI.[2] The website includes additional information on the various neighborhoods, educational activities, village-based businesses, links to other sites, and a virtual photo-tour of the community. Twelve newsletters covering parts of the period from 2000 to 2009 are posted on the site, as well.[3] Printed copies of newsletters from 1995 to 1999 and some annual reports are available at the physical EVI location. Internally, EVI has a large electronic archive of the minutes from the all-village meetings, the various neighborhood meetings, the educational center board, and from several of the standing and ad hoc committees that make up the self-management activities of the community. The archive also contains all the emails ever sent out through the several LISTSERVs. Neither the minutes nor the emails have ever been analyzed.

**What Have Researchers Studied and Not Studied at EVI?**

Research has centered on two major aspects of EVI: the degree of environmental sustainability and the nature of community life. Research has been mostly qualitative, but a couple of quantitative studies have also been conducted.

*The Degree of Sustainability*
The World Commission on Environment and Development—also known as the "Brundtland Commission," after its chairperson—defined sustainability as meeting "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own

---

1  See http://ecovillageithaca.org/evi/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=83.
2  See http://www.ecovillageithaca.org/evi/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=47&Itemid=83.
3  See http://ecovillageithaca.org/evi/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=39&Itemid=83.

needs."[4] In their report, entitled *Our Common Future,* they elaborated, "At a minimum, sustainable development must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth: the atmosphere, the waters, the soils, and the living beings."[5] Echoing this, the Ecovillage at Ithaca mission statement reads as such: "To promote experiential learning about ways of meeting human needs for shelter, food, energy, livelihood, and social connectedness that are aligned with the long-term health and viability of Earth and all its inhabitants."

So, how much sustainability has the EVI experiment achieved? According to EVI Co-founder and Director Liz Walker, the community has made significant steps in the direction of sustainability. She outlines these steps in her book *Ecovillage at Ithaca: Pioneering a Sustainable Culture* (2005), especially in chapter seven, "The 'Eco' in Ecovillage." Walker claims that EVI emphasizes a simple, affordable energy savings strategy over costly state-of-the-art technology and facilities. This makes the accomplishments more replicable in other communities.

In the book, she identifies the main sources of the reduction in EVI's per capita Ecological Footprint, which is approximately 40 percent lower than the US average. (Ecological Footprint is defined as "the area of productive land and water ecosystems required to produce the resources that the population consumes and assimilate the wastes that the population produces, wherever on Earth the land and water is located."[6]) The sources include the community's location close to Ithaca City; on-site employment (i.e., within EVI); land use policies; water conservation practices; the local, organic vegetable and fruit farm, West Haven, and Kestrel's Perch organic berry farm; green building strategies; car sharing and carpooling practices; and high levels of composting and recycling.

A document on the website entitled "FROG Energy Facts" summarizes (with complete references) a quantitative study by Moos et al. published in the *Journal of Urban Design* and a more-detailed Massachusetts Institute of Technology master's thesis by Jason

4   The World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 43.
5   See note 4, pages 44–45.
6   See http://www.sustainablescale.org/conceptualframework/understandingscale/measuringscale/ecologicalfootprint.aspx.

Brown.[7] FROG refers to the First Resident Group—that is, the first neighborhood of 30 houses. According to this research, in the year 2002 FROG used 37.5 percent fewer BTUs per person in heating and cooking, 71 percent less water, 41 percent less electricity, and had an Ecological Footprint of 56 percent below the US average.[8] A separate study, conducted by Cornell University students, found the EVI Ecological Footprint to be 45 percent below the US average in 1998.[9] Even so, the 2002 EVI (partial) Ecological Footprint of 4.25 ha is 2.4 times the 2007 biocapacity figure for earth, 1.8 global ha.[10] A two-part slideshow entitled "EVI as a Laboratory for Sustainability," which contains much of this information and related photos, can be found on the EVI website. Some energy research conducted on SONG, the second neighborhood, indicates similar heating and electrical usage patterns, but this has not been published or posted. More detailed and recent studies of our footprint would be useful in evaluating the accomplishments and limitations of the EVI experiment. It would also be of interest to see how much EVI residents talk about and/or act toward decreasing our footprint. The December 2011 installation of

7   See http://ecovillageithaca.org/evi/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_
    download&gid=34&Itemid=77; Moos et al., "Does Design Matter? The Ecological Footprint as a Planning
    Tool at the Local Level," *Journal of Urban Design* 11, no. 2 (2006): 195–224; and Jason R. Brown, "Com-
    parative Analysis of Energy Consumption Trends in Co-housing and Alternate Housing Arrangements,"
    (master's thesis, MIT, 2004).
8   Moos et al, "Does Design Matter."
9   Minott et al., "Preliminary Ecological Footprint Analysis of EcoVillage at Ithaca." (unpublished ma-
    nuscript, 1999).
10  Moos et al., "Does Design Matter," 215.

a neighborhood photovoltaic array that will produce about 52 percent of FROG home electricity needs, along with an array placed last year on the FROG common house, could have a significant impact on the footprint. A doctoral dissertation currently in progress that is using the life cycle assessment technique to estimate ecological footprint tentatively indicates that the footprint with the new photovoltaic array has declined to 70 percent below the US average.[11] However, the loss of our Ithaca Carshare car, as a result of insufficient use, means that car ownership and usage per person may have increased since Walker's book, which could offset any gains from the solar array. As is evident, relevant time series studies are lacking at EVI.

*The Nature of Community Life*

As an intentional community, EVI attracted a number of political activists and idealists who saw closer community ties as an end in themselves. Community solidarity can also influence environmental variables in at least two ways. Firstly, closer community ties can function to partly replace the materialistic addiction to products as a means of life satisfaction. Secondly, solidarity can lead to community practices that directly lessen the footprint. For example, the two on-site organic farms and the winter root vegetable cooperative reduce total community travel to supermarkets. Community dinners involve one shopping trip instead of up to 60, along with more efficient use of stoves, water, and dish-washing supplies. Car sharing and the almost daily "ride-wanted" emails reduce pressure to purchase additional vehicles. To date, no researchers have looked systematically into these aspects of EVI.

*Consensus, Committees, and Community Self-Management*

Several chapters in Walker's book deal with the processes and events in building community life. She covers both the rewards and disappointments. Former New York University psychology graduate student Andy Kirby's 2004 dissertation analyzes the overall psychological responses to trying to build community, including attitudes towards consensus decision-making. Consensus is the focus of Buckwalter's dissertation and appears as a major component in the dissertations by Fischetti and Breton. Breton also takes up the larger structural consequences of the problems inherent in consensus, as well as the contradiction between EVI's stated goal of being an educational site and its lack of regular,

11  Walker has some details of this study in her essay "Coming of Age: 21 Years of Ecovillage Planning and Living," *Communities Magazine* 156 (2012).

comparable data production over time. She also questions whether the easy admissions process for those who buy houses at EVI might make it harder to carry forward the reduction of the Ecological Footprint. Whitfield elaborates on the data problems and identifies a number of limitations on EVI's ability to reduce its Ecological Footprint in the future. Fischetti and, especially, Chitewere examine attitudes and practices towards consumerism and the challenges EVI faces in reducing the extravagances of US middle class life. This is important because Moos et al. note that consumption (as opposed to neighborhood design and building construction practices) is a major component of the American footprint.[12] The failure in 2009 to maintain the onsite car-share is evidence of the difficulty the community faces in pushing down its footprint and suggests some validity to the observations of these authors. Chitewere and Taylor push this point further, arguing that EVI residents tend to see their sustainability mostly in terms of middle class consumption practices internal to the village, thereby limiting their awareness of and actions in support of the social justice and environmental justice movements that take place outside.[13] They support their argument with an analysis of the content of EVI newsletters, showing an alleged paucity of social justice articles.

A different aspect of community life is the potential tension between individual space and personal growth versus the demands for participation and at least a certain amount of conformity. This is studied by Kirby and is the focus of Holleman's dissertation. Some material on this appears in Walker's book, as well.

Walker emphasizes the role of community-created traditions in building community solidarity. These include "guys baking pies," "women goin' swimmen,'" a maypole winding dance, and other rituals that bring community members together to reaffirm their solidarity. Some informal observations suggest a weakening of these traditions—e.g., "guys baking pies" did not take place for two years, and participation in some other traditions may be declining.

A decline in participation rates and enthusiasm for the community aspect of life at EVI would be consistent with the analysis of sociologists Mayer Zald and Roberta Ash. In

---

12  Moos et al., "Does Design Matter," 205–06.
13  Tendai Chitewere and Dorceta E. Taylor, "Sustainable Living and Community Building in Ecovillage at Ithaca: The Challenges of Incorporating Social Justice Concerns into the Practices of an Ecological Cohousing Community," in "Environment and Social Justice: An International Perspective," ed. Dorceta E. Taylor, special issue, *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy* 18 (2010): 141–76.

their classic 1966 paper "Social Move-
ment Organizations: Growth, Decay
and Change," Zald and Ash use the
concept of "routinization of charisma,"
developed by the famous German so-
ciologist Max Weber.[14] That is, social
movements begin with excitement,
enthusiasm, and energy, but have an
inherent tendency—over time and
as they interact with the other forces
in society—to become more routine.
They shift from goal orientation to or-
ganizational maintenance.



**Figure 3:**
Community
maypole ceremony,
May Day, 2010.

Thus, has the initial energy for community-reinforcing activities at EVI—such as endless
meetings and participatory decision-making, deepening groups where residents explore
their feelings towards each other in great detail, and group music-listening evenings—
begun to give way to more preoccupation with the concerns of individual households?
Do fewer residents eat at community dinners and volunteer to cook? Are community
events less well-attended and, instead, is more of community life experienced as a set
of emails or an occasional shared ride to town? Some residents perceive greater and
greater difficulty getting quorums for decisions at neighborhood and village meetings.
It is harder to recruit officers and board members. As Walker put it in an article for
*Communities Magazine*,

> Another challenge we are facing is how to keep the energy going for the long
> term. After 15 years of living in community, we are currently facing a problem of
> burnout. It is often hard to make the quorum for our monthly village meetings, our
> work teams sometimes don't have enough participation, and many community
> meals (there are four dinners a week) have low attendance. What is wrong? We've
> been trying to figure it out.[15]

14  Mayer Zald and Roberta Ash, "Social Movement Organizations: Growth, Decay and Change," *Social
    Force*s 44 no. 3 (1966): 327–41.
15  Walker, "Coming of Age," 39, http://communities.ic.org/articles/1588/Coming_of_Age.

The gradual departure or death of founding members leads to replacement by new residents who did not experience the initial idealistic surge that brought the community into being. On the other hand, Walker speculates that the infusion of new members could help overcome the burnout she feels long term residents are experiencing. These varying perceptions could provide an interesting research topic, one that has relevance for the general understanding of intentional communities.

But is EVI being routinized? Are meetings actually less well-attended, or is that just a perception of a few overly-critical observers? The data have yet to be analyzed. The nature of the changes taking place in the community would provide useful information for others setting up intentional ecological communities. Hard data are probably available in the archive of meeting minutes, and a fair assessment would require discussions with a representative sample, not just a few vocal interviewees.

On the positive side, for example, FROG neighborhood's new PV solar array is reducing our carbon footprint and will greatly reduce electricity costs. Residents have recently set up a new cooperative community garden along with the winter root cooperative mentioned above.[16] Construction for the third neighborhood, which has been actively forming over the past three years, has begun. EVI has created an organic farming educational program called Groundswell that makes use of ten acres of our land for young farmer training, one of the common houses, and much of the community's time and energy.[17] And several EVI residents played a role in the founding of the New Roots Charter School in Ithaca, where the curriculum emphasizes sustainability and social justice. We have an "Occupy" discussion group, and there are events at least once a month that involve residents in some kind of progressive political action or conversation. Recently a group sprang up to discuss alternative ways to manage ageing. In 2011, in collaboration with Tompkins County, EVI won a major grant from the US Environmental Protection Agency, in part to monitor the development of sustainable design and lifestyle in the new third neighborhood.[18]

---

16  Richard W. Franke, "Everyday and Spontaneous Cooperatives in an Ecovillage," *Grassroots Economic Organizing* 2, no. 7 (2011).
17  See http://www.groundswellcenter.org/.
18  Bill Chaisson, "Tompkins County, EcoVillage Win EPA Grant to Study Sustainable Housing Options," *Ithaca.com,* April 13, 2011.

## Research and the Community: Collaboration, Indifference, Resentment

Perhaps a significant current weakness of research and the EVI community is the lack of any ongoing community discussions or actions in response to outside research. While residents mostly welcome researchers, as well as the approximately 400 tour participants each year, the research findings are not reported within the community in any regular way. The annual report and the annual meeting are possible venues

Figure 4:
The entrance to Rachel Carson Way, the main street at EVI, the bus stop at which has a living roof.

for such interaction, but nothing along these lines seems to be happening. The community newsletter is rarely published. A 2005 local community task force on energy withered away with little obvious impact; some activities were undertaken, but no evaluation was made and few records were kept. An all-day workshop on consensus decision-making in March 2010 appears headed for the same fate. Some residents say on occasion that they are tired of answering the same questions from outside researchers. Others have shifted the focus of their activities to downtown or county-wide social justice and sustainable community development. At the same time, most residents remain welcoming to researchers and enthusiastic about having our little ecovillage experiment made better known to the outside.

## Possibilities for Future Research at EVI

Despite the large amount of data and analysis already gathered, EVI continues to offer researchers a wealth of opportunities to contribute to our understanding of environmental sustainability, the role of community in overcoming isolation and super individualism, and the potential for intentional community organizing to make life better in our age of ecological and economic crises. EVI is easy to access, onsite and fairly affordable accommodations are usually available, and participant observation is always welcomed. As with most communities, a researcher who stays more than a few days

eventually gains trust and familiarity, making the long questionnaire or in-depth inter-
view easier to carry out. In addition to updates or follow-ups to existing studies that
are more than a couple of years old, there is a plethora of possible topics that could
benefit both EVI and the broader sustainability movement, including the following:

- What have been the main decisions and changes at EVI over any particular time period?
- What are the main mechanisms of self-management at EVI, and how might they be
  applied to other communities?
- What are the major sources of conflict at EVI, and how effectively are they dealt with?
- How effective has the Land Partnership Committee been in developing sustainable land-
  use practices?
- How does the EVI committee structure function? How effective is it?
- What have been the barriers to affordability and diversity at EVI, and how has the com-
  munity attempted to overcome these barriers?
- How is the third neighborhood impacting community life and sustainability at EVI?
- How do residents of the surrounding area—including the minority and low-income po-
  pulations—perceive the EVI experiment?
- How much income inequality exists at EVI, and what policies are in place or could be
  envisioned to reduce it?
- What are the consequences, if any, of the material inequalities that exist?
- Has EVI become less energetic than in its early days in promoting sustainable lifestyles
  among its residents?
- What is EVI's Ecological Footprint today, and what changes have occurred since previ-
  ous estimates?
- How much mobility in residence has occurred at EVI over the years, and how are new
  residents different, if at all, from the founders?
- What options remain for EVI to reduce its Ecological Footprint?
- How much impact do the community dinners and the onsite farms have on EVI's Eco-
  logical Footprint?
- Which of EVI's designs and/or practices have the greatest potential for replication in
  other neighborhoods or communities, and why?
- Is community life at EVI having any measurable impact on consumption patterns that
  would distinguish it from regular suburban life in the United States?
- How are EVI residents approaching the problem of ageing? What programs have they
  developed, and how effective are they?

Other researchers will undoubtedly come up with additional ideas for research at EVI, which our community will certainly welcome. We look forward to their questions and their findings.

## Bibliography of Major Publications about Ecovillage at Ithaca

**Books or Chapters in Books**

Dawson, Jonathan. "Ecovillages and the Transformation of Values." *2010 State of the World—Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability*, edited by Worldwatch Institute, 185–90. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010. Specific mention of EVI's 40% reduction in energy consumption and the educational programs in concert with Cornell and with Ithaca College.

McKibben, Bill. *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future.* New York: Times Books, 2007. On pages 155–58, he discusses EVI and Yoff, an EVI Sister Village in Senegal; based on a visit in 1996 and on Liz Walker's book.

Walker, Liz. *Ecovillage at Ithaca: Pioneering a Sustainable Culture*. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2005.

———. "Weaving the Community Fabric" and "The Cycle of Life: Birth and Death in Community." In *Beyond You and Me: Inspiration for Developing Community,* edited by Kosha Anja Joubert and Robin Alfred, 58–64 and 205–09. Hampshire: Permanent Publications / Gaia Education, 2007.  http://www.gaiaeducation.net/docs/Beyond%20You%20&%20Me%20Ebook.pdf.

———. "Bringing the Harvest Home: CSA Farming and Farmer Education at Ecovillage at Ithaca." In *Designing Ecological Habitats: Creating a Sense of Place,* edited by E. Christopher Mare and Max Lindegger, 118–23. East Meon, UK: Permanent Publications, 2011.
For Gaia Education: http://www.gaiaeducation.net/docs/4Keys%20-%20Designing%20Ecological%20Habitats.pdf.

**Journal and Magazine Articles**

Allen-Gil, Susan, Liz Walker, Garry Thomas, Tom Shevory, and Elan Shapiro. "Forming a Community Partnership to Enhance Education in Sustainability." *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 6, no. 4 (2005): 392–402.

Breton, Prudence-Elise. "Ecovillages: How Ecological Are You?" *Communities* 143 (2009): 22–24.

Chitewere, Tendai. "Green Technology and the Design of a Green Lifestyle." *Humanities and Technology Review* 27 (2008): 87–105. http://htronline.weebly.com/uploads/5/1/4/3/5143156/2008_volume_27.pdf.

———. "Equity in Sustainable Communities: Exploring Tools from Environmental Justice and Political Ecology." *Natural Resources Journal* 50, no. 2 (2010a): 315–39. Pages 334 to 337 are specifically about EVI; many other references throughout the article.

Chitewere, Tendai, and Dorceta E. Taylor. "Sustainable Living and Community Building in Ecovillage at Ithaca: The Challenges of Incorporating Social Justice Concerns into the Practices of an Ecological Cohousing Community." In "Environment and Social Justice: An International Perspective," edited by Dorceta E. Taylor. Special Issue. *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy* 18 (2010b): 141–76. http://www.emeraldinsight.com/books.htm?chapterid=1881443&show=abstract.

Kasper, Debbie Van Schyndel. "Redefining Community in the Ecovillage." *Human Ecology Review* 15, no. 1 (2008): 12–24.

Kirby, Andy. "Redefining Social and Environmental Relations at the Ecovillage at Ithaca: A Case Study." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23 (2003): 323–32.

Moos, Markus, Jason Whitfield, Laura C. Johnson, and Jean Andrey. "Does Design Matter? The Ecological Footprint as a Planning Tool at the Local Level." *Journal of Urban Design* 11, no. 2 (2006): 195–224.

Walker, Liz. "Coming of Age: 21 Years of EcoVillage Planning and Living." *Communities Magazine* 156 (2012): 36–40. http://communities.ic.org/articles/1588/Coming_of_Age.

Willett, Allegra. "Growing Up in Ecovillage at Ithaca." *Communities Magazine* 156 (2012): 41. An article about childhood memories.

**Dissertations**

Blouin, Michael. "The Urban Ecovillage Experiment: The Stories of Six Communities that Hoped to Change the World." BA diss., Pomona College, 2007.

Breton, Prudence-Elise. "Organizing for Sustainability at a Small Scale: A Case Study of an Ecovillage." Master's thesis, The University of Northern British Columbia, 2009.

Brown, Jason R. "Comparative Analysis of Energy Consumption Trends in Co-housing and Alternate Housing Arrangements." Master's thesis, MIT, 2004.

Buckwalter, Corry C. "The Contribution of Consensus-Building to Participatory Design: A Case Study of Ecovillage at Ithaca." Master's thesis, Cornell University, 1994.

Chitewere, Tendai. "Constructing a Green Lifestyle: Consumption and Environmentalism in an Ecovillage." PhD diss., State University of New York in Binghamton, 2006.

Fischetti, Diana Michelle. "Building Resistance from Home: Ecovillage at Ithaca as a Model of Sustainable Living." Master's thesis, University of Oregon, 2008.

Guinther, Lindsey Lawry. "Cohousing: Its Characteristics, Evolution, and Emerging Typologies." Master's thesis, University of Cincinnati School of Architecture and Interior Design, 2008.

Holleman, Mirjam. "Individuality in Community at the EcoVillage at Ithaca." Master's thesis, VU (Free University), Amsterdam, 2011. http://ecovillageithaca.org/evi/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=36&Itemid=83.

Jovic, Emily V. "Lighter Footprints: Quality of Life Correlates, Mindfulness, and the Sustainability Movement." Master's thesis, University of Calgary, 2004.

Kirby, Andy. "Self in Practice in an Ecological Community: Connecting Personal, Social and Ecological Worlds in the Ecovillage at Ithaca." PhD diss., City University of New York, 2004.

Whitfield, Jason. "Understanding the Barriers Encountered by Residents of Ecovillages." Master's thesis, University of Waterloo, 2001.

**Miscellaneous Reports and Documents**

Franke, Richard W. "Everyday and Spontaneous Cooperatives in an Ecovillage." *Grassroots Economic Organizing* 2, no. 7 (2011). http://geo.coop/node/617.

Hollick, Malcolm, and Christine Connelly. *Sustainable Communities: Lessons from Aspiring Ecovillages.* Australia: Praxis Education, 1998. Pages 39–42 are specifically about EVI.

Kirby, Andy. "Domestic Protest: The Ecovillage Movement as a Space of Resistance." *Bad Subjects* (2004): 65. http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2004/65/kirby.html.

Minott, Stefan, Natalia Peranginangin, and Sun Shao. "Preliminary Ecological Footprint Analysis of EcoVillage at Ithaca." Unpublished manuscript, 1999.

Walker, Elizabeth. "Ecovillage at Ithaca: Principles, Best Practices and Lessons Learned," 2012. http://ecovillageithaca.org/evi/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=49&Itemid=77. Prepared for the US Environmental Protection Agency's Climate Showcase Communities Grant.

**Websites with Further Information about EVI**

Chaisson, Bill. "Tompkins County, EcoVillage Win EPA Grant to Study Sustainable Housing Options." *Ithaca.com*, April 13, 2011. http://www.ithaca.com/news/article_71585b2a-65dc-11e0-b2f5-001cc4c002e0.html. Article in local press about the EPA grant.

NAHB Research Center. "TechPractices: EcoVillage at Ithaca, Ithaca, NY." http://www.toolbase.org/Home-Building-Topics/Indoor-Air-Quality/EcoVillage-at-Ithaca. Architect and builder description of the technical aspects of the FROG heating system.

Anna Kovasna

## Collaborative Research: Examples and Lessons from a Baltic Sea Project

"Ecovillages for Sustainable Rural Development," or ECOVILLAGES, is a collaborative research project in which ecovillagers and academics, and ecovillager academics, aim to advance the political recognition, number, resources, and influence of ecovillages in the Baltic Sea Region. My role in the project is to represent the Swedish Ecovillage Network, which means I am involved mainly as an activist. I am, however, also a PhD candidate in social anthropology, researching alternative economics and culture in ecovillages. Here, I am writing neither as an official representative of the project nor of my own research, but as somebody who is trying to combine my roles as activist and academic within the ecovillage movement.

The ECOVILLAGES project builds on a proclaimed conviction that ecovillages are a solution to many problems facing society today. It also involves actors with different experiences and approaches to implementing and spreading that solution. As such, it highlights important issues and possibilities that emerge when academics, activists, and activist academics attempt to work together to change society. I will return to these issues, since I feel they are at the core of any collaborative project for social change. First, however, I will explain the origins, characteristics, goals, and accomplishments of the project so far.

### ECOVILLAGES and ECOVILLAGESplus at a Glance

ECOVILLAGES is a three-year project funded by the EU Baltic Sea Region Programme and the European Rural Development Fund. Started in February 2011, it is a flagship of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and a Baltic 21 Lighthouse Project. Connected to the project is ECOVILLAGESplus, which is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency's (SIDA) Baltic Sea Unit and enables partners from Russia and several Swedish organizations to also participate in ECOVILLAGES. I will from now on use the capitalized word ECOVILLAGES or "the project" to refer to both these projects, since, in practice, they function almost as one.

In total, the project involves 15 partner organizations, seven of which are academic institutions; seven are ecovillages, ecovillage networks, or thematically related organizations; and one is the Council of Baltic Sea States. The participation of two partners from Belarus is financed through the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, although actual national permission for their participation has not yet come through.

**Project Partners, ECOVILLAGES and ECOVILLAGES plus**

| Lead Partner | Lithuanian Institute of Agrarian Economics |
|---|---|
| **Project Partners** | Centre of Environmental Solutions, Belarus<br>Latvian State Institute of Agrarian Economics<br>MTT Agrifood Research, Finland<br>Suderbyn Cooperative Society, Sweden<br>West Pomeranian Business School, Poland |
| **Associated Partners** | Centre for Independent Social Research, Russia<br>Council of Baltic Sea States<br>Ecohome NGO, Belarus<br>Forest Technical Academy, Russia<br>Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) Europe<br>Ekobyarnas Riksorganisation, the Swedish ecovillage network<br>Permaculture Sweden<br>Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences<br>ZEGG Ecovillage, Germany |

*Origins*

From its very origin, ECOVILLAGES has blended influences from the two initiatives from which it sprouted: one originating in the ecovillage movement, the other in an academic institution. The former was a project entitled Healthy Lifestyles in the Baltic Region, which was initiated by GEN Europe and financed by the SIDA Baltic Sea Unit. The lead partner was Holma Folkhögskola in Sweden (an adult education center). The

latter was an EU-financed project on the role of permaculture[1] in farming, planned by the Lithuanian Institute of Agrarian Economics (LAEI). Looking for potential partners, LAEI contacted Permaculture Sweden, which is one of the founders of *Holma Folkhögskola*. Within the framework of the Healthy Lifestyles project there were already plans for a regional meeting to bring together various actors in the field. The result was a gathering in an ecovillage in Estonia in 2009, where most of the partners, both academic and non-academic, of the current ECOVILLAGES and ECOVILLAGESplus projects were present.

After this gathering, LAEI reformulated their project to focus on ecovillages and invited various partners to join. At the same time, Permaculture Sweden, the Swedish Ecovillage Association, and the Russian participants continued their dialogue, which led to ECOVILLAGESplus, with Permaculture Sweden as lead partner. All members of ECOVILLAGESplus are associated partners in the larger project. As can be seen in the list of project partners, it proved quite difficult to find actual ecovillages willing to become main partners in the project, an issue further discussed below.

*Goals*

As stated in the project plan, ECOVILLAGES is aimed at "helping our society to get closer to nature again and to develop new ways of living together on the land in a genuinely more sustainable way." This is to be done through promoting the ecovillage concept, which is seen as an innovation offering solutions to problems related to the distribution of resources, climate change, and the social life in the region. Ecovillages are presented as "an alternative to the individualistic, consumerist, and commodified systems many cities represent."

The three main goals of the project are to create toolkits for ecovillage developers, to formulate and disseminate policy recommendations, and to strengthen the capacity of local ecovillages and ecovillage networks and their visibility in society. In addition, the project is intended to promote knowledge transfer between ecovillages and the general public, as well as between different parts of the region. These aims are to be reached through scientific research in ecovillages and through partnerships between

---

1   The word permaculture is a contraction of "permanent agriculture" or "permanent culture." Permaculture is concerned with the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems, which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. The aim is to integrate landscape and people, providing food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way.

researchers and ecovillagers. In this sense, academics are engaged in this project in order to support and collaborate with ecovillages in bettering society, not to conduct studies purely for the sake of research.

*Expected Results and Outputs*

In more concrete terms, the project will produce three manuals for launching and sustaining ecovillages: one about permaculture in the Baltic Sea region, one for sustainable housing and green architecture, and one covering guidelines for community living, including community planning and development, outreach and marketing, community businesses, consensus decision-making, and meeting facilitation. The focus is on spreading information about best practices and common pitfalls. It is expected that these manuals can be transferred to and used in many different contexts, not just in ecovillages, and not just in the Baltic Sea region.

The manuals will be based on a combination of surveys, case studies, and interviews that—together with analyses of the main political, legal, economic, and environmental challenges for ecovillages in the region—also form the basis of the policy recommendations on how to support and facilitate ecovillage life. The aim is, naturally, that these recommendations are put into practice.

To strengthen the ecovillage movement and awareness of it in the region, the project is also responsible for starting national and regional ecovillage networks, formulating and implementing an ecovillage internship program, constructing an online tool for ecovillages to assess their progress towards sustainability, and starting what is called the Ecovillage Road. This latter program is essentially an interactive online database for tourism, marketing, and networking, with the purpose of facilitating ecovillage visits, outreach, and knowledge exchange.

**The Role and Nature of Research**

Research plays a key role in fulfilling the aims of the project, since it provides the basis for both manuals and recommendations and, to some extent, for networking and the dissemination of knowledge. It consisted of an initial survey of all existing ecovillages and ecovillage initiatives in the participating countries, which was focused on actually

locating them and on collecting data on each, such as the age, size, and general characteristics. The survey was followed by a more in-depth study based on physical visits and semi-structured interviews covering social, cultural, economic, ecological, and technological aspects of ecovillage life. The questionnaire used in these interviews was constructed by all partners together, giving ecovillagers and related organizations significant influence over the information gathered and enabling them to adjust the questions to be more relevant for respondents.

In some countries, these interviews were carried out with all known ecovillages; in others, such as in Sweden and Russia, the total number of villages was too great, so a sample was selected. In total, interviews were held with representatives from 44 ecovillages: 12 in Sweden, 12 in Finland, six in Russia, seven in Latvia, and seven in Lithuania. While the results of the questionnaire are still being analyzed, it is already clear that the sample is too small and conditions too varied to draw statistical conclusions. Instead, the material gives a general overview of tendencies in the region and makes it possible to select especially interesting cases for further qualitative studies. These coming case studies will focus on specific aspects of problems, solutions, and innovations in various ecovillages.

## Practical Notes on Collaboration

*Finding Partners and Building Partnerships*
Achieving many of the project goals requires close cooperation between researchers and ecovillagers. However, the makeup of the project partners varies by country. In Sweden, for example, one ecovillage and the national ecovillage network are project partners; whereas in Poland, the project partner, the West Pomeranian Business School, initially did not know of any ecovillages in the country. Other countries fall somewhere in between.

As mentioned earlier, it was difficult to find ecovillages and related organizations willing to become full project partners. One of the explanations given was that ecovillagers and people who spend a lot of time doing voluntary work in organizations tend to be very busy with their existing work and have little time for additional activities. Also, insecurity about workloads, requirements, and responsibilities, as well as a reluctance to

be financially responsible for a large project, seemed to deter potential participants. This was true even when there was sufficient funding to pay people for their time. Thus, this is clearly an issue to be reckoned with in planning similar projects.

The project must also find organizations able to take responsibility for disseminating the toolkits, maintaining the Ecovillage Road database, and building networks once it is completed. In fact, in September 2011, the project goals were revised to include not only increased public and political recognition, but also increased sustainability of transnational cooperative structures in the ecovillage movement.

To achieve this, the project has begun encouraging the establishment of new national and regional networks, as well as strengthening existing ones. Also, it is now collaborating closely with the European ecovillage association, Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) Europe, which is part of GEN International, an NGO with consultative status at the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) commission and a partner of United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). The collaboration with GEN also increases the chances of the results spreading beyond the Baltic region. The project will use GEN's database for its web platform and Ecovillage Road, and new networks will become members of GEN. The project also supports GEN Europe's declaration on the importance of low-impact settlements in the EU, and considers this a part of its work for political recognition. Hence, collaboration is beneficial for all parties involved, as well as crucial for the success of the project.

*Who Does What?*
Regarding the distribution of tasks, the basic idea is that academic partners are responsible for research, while non-academic partners provide the practical knowledge needed for implementing the project, a task ultimately carried out by all partners. In Sweden and other countries with strong movements, many activities are actually carried out by ecovillagers themselves. In other places, it is the academics who host the meetings, trying to motivate ecovillagers to organize themselves. The future will reveal the consequences of these differences.

In fact, the example of Sweden says a lot about how collaborative projects may potentially strengthen social movements. In Sweden, all local activities are carried out by the Swedish ecovillage network. Thus, Swedish ecovillage activists organized the national

network meeting required by the project and also gathered all data in the scientific investigation. Representatives from the Swedish ecovillage network thereby came into personal contact with all ecovillages in Sweden, visiting many and gathering extra data of specific relevance to the network's own work. Also, while only one ecovillage gathering was financed by the project to fulfil its goals, the overwhelmingly positive response to this meeting led to another gathering a few months later, as well as to plans for a third one to take place in the fall of 2012. In these meetings, the network has been able to discuss the data gathered by the project, enabling a quick translation of this information into practical tools for strengthening local initiatives. Of course, many of these things could have happened without the organization's involvement in the ECOVILLAGES project, but in this case the financial resources and expert help in both data analysis and political work have been crucial for the organization's rapid growth in size and activity. The strength of the Swedish ecovillages movement has, thus, already increased as a result of the project—a required outcome of the project in itself.

## Challenges, Issues, and Promises of Collaboration

*Who Owns the Project?*
None of the aforementioned moves involving GEN Europe were uncontroversial. Some partners have expressed fears that control will slip out of the hands of those responsible when ownership of both the process and the product is handed over to the ecovillage movement. There are also concerns about for whom the project really exists and whether the main goal is to strengthen already existing initiatives or to inspire the public to follow their lead, thus expanding the ecovillage movement. Here, I see a dividing line between academic and ecovillage partners. While ecovillagers will more likely want to empower the movement to spread its own message to the public, some academic partners are more focused on using the project's research to reach the public directly.

This brings me back to the issue of social change and how it can be realized. Even though it is clear that collaboration between researchers and ecovillagers is both fruitful and necessary to realize the vision of this project, what that vision is, who owns it, and how it best becomes reality are still debated. Another example in the same vein comes from the project's kick-off meeting. One participant had come to research and implement large-scale solutions for the agricultural and rural challenges in one of

the countries involved. However, other participants expressed that their inspiration to participate stemmed from examples of deeply spiritual or experimental communities, to which the former participant replied exasperatedly, "but how can I go and tell the farmers of my country that they should be like Hare Krishna!"

### How to Communicate and Create Trust Between Partners?

Luckily, differences such as these are being worked out as understanding and trust build up between partners, as well as between the project and the ecovillages participating in the research. Ideally, enough trust and understanding should be established to make questions of ownership obsolete. How long this process takes, however, seems to depend on the backgrounds and ideas of the various participants.

In all cases, open communication and a will to meet and understand the other on equal footing seems important. What this project and others like it entail is a meeting of people with different worldviews, ways of life, styles of interacting and communicating, and, often, also social statuses and power within larger society. This meeting takes place not only during data collection, but is also at the heart of the project. In ECOVILLAGES, communication is made easier by the fact that some academics involved are also personally engaged in the environmental or ecovillage movements. There are also, naturally, project participants from the movement who are also academics. Although their position may sometimes be complicated, to me, these activist academics play an important role in harnessing the potential for the transformative action inherent to this kind of collaborative effort.

### How Useful Are Shared Beliefs and Principles?

Another interesting question is how important it is to have shared beliefs. Does collaboration or research in a setting such as the ECOVILLAGES project require shared beliefs to create trust and enable cooperation, or does being motivated by one's convictions undermine the validity and credibility of the research? In the case of the ECOVILLAGES project, I would argue that it helps to be enthusiastic about the aims of the project, especially for scientists. This is not the same as being uncritical. Critical research is necessary to improve both understandings and possible solutions in any situation. Just as a good friend is someone who knows you and allows you to grow by giving honest feedback, good collaborative research can unite different people under a common purpose to better understand and improve both themselves and what they do. Perhaps what is needed to

accomplish this is not faith in a specific model or solution, but a shared belief that another world is possible. Such a belief is sometimes considered naïve, but, as anthropologist and political activist David Graeber points out, it is as difficult to know for sure if another world is impossible as it is to know it is possible.[2] Being a cynic is easy, and perhaps researchers could be more daring in looking for ways to realize that other world. Maybe a good place to start is by researching and collaborating with existing attempts at finding alternatives.

*What Are The Roles of Academics and Activists?*
I think the ECOVILLAGES project demonstrates some of the benefits and opportunities collaboration between ecovillages and academia can provide in supporting the movement and in bringing about societal change. It also hints at the possibilities for anchoring research and achieving a real bottom-up perspective in research design, as well as the translation of results into action.

Some of the points I have raised here, however, highlight another interesting issue: what roles do the different actors in a collaborative project play? Are the academics working for the activists, or the other way around? How can we find a balance between a truly collaborative, mutually beneficial project and everybody's expectations and needs?

Another aspect of the same issue has to do with how to bring about social change. Should academics use their analyses and conclusions to lead people to a brighter future, perhaps through collaboration with politicians? Or, should academics use their skills to understand larger contexts and implications, but then offer their knowledge and conclusions to the public as suggestions for how to improve or change, while leaving the changing itself in the hands of people on the ground? In short, should science lead or support endeavours to change society in a more sustainable direction, and how can we find a way to avoid the science-society dichotomy altogether and simply stand together as people striving to improve our societies?

## Lessons from the ECOVILLAGES Project

Does looking at ECOVILLAGES during its inception and first year provide any clues for how these questions may be answered? One thing that stands out is the importance

2   David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), 10.

of the collaboration already existing in the project's planning stages and the research conducted within it. In this particular case, goals, outcomes, and focal points are still debated and sometimes revised, but the fact that both academic and ecovillage partners have been involved from the very beginning means both have a voice and there is a foundation for which all partners are responsible and that they support. It is important to remember, however, that from the beginning it was difficult to find ecovillages willing to become full partners in the project. Therefore, an important question that remains is how to make similar projects interesting enough to outweigh the costs of participation for those they primarily concern.

A second salient lesson is that the project description, quoted in the beginning of this paper, declares a shared belief in ecovillages as agents of positive change. To me, this seems to create a cornerstone of trust between different partners and a belief in the good intentions of all involved. It also allows arguments to focus on how to bring about that change in the most efficient way, rather than on whether ecovillages are good or bad models for the future.

Speaking of arguments, I must once again bring up the importance of open and clear communication. To me, it is obvious that, despite the collaborative planning, joint implementation, and shared beliefs, the partners and associates in ECOVILLAGES came into the project with different expectations, needs, and ideas about their roles and those of the others involved. To honestly explore these differences as they occur—or, ideally, even before they do—is important, as is the mutual willingness to find a common solution.

From the perspective of a member of the Swedish Ecovillage network, I think ECO-VILLAGES has already benefited the ecovillage movement in the Baltic region. Moreover, it has done so without any major disappointments or conflicts that I am aware of, which might be a sign that it actually has something to teach about collaborative research projects. Still, the project is far from finished. What it will finally teach us and whether it manages to reach its goal of spreading the ecovillage idea to change wider society remains to be seen.

Marcus Andreas and Felix Wagner

## "For Whom? For the Future!"
## Ecovillage Sieben Linden as a Model and Research Project

Foreword by Marcus Andreas

When the council of the ecovillage Sieben Linden agreed to collaborate with me for my dissertation research in 2008, I was delighted. Yet one question emerged from the process: why was it so unexpectedly difficult to win Sieben Linden's participation in academic research, when it, in fact, described itself as a "model and research project"? For example, at the very beginning I was informed that interviews were undesired and my participation in internal events would be highly problematic. Shouldn't a model sustainability project welcome scientific accompaniment—even actively seek it out?

The idea of a "model project" addresses the important possibility of transferring insights and practices to society at-large (see Würfel in this issue). Identifying and analyzing this potential seems like a very worthwhile research task. Thus, the first question driving this paper is, *in what sense does Sieben Linden understand itself as a "model and research project"?*

Despite their desire to be transparent, the reservations of the ecovillagers stem from their reluctance to become "monkeys at the zoo," explained one Sieben Linden resident, Christoph Strünke. Thus, this paper also explores a second, methodological question: *what kind of research avoids the "zoo" effect?*

### The Evolution of the Model and Research Project

The original idea to create a German ecovillage is rooted in the anti-nuclear protest of Gorleben in 1980, as well as in the 1983 political program of the Green Party (the so-called *Sindelfinger Beschlüsse*[1]). But the specific project that would later become

This essay was originally written in German and has been translated for *RCC Perspectives* by Brenda Black.

1  Die Grünen, *Gegen Arbeitslosigkeit und Sozialabbau: Sinnvoll arbeiten—solidarisch leben* (Bonn: Die Grünen, 1983), 24.

the ecovillage of Sieben Linden originated in Heidelberg in 1989 and attracted interest from throughout West Germany. Jörg Sommer, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Heidelberg, was particularly prominent in the initiative. At first he spoke of it as a political alternative to the model of capitalism:

> For other groups, self-sufficiency is a possibility for withdrawing from society; we, on the other hand, are pursuing the goal of developing an alternative to the existing industrial and consumer society and therefore **to have effects that carry over into society**.[2] *(emphasis in original)*

In this context, "eco" stood for economy rather than ecology, alluding to the idea that a new culture would arise out of a changed economy.[3] However, by 1992 the model idea had expanded to include social and ecological dimensions, uniting ecology with economy:

> The model character of the planned village consists of the comprehensive attempt to integrate all spheres of life (home life, work, provision, free time) as part of an ecological circular economy.[4]

By 1993 Sommer had left the initiative, and the group had moved to a former farm estate in Groß Chüden, a small village in Saxony-Anhalt in the former East Germany, to look independently for land on which to settle. The focus of the group had shifted by then, as they aimed to make the model effective for "rural areas"[5] and for "sustainable development in the region."[6] The ecovillage hoped to ultimately catalyze the creation of a

---

2   Jörg Sommer, "Ökodorfprojekt 'Selbstversorgung als Selbstbestimmung,'" in *Zur Vorbereitung der Ost-West-Begegnung Selbstorganisierte Lebensgemeinschaften (Kommunen, Ökodörfer, spirituelle Gemeinschaften und andere alternative Lebensformen): 14.–17. Juni in Kleinmachnow bei Berlin*, eds. Vorbereitungsgruppe (Elisabeth Voß et al.), (Steyerberg: Informationsdienst Ökodorf e.V., 1990), 120–21.

3   According to Dieter Halbach, a former associate of Sommer's and an ecovillage veteran. Dieter Halbach, interview by Marcus Andreas, 2011.

4   Freundeskreis ökologisches Dorf e.V., *Konzeption einer ökologischen Siedlung—sozialökologisches Modellprojekt zur Entwicklung von Siedlungs- und Wirtschaftsweisen im ländlichen Raum* (Heidelberg: Freundeskreis ökologisches Dorf e.V., 1992), 7.

5   Freundeskreis ökologisches Dorf e.V., *Konzeption einer ökologischen Siedlung,* 8.

6   Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G., [no title available] (Groß Chüden: Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G., 1995), [no page numbers available].

"model region for sustainable regional development."[7] They also began considering the possibility of small-scale tourism, as well as forming ties with the scientific community.[8]

In 1996 the project team was awarded funding through a competition held by the Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU) called the TAT-Orte competition, which was intended to assist rural townships in former East Germany and to spread awareness of sustainability issues.[9] In their statement about the decision, the competition's jury emphasized their hope that other members of society would also benefit from this project: "The exceptional degree of engagement . . . which stimulates the region and other environmental education initiatives deserves to be acknowledged. In light of its exemplary nature and its transferability, the proposal is officially awarded and honored."[10] In addition, the project received 100,000 DM from the DBU to finance a research project about "integrated, inhabitant-oriented town planning"[11]—an important step towards professionalizing this private citizen project. With this recognition and the motivational "drive"[12] behind them, the ecovillage project successfully ended their search for land in 1997 in the small village of Poppau.

Fifteen years later in 2002, Sieben Linden is a thriving ecovillage. At the time of this project, Sieben Linden presented itself as a model and research project "that is testing out sustainable living at a manageable scale."[13] As previously said, the model aspect has been part of the concept for the ecovillage since it was first conceived. Sieben Linden as a "research project," however, is a more recent development.

---

7   Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G., *Siedlungs- und Regionalkonzept Ökodorf 2000: Eine Information der Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G.* (Groß Chüden: Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G, 1996), [no page numbers available].

8   Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G., *Siedlungs- und Regionalkonzept Ökodorf 2000*. For example, project studies by the TU Hamburg-Harburg and the GH  Kassel, 1996; cf. Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., *Forschung über Sieben Linden und Gemeinschaft*, accessed June 29, 2012, http://www.siebenlinden.de/htmcontent9987.html.

9   A second TAT-Orte award was won in 2000, after the settlement had already been implemented.

10  Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU) and Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik (DIfU), *TAT-Orte: Gemeinden im ökologischen Wettbewerb: 1996* (Berlin: DIfU, 1996), 151.

11  Dieter Halbach, Interview transcript by Marcus Andreas, 2011, 12.

12  Eva Stützel and Julia Kommerell, "Der Weg nach Sieben Linden," in *Sieben Linden: Lebensentwurf und Realität: Visionen, Alltag, Gemeinschaft, Ökologie, Ökonomie und Spiritualität; Eine Textsammlung*, ed. Freundeskreis Ökodorf Sieben Linden e.V. (Poppau: Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., 2007), 10–11.

13  Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., *Über uns,* accessed October 24, 2008, http://www.siebenlinden.de/htmcontent2000.html.

**Understanding the "Model and Research Project"**

For this project, we were interested in what it meant to the people of Sieben Linden today to be a "model and research project." To find out, we initiated a three-part series of events. In an attempt to avoid the "monkey in the zoo" effect, we placed great value on transparency and inclusive participation throughout the research process.

The goal of the first event, which took place in March 2009, was to determine how Sieben Linden understood the pair of terms "model and research project." With the assistance of two Sieben Linden residents, Strünke as our academic advisor, and Kosha Anja Joubert, the president of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), we tailored the workshop to the ecovillage context as much as possible—e.g., we chose to conduct it during an evening in the common room. The event evidently caught people's interest, as a total of 16 people attended—more participants than expected.[14]

Three questions guided the evening's discussion (fig. 1):

• **From *what?*** (What is being modeled or researched?)
• **For *whom /what?*** (For whom or for what purpose do the model and the research serve?)
• ***How?*** (How should the model function, and how is the research conducted?)



**Figure 1:**
The questions were written along a red thread, which reflects the German metaphor "ein roter Faden" (a red thread), meaning a unifying principle of an activity.

To begin, the participants were asked to write down their answers separately on note cards; their answers were then presented to the group and the cards laid out on the floor to serve as visual reference points for the conversation. This was followed by a lively discussion, in which the moderators largely refrained from active involvement. The group discussion

14  For context, at that time about 120 people lived in the ecovillage, among them about 90 adults. Those in attendance were mainly "old hands," with eight years as the mean length of residence.

format—a method which is used far too infrequently[15]—seemed appropriate for this first step. In contrast to an interview, individual statements can be elaborated upon, rejected, or validated in the course of a conversation.

Two results were immediately obvious. First, it became evident there were a variety of opinions about whether Sieben Linden was a model and research project at all, or at least one of the two, as these responses demonstrate:

> Participant 1: I don't feel that we are a research project at all.
> Participant 2: What, you don't see us as a research project?
> Participant 3: I don't either!

Second, the participants frequently emphasized that there is a tension between the twin goals of trying to be both a research project and a model. Some of the participants saw these two aspects as mutually strengthening each other, but many others saw them as hindrances, such as this participant.

> We aren't so free here to really do research, because we have to think about the region and so forth, since we also serve as a model. I have the feeling that the fact we're a model hinders us from being a research project.[16]

Before turning to the research component, which was the focus of the second event, we will first look at Sieben Linden as a "model."

*Sieben Linden as a Model*
As the discussion participants suggested, being a model would mean offering reproducible solutions to the challenge of sustainable lifestyles. The task of the ecovillage is to develop these solutions and live them, to "walk the talk." However, since the ecovillage is not representative of all social contexts, the group recognized their insufficiency in extending these ideas to wider society.

---

15  Philipp Mayring, *Einführung in die qualitative Sozialforschung* (Weinheim, Basel: Beltz, 2002), 77f.
16  For example, ecovillagers take care not to bathe naked in the pond during Sunday tours, out of sensitivity to visitors' potentially differing perspectives. Cf. Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., *Führung Sieben Linden* (Internal document, 2009), 14.

If I use the word "model," then it means that I want to create a certain degree of transferability, and the conditions for this are quite bad—that is, . . . the starting point is that we are an unbelievably elite group here [laughter] with unbelievably elite requirements. I don't think that's a bad thing at all; I like living here. No, it's only that it makes the possibilities of transfer relatively small.

The ecovillagers did not address *to* whom exactly they are trying to transfer ideas and practices, but instead expressed it as, "For whom? For the future!" Nevertheless, participants mentioned media representatives and scientists as possible go-betweens for bringing the ideas of the ecovillage to society at-large, and they gave numerous examples of concrete elements that could be transmitted to guests, the region, and peers (e.g., the use of compost toilets). Furthermore, participants also understood Sieben Linden as a "model for new patterns of life," which has a mostly vague effect on the outside world—a "paradigmatic, rather than concrete, transferability," as one participant stated. Another participant said that the ecovillage is like a rock quarry from which one can take fragments and, therefore, should be seen more as an "integrated source of inspiration" than as a model.

We synthesized these various perspectives into a diagram, which reveals the spectrum of overlapping ways of viewing the ecovillage as a model (fig. 2). *Particular* refers to the individual elements that can be extracted easily from Sieben Linden, while *paradigmatic* refers to the ecovillage as an indivisible whole. *Concrete describes* elements that can be clearly identified, and *diffuse* refers to aspects that are difficult to identify precisely.

In addition, we chose a concept from the discussion as a reference for each of the four areas.

- In the particular dimension, the ecovillage offers concrete models, such as the popular straw bale construction or the (nearly equally popular) compost toilets. Its comparison to a *stone quarry* suggests that these can be taken out of their context relatively arbitrarily and employed elsewhere.
- The particular often overlaps with the diffuse; an example of this is the residents' culture of communication, which uses concrete elements, such as discussion rules, but on the whole functions more as a *source of inspiration* to others.
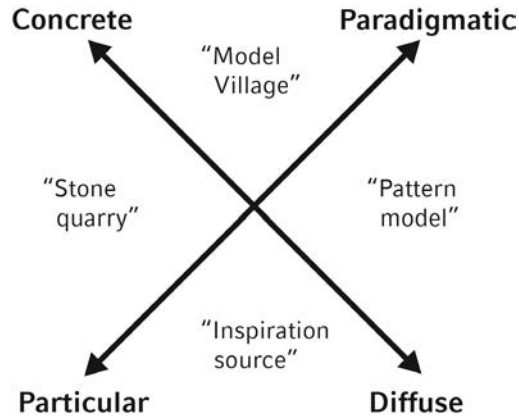
- In speaking of the ecovillage as a paradigm, or as a concrete *model village*, it alludes to how it could theoretically be built just as easily at another location. The residents have mostly come to reject this notion of easy duplication,[17] however, even though such intentions were previously popular in the wider context of GEN.
- The diffuse manifestation of the paradigmatic approach is described as a *model for patterns of life.* That is, Sieben Linden is a place where ideas can be tested for their feasibility in everyday life.

Although the matrix presents various ways that Sieben Linden might function as a model and research project, the participants attested that, even for them, it was not always easy to tell what exactly was being "researched" and of what it was a model. Intentions and results cannot always be correlated to one another, as one participant expressed using the analogy of space exploration: the goal was to reach the moon, but, as a side effect, people got Teflon pans.

In discussing what it means to be a "model and research project"—ideas that are so important for creating self-identity—the terms' meanings began to dissolve. Some participants could identify with the concepts, others only with one of the two, and still others with neither. Also, they perceived a tension between these two aspects; although, in spite of this, it became clear they believed the ecovillage has something to offer: its model character.

17  See the forthcoming dissertation by M. Andreas.

> Yes, well, I don't like either the term model or research project. That is, I also have the feeling that we aren't really either one of them, because we aren't a model in the sense that I would wish many other such ecovillages to arise—it's complete humbug to build new villages when there are villages standing empty everywhere, for example. And, even so, I feel like we are justified in what we are doing here, as an inspirational project, as a project that [functions] through its all-round character.

Regarding the term "research project," opinions differed greatly. For example, participants, and in particular those with an academic background, frequently stated that Sieben Linden is no such thing. As one of these participants said, "I have a kind of scientist's soul in me . . . and it can't make anything of this term 'research project' in this context."

Some participants suggested that only when research is understood as a living experiment can the ecovillage legitimize itself as a research project.[18] Therefore, as a second step in this study, a workshop was organized that was more explicitly dedicated to exploring the research aspect.

*Sieben Linden as a Research Project*
The goal of the second event, which took place in August of 2009, was to look more closely at the "research aspect" through collaborative group work. The guiding questions here were

- how and what does Sieben Linden research;
- what is discovered through this, and how are the results arrived at; and
- how might research look in the future?

This time there were nine participants, fewer than during the group discussion. Reasons for this might have been the scheduled day (Saturday afternoon) or the length (it was planned to last four hours). Also, two of the participants suggested the academic tone of the poster for the event may have deterred people.[19]

---

18  Along these lines, Joubert introduced to the discussion the idea of the ecovillage as a "living and learning center," which is relevant for the sustainability discourse precisely through its entanglement of theory and practice.
19  It was, however, apparently sufficient to convince both of them to attend.

The participants were divided into three groups to reflect upon research and results in Sieben Linden, particularly in the realm of sustainable development. A graphic from the Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) course structured the content of the discussion, offering an overview of aspects of sustainability that are (or should be) achieved in ecovillages (fig. 3). The EDE graphic builds on the classic threefold division of sustainability—social, ecological, economic—but adds an additional dimension: worldview.[20] Due to the small number of participants, we decided to discuss only the three "classic" areas of sustainability.[21] Participants were asked to pinpoint which items from this graphic were present within Sieben Linden, and whether they turned out to be successful.
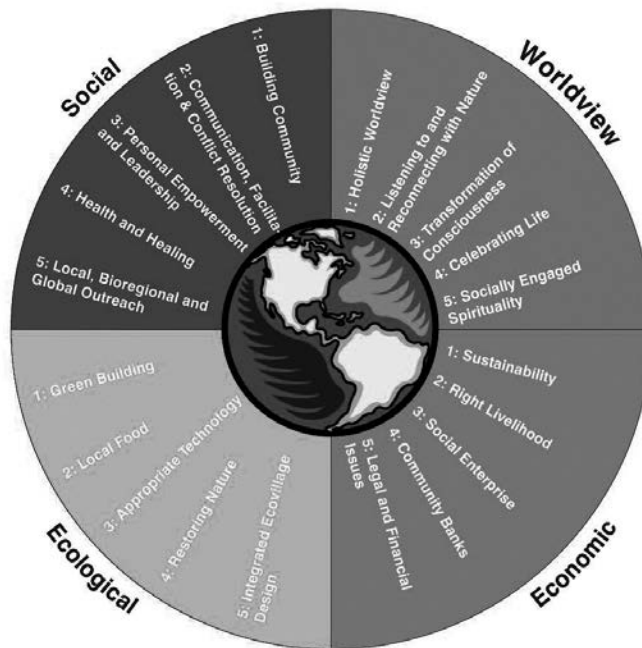


**Figure 3:** A visual conceptualization of the elements of sustainable development by Ecovillage Design Education.

20  The "worldview" area is often also referred to as the cultural one in Sieben Linden. Cf. Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., *Führung Sieben Linden* (Internal document, 2009), 4. For remarks in that respect, see Wagner in this issue.
21  Since we wanted at least three participants in each group, we did not have enough participants to divide into four groups.

The participants then discussed how "research" had been and continued to be conducted in Sieben Linden. In line with the findings of the previous group discussion, we presented the term "research" not in the scientific sense, but in the sense of experimenting with new things, continuing to develop things that worked, and discarding those that didn't.

In the *social* dimension, it became clear that Sieben Linden has a rich spectrum of developments and endeavors. Over the years various helpful methods and structures for interpersonal processes have been *established*, such as the Zegg-Forum (a form of ritualized open communication),[22] nonviolent communication,[23] singing, meditating, rituals, and much more. While the participants described the living situation of children and people with special needs as not structured enough on the whole, they stressed that the community still offered a very constructive social environment for these groups. Overall, the social fabric was described as very supportive.

In most cases, Sieben Linden evaluates its social methods and fabric by answering the question "what feels good."[24] However, there are also more clearly formulated ways to test innovations, such as the introduction of a council system, which replaced the previous decision-making method of consensus in the general assembly. The internal research process was vividly described as "operating on a living patient"—that is, consequences are experienced directly and immediately. The fact that, frequently, too many new things were tried out at once, making it nearly impossible to determine the effects of individual factors, was perceived as a difficulty. Participants also claimed that the perspectives of outsiders, such as guests and the media, is another way they evaluate their community.

In the *ecological* dimension, the participants admitted that, for most of the aspects, the statement "yes, we do that, but we could do more" was applicable. As positive examples, they stressed ecological construction methods (e.g., straw bale buildings) and closed water systems (e.g., compost toilets). The residents of Sieben Linden generally have a high ecological awareness, even if the strictness of their rules had relaxed over time (for

22  For a more detailed description, see http://www.zegg-forum.org/index_en.phtml.
23  Their method is based on the ideas of Marshall Rosenberg; see http://www.cnvc.org/.
24  An alternative translation might be, "What feels right/correct"; however, emphasis lies on the verb. For a discussion of the different kind of rationality which is addressed here, see the forthcoming dissertation by author M. Andreas.

example, their increased willingness to travel by airplane). Furthermore, they expressed the wish to have a current evaluation of the Sieben Linden's ecological footprint.

In the dimension of *economy*, participants evaluated their experimentation with commonly owning land and buildings (instead of individually, as is otherwise customary) very positively. Their approach towards money and loans is based on solidary principles, such as issuing interest-free loans, an exchange and gift system, and a small wage gap (measured according to social criteria). Participants rated their generally stable local economy highly (i.e., "ideally keeping money within one's own village," as one participant put it), but they also saw room for improvement in more clearly embedding individuals into the community's economy. Regarding external research, participants expressed the wish to acquire more facts about their internal economy, such as the flow of money into and out of Sieben Linden, in order to gain insight into the resilience of local economies.

Overall, it was clear that instances of structured research originating within Sieben Linden occurred rarely. The research mostly entailed trying things out and waiting to see what would establish itself over the long term, without any attempt at documentation, except for a brochure called "Lifestyle and Reality."[25] Beyond this, there was agreement that more structured documentation was necessary.

Regarding external research, participants first of all recognized they all did not know of the already existing academic studies. They expressed the expectation that scientists and researchers should explicitly present completed studies at Sieben Linden. Participants expressed the desire that scientific studies not keep looking at the same topics (generally, sociological observations of "how a community works"), but rather expand upon already existing research. In addition, they came to the conclusion that they wanted to become more active in this matter and suggested topics for scientific study that would provide residents with more useful information. As a result of this discussion, the participants and organizers worked together to draft a plan for a follow-up event that would focus more closely on the topic of research in and about Sieben Linden.

*Making the Ecovillage-Research Connection*
Over the course of the research process, the relationship between the researchers and ecovillagers was transformed. In a demonstration of their mutual respect for one

25  Brochure: Sieben Linden, *Lebensentwurf und Realität,* 2007.

another, the academics working in Sieben Linden were invited by the Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V. (Society of Friends of Ecovillages) to present the state of their research at an event called Day for Science and Research[26] in April 2010. A strikingly large number of residents were present at the event, which took place in the village pub.[27] In addition to presentations of individual papers, including the authors' dissertations, participants discussed topics the ecovillage would like the researchers to explore, such as their economy and ecological footprint. The ecovillagers also agreed to consider researchers working in Sieben Linden "visiting partners" and, thus, charge them a lower price for accommodation and food than they do normal visitors.

Since this event, Sieben Linden has presented existing and requested research about their community on their website, and they list Research in Community (RIC) and the University of Münster as additional contacts for such matters.[28] The goals of these measures were to coordinate research requests, to define points of departure for interested students and scholars alike, to provide information about the state of existing research in order to avoid repetitions and redundancy, and, overall, to facilitate a smooth research process. The Day for Science and Research participants agreed that in order to have a fruitful collaboration, all parties involved should be clear and transparent about their ambitions and expectations. Taken together, these arrangements should help to avoid the "zoo" effect and provide an effective basis for further research.

### Conclusion

Since conducting our research, the pair of terms "model" and "research project" have gradually, but not entirely disappeared from Sieben Linden's website and flyers; in more recent publications of and about the ecovillage, they can no longer be found. Responsible for this change was the Kleingruppe Öffentlichkeitsarbeit (KG Öff, or "Working Group Public Relations"), and their representative, Julia Kommerell. They explained the decision as follows:

---

26  In German: "Tag der Wissenschaft."
27  There were more attendees than otherwise expected, according to Sandra Campe, personal communication, 2010.
28  Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., *Forschung über Sieben Linden und Gemeinschaft,* accessed 29 June 2012, http://www.siebenlinden.de/htmcontent9987.html.

An evaluation of our public outreach work in 2010 examined various statements from our publicity materials for accuracy and consistency. . . . As described above, "model" and "research project" are connected with the expectation of systematic and, to a certain degree, scientific documentation and transferability. Since Sieben Linden does not fulfill this stringent requirement, or at least cannot demonstrate it, the decision was made to no longer use the term in promotional materials.

Even so, internally there remains a certain awareness that specific aspects of eco-village life are transferable and that, as an inspirational place for living and learning, the village as a whole has a research character, above all for the residents themselves. For a cooperative and sustainable way of life must be relearned in part and investigated using experimental settings that serve as models.[29]
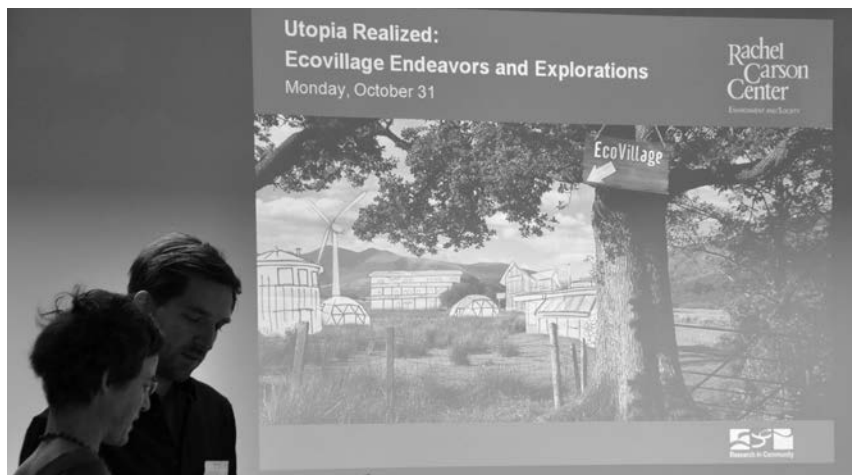


**Figure 1:** Julia Kommerell and Marcus Andreas in discussion during the workshop "Realizing Utopia: Ecovillage Endeavors and Explorations" held in October 2011.

Regardless, this inter- and, to some degree, trans-disciplinary research project led to a meeting as equals between researchers and ecovillagers. Even if the original "model and research" terminology has been discarded, ecovillages remain interesting models for the "idea of applicability," as one resident formulated it. The "project" part of Sieben Lindens' self-description has remained, however, as it is a goal-driven undertaking with a still-open endpoint.

29  This explanation was written by Kommerell specifically for this essay.

**Acknowledgements**

**Bibliography**

Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU) and Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik (DIfU). *TAT-Orte: Gemeinden im Ökologischen Wettbewerb, 1996.* Berlin: DIfU, 1996.

Die Grünen. *Gegen Arbeitslosigkeit und Sozialabbau: Sinnvoll Arbeiten—Solidarisch Leben.* Bonn: Die Grünen, 1983.

Freundeskreis ökologisches Dorf e.V. *Konzeption einer ökologischen Siedlung: Sozialökologisches-Modellprojekt zur Entwicklung von Siedlungs- und Wirtschaftsweisen im Ländlichen Raum.* Heidelberg: Freundeskreis ökologisches Dorf e.V., 1992.

Mayring, Philipp. *Einführung in die Qualitative Sozialforschung.* Weinheim, Basel: Beltz, 2002.

Sommer, Jörg. "Ökodorfprojekt 'Selbstversorgung als Selbstbestimmung.'" In *Zur Vorbereitung der Ost- West-Begegnung Selbstorganisierte Lebensgemeinschaften (Kommunen, Ökodörfer, spirituelle Gemeinschaften und Andere Alternative Lebensformen): 14. − 17. Juni in Kleinmachnow bei Berlin,* edited by Vorbereitungsgruppe (Elisabeth Voß et al.), 120–21. Steyerberg: Informationsdienst Ökodorf e.V., 1990.

Stützel, Eva, and Julia Kommerell. "Der Weg nach Sieben Linden." In *Sieben Linden: Lebensentwurf und Realität; Visionen, Alltag, Gemeinschaft, Ökologie, Ökonomie und Spiritualität. Eine Textsammlung,* edited by Freundeskreis Ökodorf Sieben Linden e.V., 10–11. Poppau: Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., 2007.

Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G.. [no title]. Groß Chüden: Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G, 1995.

Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G. *Siedlungs- und Regionalkonzept Ökodorf 2000: Eine Information der Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G..* Groß Chüden: Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G., 1996.

## About the Authors

**Marcus Andreas** is a doctoral student in educational sciences and social and cultural anthropology at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich. His thesis focuses primarily on the ecovillage Sieben Linden in Sachsen-Anhalt, but his research has also brought him to the University of California, Berkeley and the Los Angeles Eco-Village. He is a co-founder of Research in Community e.V. and a research associate at the Rachel Carson Center for Environmental and Society.

**Diana Leafe Christian** is the author of *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages* and *Intentional Communities* and *Finding Community: How to Join an Ecovillage or Intentional Community.* She publishes *Ecovillages*, a free online newsletter (http://EcovillageNews.org) and was the editor of *Communities* magazine for 14 years. She is also an Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) trainer through Global Ecovillage Network (GEN)/Gaia Education, and she speaks, trains, and consults on starting ecovillages.

**Mara-Daria Cojocaru** studied political science, theater, and law in Munich and received her PhD in political science and philosophy in 2011 for her dissertation on the normativity of the city. Her research interests within political philosophy and philosophical anthropology focus on the philosophical negotiation of individual and collective identity, with particular respect to questions of human nature and the good life.

**Richard W. Franke** is a professor emeritus of anthropology at Montclair State University, where he taught from 1972 to 2009. He received his PhD in anthropology from Harvard University and has written on food, ecology, inequality, cooperatives and democratic development in the Third World. Since 2009 he has resided in the Ecovillage at Ithaca with his wife. Franke is a board member of Sustainable Tompkins, and he writes an occasional column on sustainability for the *Tompkins Weekly* newspaper.

**Geseko von Lüpke** completed his PhD in Chinese foreign and reunification politics and attended the German School for Journalism in Munich. Since 1989 he has worked as a newspaper and magazine journalist and a freelancer for public broadcasting in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. He has published books on global civil society, wilderness therapy, the science of cooperation, indigenous cultures and shamanism,

and alternative approaches to dealing with crisis. Along with quantumphysicist Hans-Peter Dürr, he is board chair of the Munich-based NGO Global Challenges Network.

**Anna Kovasna** is a PhD candidate in social anthropology at Lund University in Sweden. Specializing in ecovillages and the creation of small-scale, sustainable economies and cultures in Europe, she is currently based in Findhorn, Scotland, carrying out long-term fieldwork for her dissertation. Anna is also the former president of the Swedish Ecovillage Network, where she continues to play an active role.

**Louise Meijering** is an assistant professor at the University of Groningen's Population Research Center in the Netherlands. She conducts research on intentional communities, ageing and well-being, and experiences of stroke patients. She carries out research with, rather than about, her participants, adopting a participatory approach. Meijering has published in Dutch specialist journals, such as *Rooilijn* and *Geografie*, and academic journals, such as *Area, Journal of Rural Studies*, and *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie.*

**Bill Metcalf** works within the Graduate Research School at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. He is a world expert on intentional communities; past president of the International Communal Studies Association; on the editorial boards of refereed academic journals, including *Communal Societies* and *Queensland History Journal;* an editor of *Encyclopedia of Community* (2003)*;* and International Correspondent for *Communities* magazine. A prolific author, his best known books are *The Findhorn Book of Community Living* (2004) and *Shared Visions—Shared Lives* (1996).

**Jenny Pickerill** is a reader in environmental geography at the University of Leicester. Her research focuses on how we understand, value and (ab)use the environment, with a particular interest in inspiring grassroots solutions to environmental problems and in positive ways to change social practices. Her special interest in innovative eco-housing is based in her work with ecovillages and self-built eco-communities in Wales, England, Spain, Argentina, Australia, Thailand, and the United States. She has published three books: *Cyberprotest: Environmental Activism Online* (2003), *Anti-War Activism: New Media and Protest in the Information Age* (2008, with Kevin Gillan and Frank Webster) and *Low Impact Development* (2009, with Larch Maxey).

**Felix Wagner** is a doctoral candidate in psychology at the University of Freiburg in Germany, and considers himself a transformation researcher and community traveler. He is a co-founder and board member of Research in Community e.V., as well as a co-founder of Lebensdorf e.V., a nonprofit organization devoted to developing a research- and transition-oriented ecovillage.

**Michael Würfel** was born in the German mountains, but has lived in various places within Germany (mostly in Berlin) and spent one year in southern California. He studied dramaturgy at Babelsberg Film School and has worked as a certified carpenter, writer, and filmmaker. Since the summer of 2007, he has been a resident of Sieben Linden Ecovillage. In 2012, he published the book *Dorf ohne Kirche (Village Without a Church)* and is currently working on a documentary film about Sieben Linden.

ClimatePartner °
printed climate-neutrally

Ecovillages are arguably seen as "pioneers of change." Yet, thus far,
little light has been shed on their potential to effect change beyond
their own borders. This issue of *RCC Perspectives* presents a much
needed overview of research on ecovillages: from the history and
philosophy of utopias to present case studies and ongoing research
from across the globe. It addresses whether ecovillages can serve as
models for a cultural transformation, and shows how researchers and
activists could and are collaborating in the quest for utopia, all the
while inviting readers to explore what it means to live "the good life."