

Introduction

“The ecovillage is not just techniques, it is a way of life.” [Resident of Solbyn]

Ecovillage. *“It is ridiculous name,”* wrote an ecovillage resident, but she, at forty-five, isn’t making any plans to move. She intends to live there for *“the rest of [her] life.”* [Mjölntorpet]

Who am I? What do I want? Where and how do I fit in? Why am I here? Life in an ecovillage helps individuals discern for themselves their answers to these eternal human questions. It gives them a sense of self-worth, a connection with others in the community, and provides a sense of purpose through a shared commitment to the preservation of the environment for today and tomorrow.

Aside from an occasional chicken coop and solar panels, it would be hard to know that you had happened upon an ecovillage. Swedish ecovillages are hardly distinguishable from other neighborhoods. In spite of their unremarkable appearance, the ecovillage enriches the lives of its residents in a manner unrivaled by contemporary forms of living environments in the Western world.

Twenty ecovillages are woven into the fabric of Swedish towns and cities today. The ecovillages profiled in this book are, in most abbreviated terms, are middle-class residential neighborhoods of up to 50 households, built and operated to maximize social support and minimize environmental impact. They are located in or near existing residential neighborhoods. Schools, stores and other city services are usually within walking distance.

These are the ecovillages today, but the ultimate

vision of an ecovillage extends beyond residential life to incorporate existing communities, homes, and businesses. The ideal ecovillage would be a way of life that incorporates all the facets of our daily lives. It is a way of life which brings a renewed meaning to how we live, work and interact with the world around us. Today’s communities lay the groundwork for the evolution of the ecovillage concept. The existing communities continue to evolve and new communities build upon the knowledge gained by those who have gone before. Ecological building techniques are not what makes an ecovillage ecologically friendly. Anyone can build with ecological techniques. The residents’ sustained commitment to a continual betterment of their interaction with the environment is ultimately far more valuable than the initial building techniques. This and other properties makes it possible to expand ecovillage concepts to a wide range of new and existing communities. Ecovillages, however, will not take the world by storm. Each one begins as a seed which must be tended and nurtured with care in order to grow and mature.

What type of person lives in an ecovillage? Ecovillage residents share a desire to improve their lives and make a difference; for themselves and for society. *“For several years I had thought about the future and our survival. I started watching how others lived and suddenly it pertained to me... We asked ourselves about the meaning of our lives and our family’s future. We, quite simply, wanted to try to change our lifestyle. Therefore, we have chosen a resource efficient home near nature with control over consumption as well as waste.”* Says a resident explaining his reasons for getting involved in the planning of Åkesta ecovillage.

People tend to shy away from the idea of ecovillages because it reminds them of cooperative living, which implies suffocation of the individual, and the environmental movement which implies austerity and self-sacrifice. When in fact, because residents share responsibilities and experience a higher quality of life, ecovillage residents enjoy a greater freedom to pursue their individual dreams.

Must one be an environmental extremist, willing to give up the luxuries of modern life? “No,” says an ecovillage resident, “*you really don’t. Here we live just like normal, but with a few different habits.*” [Tuggelite] If living in an ecovillage is such a regular affair, why is the woman, mentioned earlier, determined to live there for the rest of her life? Why do 90% of surveyed residents consider the social contact with their neighbors “better” or “much better” than in “regular housing”? It can not be because of the impressive ecological technological solutions. Few residents would agree with that. It is not because planning and building an ecovillage is such an easy task. The execution of a plan takes several years and a lot of hard work. The answer to why Swedish ecovillage residents are so satisfied goes far beyond technical marvels, beyond architectural embellishments, and even beyond an interest in environmental protection. The essence of the ecovillage lies within the residents themselves and their daily lives. In choosing where to live they have changed how they live.

The essence of the ecovillage lies in the interrelationship of the individual, the community, and their commitment to the welfare of the community and the environment. The individual’s sense of self is strengthened through their contribution to the goals of a responsive community. The community is strengthened by its response to the diversity of needs and desires of

the individuals. Individuals and the community are strengthened by their common resolve to protect the environment and preserve the community. This resolve provides a sense of purpose greater than either the individual or the community. These three elements - personal self worth, a sense of community, and a sense of purpose - are interdependent, maturation of one, fosters the maturation of the whole. Together they form a gestalt; elements so unified that its properties cannot be derived from the sum of its parts. This gestalt is the pride and fulfillment that we seek in our lives. Those residents who have found this gestalt want to remain in their ecovillage community for the rest of their lives.

Three conditions in general society today have been instrumental in motivating individuals interested in improving their quality of life to seek out the alternative of an ecovillage. The study of ecovillages is a means to further personal goals and combat the following three undesirable conditions.

1 - Environmental degradation: Pollution in the air, water, and our homes, threatens us daily. We do not know the long term results of our assaults on the environment, but we do know that in ever increasing numbers our friends and family are battling cancer, allergies and asthma. Health risks are not the only fall-out of environmental degradation. Beautiful vistas are being turned into parking lots. We fear eating or drinking anything not packaged, sealed and stamped “germ free.” Our quality of life is affected and the legacy we leave for our children is uncertain.

2 - Constant stress: Western society is increasingly stressful. Paramount among the sources of stress is a sense of decreasing time. Our lives seem to run faster and faster with more obligations than time to

meet them. Also paramount is our concern for the welfare of our children. We fear for their safety, their values, their education, and their future. Daily, we face a barrage of stressful fears. We fear constantly for our safety. We want safety from violence, theft, accidents, and the unknown. We fear that our needs will not be met socially, or in business. We fear estrangement from our families and neighbors. Instead of these stresses we want peace of mind, a sense of belonging, and increased comfort in our daily lives.

3 - Financial pressures: Financial demands can rule our lives. We try to make our lives easier by buying more and more things. Our lives are then further complicated by the responsibility for our increasing consumption. We can not escape the treadmill. The more we think we need, the more stress and effort we expend in getting it and caring for it. Increased consumption produces increased waste and pollution. Waste and pollution are prominent during the production of a product, our use of the product, and it's disposal. The more we buy, the more companies produce, with little regard for the environment, in proportion to profit.

The ecovillages are a way to address these problems. Ecovillages are not the singular answer, but they do provide valuable lessons. The world is not heading towards a happy-little-ecovillage-utopia. But, the ecovillages do provide lessons. These lessons can be applied in many situations. The residents of the ecovillages speak glowingly of their communities and continue to develop measures to reduce their impact on the environment. This study ventures to understand how this came to be.

“I hope others can learn from our experiment, that is what it is all about.” [Tuggelite]

This book is not just a report on ecovillages. It is exploration of a form of living designed to improve the quality of people's lives. It explores more than whether the ecovillage residents are happy or not. It explores how people are happy and what elements contribute to a better quality of life in an ecovillage vs. “regular” housing. It is a handbook which delves into how specific details of day to day living can be improved through design and social dynamics. It looks at how to promote good design and social dynamics around the central goal of protecting the environment. Because life is not living in isolation within four walls, it is interaction with the local community, society at large, and the natural world.

It is a comprehensive examination of ecovillages, not just a social, technical or theoretical investigation, but a practical look at ecovillages today. What is their vision? Where are they going and what measures can be taken to expand the benefits to a wider audience? It explains how to plan an ecovillage, including what to be certain to do and what pitfalls should be avoided. It looks at the intersection of the social system with design and how to maximize the benefits of this intersection.

The core purpose of this book is twofold. First, to show how ecovillages are a means of meeting the basic human needs of personal identity, belonging and a sense of purpose. Second, to present the lessons garnered from ecovillages so they can be applied to other projects. The projects described herein are the success stories, however, many good plans have sadly gone astray. It is this author's desire to provide guidance which might

help future planners avoid the pitfalls that have burdened well-intentioned planners in the past. The desire for this type of lifestyle is great. So many people want to live in the ecovillage communities; it behooves us to do all we can to make the process work from the first idea to a fully functioning community.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is background information: an expanded definition, history, and case studies. Part two presents practical suggestions about different facets of planning, social interaction, economics, and design. The final part, "Where Next?" looks at the application of ecovillage principles to other types of projects.

Part One, the background information, creates a context for the practical discussion of the ecovillages in part two. The Definition chapter reviews the merits of existing definitions and contrasts them with existing projects. The contrast between the theoretical and actual projects reveals the dynamic nature of ecovillages and the importance of continued maturation within existing projects and for new projects. The Context chapter investigates the co-evolution of the ecovillage movement and ecological consciousness in Western society, highlighting relevant national and international events. The significance of a balance between the individual, community, and a sense of purpose is further evaluated in respect to other recent social movements. The Case Studies are an introduction to the practical application of the theoretical concepts previously described. A quick review of the studies in order illustrates concrete examples of how the projects have learned, and not learned, from previous projects and their evolution in respect to Swedish society. The case studies paint the story of each project which aids the reader in a better appreciation the specific details investigated in Part Two. A chart at the end of each

case study presents the technical features of each project. The Case Studies introduces people whose dreams have become a reality. The ecovillage is not a mere theoretical construct. It is a way of life that enriches the daily life of hundreds of people.

Part two is a practical guide to planning and living in an ecovillage. It explains how residents are able to achieve a balance between the individual, community, and their commitment to environmental preservation. Recommendations are substantiated by the words of residents themselves, statistical evidence from an extensive survey of residents in nine ecovillages, observations and interviews. Part Two begins with a discussion of the research methods in this study.

Future residents are placed center stage in the discussion of planning an ecovillage. Other people involved in the planning process and the steps involved in the planning process are described in relation to the residents. The Planning chapter provides recommendations and reminders about crucial points in the process where future residents might lose confidence, focus, or control. It shows others have gone through this and restores faith that it is possible.

It provides some solutions to discouraging pitfalls which have arisen in other groups. The focus here, as in the rest of the book, is on social interaction. Logistical details will vary tremendously from project to project but basic behavioral issues arise in any group process. Social dynamics shape the analysis throughout the book.

People are the focus of this book, not buildings or pollution or politics, therefore, the entire report relates to people and their interactions with each other, and with their surroundings. The Social chapter delves into who the residents are, their feelings about their experience being a part of an ecovillage, and how they

interact with each other and the environment. It includes residents' concern for their children, the social dynamics of shared maintenance, and recommendations for how an ecovillage might improve the social climate. The discussion on environmental behavior goes beyond the scope of the ecovillage, and draws on outside research regarding environmental behavior. The discussion of environmental behavior includes human perception of ecovillages, from within the ecovillages, and from the larger community.

The Economics chapter addresses the frequent assumption that living ecologically is necessarily more expensive. Although some costs are higher than "regular" housing other costs are lower. Ultimately the cost of building and living ecologically appears commensurate with "regular" housing.

The Design chapter complements the Social chapter. Basic information on the design and function of elements of the ecovillage, from toilets to site design, is presented as background information. The centerpiece of the Design chapter is not, however, the thickness of the insulation or the choice of paint. It is the residents' interaction with and experience of their physical surroundings. Recommendations center on design which is visible, simple, user-friendly, attractive and pleasant to use. Design which is for people and the environment enhances quality of life and contributes to the balance between needs of the individual, community and the environment.

The promotion of the ecovillage concept is not intended to result in a proliferation of newly built residential neighborhoods. Part Three, *Where Next*, examines how the essence an ecovillage, its gestalt, is transferable to existing communities, communities which incorporate many more facets of life than housing. The houses are really just an adjunct to the community,

whereas the community is the blood, the heart, and the soul of the ecovillage. Several projects in Sweden have obtained positive results through successful incorporation of either design or planning techniques similar to those in the ecovillages. A better quality of life should not be limited to those in the western world who can afford new homes. Elitist elements of the movement are exposed. Time and hard work will show if the essence of the ecovillages can surmount the barriers which exist between us.

A note for the reader:

The Appendix includes copies of the original research documents, complete results from the survey, the bibliography, and a glossary. The bibliography has an annotated component which is distributed at the end of relevant sections throughout the report under the heading "Resources." Annotated sources are identified in the bibliography with the appropriate reference page. The glossary includes a definition of terms and a bilingual list of words for which it was difficult to find precise translations.

Research for this study was conducted on a Fulbright fellowship at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) between November 1997 and July 1998. Unless otherwise noted, all statistics are based on a survey conducted in the spring of 1998 and conclusions are based upon interviews and observations by the author. The survey results are comprised of responses from 117 residents in nine ecovillages. All quotes from the residents are printed in *italics*. All photographs were taken by the author unless otherwise cited. The author has done all translations with consultation with native speakers as necessary.

