

Would an Ecovillage by Any Other Name Smell as Sweet?

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What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

--- Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II

I contributed an article to *Communities* magazine back in the Fall of 2000, Issue #108. The article was entitled “Designing My Own Education for the Ecovillage Millennium,” and described my experiences creating the world’s first formal degree devoted to Ecovillage Design. Now, more than a decade later, I’m nearing completion of my Ph.D. still on the Ecovillage track (more or less). I wish to describe here how my understanding of the Ecovillage has evolved in the intervening years, noting especially how the name “Ecovillage” gets applied to numerous styles of community development – and not all of them compatible with one another!

I remember back at Crystal Waters in September 1997. The newly formed Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) was offering their first ever Ecovillage Design Course. Max Lindegger was hosting a star-studded line-up of presenters: Albert Bates from The Farm, Declan Kennedy from Lebensgarten, John Talbot from Findhorn, and Linda Joseph and Kailish from the Manitou Institute. I had one burning question: “What is it about an Ecovillage that makes it a *village*?” I’ll never forget Max’s reply, because it has helped to guide me through all these years of schooling: “A village is large enough to contain a church. Hamlets are too small for churches.”

I think that when GEN was forming, there was a purposeful intent not to exclude anybody; therefore, the only criterion for joining the network was *self-identification*: any group that considered themselves an “ecovillage” could become one. There were some obvious advantages to this but also, I would submit, some drawbacks.

I think back to the time when I became part of an urban permaculture experiment here in my hometown of Bellingham, Washington. There were six autonomous individuals living in a house originally designed for a nuclear family, plus two converted school-buses and a wikkiup – maybe ten full-time residents total. The owner was so proud to get this experiment underway that he turned to me one day and beamed, “This can be our own little ecovillage!”

I know that within the Fellowship of Intentional Communities, the name “ecovillage” can be applied to any community with an ecological bent – meaning, of course, that some communities form for strictly social or spiritual intentions. Diana Leafe Christian, who was the editor of *Communities* magazine when I submitted my first article, wrote an important book entitled

Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities. This title implies that these two terms can be used interchangeably, that ecovillages are, by definition, intentional communities.

Yet not everybody thinks this way. For example, Phil Hawes, who was the chief architect for Biosphere II, and who now teaches at the San Francisco Institute of Architecture, has formed a sophisticated concept of “ecovillage” based on an optimum size of 5000 persons. In Phil’s model, the “ecovillage” begins with a cluster of about 250 people who will incorporate all the essential industries needed to build the full village. This is certainly not a model where a “core group” will begin meeting and working through consensus until they reach a point where they are ready to pool resources and purchase a piece of land upon which to construct their dream “ecovillage” – no, Phil’s model requires professional development and some heavy financing. Does that mean it cannot be an “ecovillage?”

Another successful architect, Greg Ramsey from Village Habitat Design in Atlanta, who has taught Ecovillage Design Courses at The Farm, has developed a model he calls “Conservation Communities” – a model meant to be competitive in real estate markets. Greg is currently working on a project he calls an “ecovillage:” two cohousing communities encircling an “artisan village” surrounded by agricultural land and buffered by extensive forest. This is a project that will need to be professionally designed and, when the time is right, contracted to a developer for construction. Does that mean it can’t be a *real* “ecovillage?”

And then there’s the version introduced by Robert Gilman, who, you may recall, produced for Gaia Trust through his magazine *In Context* in 1991 the seminal report “Eco-Villages and Sustainable Communities.” Robert has gone on to become a City Council member in a small town called Langley on Whidbey Island in Washington State. At the GEN+10 Conference at Findhorn in 2005, Robert presented a thought-provoking slide-show in which he asked the provocative question: “Can Langley be considered an ecovillage?” This was not an offhand remark, for Robert re-introduced all the criteria for “ecovillage” that he first enumerated in the 1991 report and demonstrated that, yes, all these same criteria *could* be applied to a progressive municipality.

My favorite examples are the fabulous traditional villages of Tuscany and the Provence. Recognizing that “eco” is short for “ecological” then these surely can be considered “eco-villages,” for they are definitely *ecologically integrated* into the landscape. And, we could take it a step further by also insisting that these villages are *intentional communities*, in that they are entirely built and maintained by the self-governing processes of the people who live there – especially so in the days before globalization.

And so, from an academic perspective, a “village” is a certain size and character, and performs certain functions – for one thing, it’s big enough to contain a church! Huehucoyotl in Mexico seems to have realized this: they call their community an *ecoaldea*, where “aldea” is the Spanish word for little village, or *hamlet*. Do you think people would sign up for an Ecohamlet Design Course?

This distinction is not as trivial as it may at first sound. All over North America there are phony developments that call themselves “villages.” Many single-use suburban subdivisions are named “villages.” Then there are shopping centers, apartment complexes, and even strip malls that bear the “village” name. I’m sure you can find some examples in your home town, so ubiquitous is this phenomenon. The point is that these are not really villages, not at all; yet there seems to be a fascination – almost a sentimental longing – for naming everything as a “village.”

And then there’s the “ecovillage.” There is not an ecovillage in the world that is big enough to be considered a real village – right? An urban permaculture experiment is sure not a village. Nor is a cohousing development. Nor is three families on 20 acres. Some of the projects may get close – Tamera, Damanhur, Findhorn, Crystal Waters, The Farm – yet technically speaking these are still hamlet scale. What does all this mean? Just that the name “ecovillage” is being used as a *metaphor* for the greater vision of “sustainable community.”

My own opinion is that the settlement patterning of the North American continent was thrown together rather hastily and randomly in a mad rush of “manifest destiny.” You might say that post-conquest North America skipped the village stage of development. The resulting infrastructure will prove to be increasingly dysfunctional in the coming period of energy descent. During this period, the entire settlement patterning of North America will need to be retrofitted to a sustainable *village* scale. This means urban villages, suburban villages, rural villages, and yes, *ecovillages*.

The ecovillages are the vanguard. I think of them now as “research, training, and demonstration sites” where all the various sustainable systems – ecological systems, social systems, economic systems, technological systems – can be integrated together in one place. These ecovillages are inherently educational centers where the general population can come see how it’s done, where they can learn the skills and know-how they will need to begin re-organizing their neighborhoods and suburbs into *real* villages. No one needs to tell them that we’re using the name “ecovillage” metaphorically.