ECOVILLAGE CHARACTERISTICS, CHALLENGES & GUIDELINES

Based on a précis the work of Robert Gilman and colleagues, with extensions and examples

ECOVILLAGE DEFINITION

> A *human scale, full-featured* settlement, in which *human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world*, in a way that is *supportive of healthy human development* and can be successfully *continued into the indefinite future* (Context Institute 1991: 7).

This definition of EcoVillage from 1991 is still used world-wide as a starting point for dealing with the complexity that such communities represent. At their heart, traditional EcoVillages are what happens when groups of concerned people want to demonstrate through their lifestyles that we can do very much better in our ongoing relationships with our ecosystems and each other. To recognise this and work in this area, a developer needs to understand and share the nature of this concern, especially if planning to initiate EcoVillage (or Cohousing) projects in a commercially-facilitated way.

The framework for the following writing is summarised from pages 7-13 of the Context Institute's Report for Gaia Trust, 1991, now out of print, with other input as cited. Extra, illustrative information from Australian EcoVillage experience and my overseas research has been added.

There is still an option to purchase the Context Institute's original Journal "Living Together" theme edition #29, 1991 at http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC29/TOC29.htm, which has many articles of interest.

Gilman's articles include the expanded definition and the challenges experienced by dozens of communities.

Human scale

The objective is a "sense of close-knit human-scale community", where everyone is at least known to everyone else and close enough to engage.

Evidence from intentional community experience & anthropology indicates a maximum size for stable communities between 100 (industrial) and 1000 (remote), depending on context. Over 500 is thought inadvisable and prone to excessive bureaucracy or fragmentation into factions.

McCamant & Durrett's research into Cohousing found a range of 10-100 people, an average of 15-30 and a range of 6-40, households, an optimum of 20-25, and a population averaging 40-100 – perhaps 75 maximum is best (McCamant *et al* 1994: 43-4).

Crystal Waters Permaculture EcoVillage near Maleny Qld has 230 people from 83 lots. The larger Australian EcoVillages with approx 140 lots could perhaps look forward to 200-400 people.

Other examples (lots): Aldinga EcoVillage SA 142 + 24+ x cottages, EcoVillage at Currumbin Qld 144, SomerVille WA 104, Jarlanbah Permaculture Cohousing Hamlet NSW 43, Ithaca Cohousing EcoVillage USA 30 + 20 + more planned, Earthsong Cohousing Eco-Neighbourhood NZ 32, Cohousing EcoVillage at Loudoun USA 2x25, Muir Commons Cohousing USA 26, Overdrevet Cohousing Denmark 25, Elder-Spirit Cohousing Virginia 29, Mariendalsvej Cohousing Copenhagen 22.

While EcoVillages are generally larger than Cohousings, they are often arranged in smaller neighbourhood groups or clusters.

Housing in these communities is usually complemented by various other buildings and structures. Rural and rural fringe communities often occupy former agricultural properties, with related outbuildings.

Full-featured settlement

The idea is that an EcoVillage is a small-scale microcosm of wider society, but unlike the latter, is integrated and eco-cyclic rather than linear and disconnected by zonal apartheid, ie 'mixed use'. 'Small enough' to feel close-knit; 'large enough' to provide diversity. Thus residence, work, socialising, recreation, creativity and spiritual freedom would all be possible at the one location.

Unless they contain Cohousing, and because they are looser-knit and built individually, EcoVillages tend not to have regular shared meals, but do gather often for joint projects, 'pot-luck' feasts, meetings, celebrations, concerts, sports, walking, and social events, many needing venues. It really is very individual. Aldinga Arts-EcoVillage has an array of such buildings, as well as an amphitheatre, and a community-built substantial pizza oven in a 'heart of the Village' area, currently under development. It also has 10 dams for stormwater capture, 16 orchards, edible landscape, and an on-site sewage treatment plant that feeds a woodlot and some of the orchards. *See* Aldinga Arts-EcoVillage Case Study.

Findhorn Foundation's commercial scale facilities at '*The Park*' (originally a caravan park near a small fishing village in Scotland), can provide meals for all (vegetarian, 349 people + the many guests: purchase a meal ticket). Its 'Universal Hall', a wonderful structure built with significant contributions from resident artists, has a stone roof, magnificent stained glass windows, massive ornamental doors and huge murals. It regularly hosts symphony orchestras. It has other structures built by visiting artists and resident self-builders, including housing for adolescents – see Overdrevet Case Study - and guests, a cluster of whiskey barrel houses and a state-of-the-art EcoVillage project; many small businesses such as supermarket also with gifts, books and music; an apothecary, a famous weaving centre, and a conference centre located in a huge old hotel in Nearby Forres. It also has a wind turbine, organic vegetable gardens and a bio-centre sewage treatment works.

The definition expects as many jobs in the village as employed people. Some overseas communities have set out with this goal, but found that income from an external job is needed to enable the lifestyle. Other places are bustling with energetic enterprises and self-sufficient in providing basic needs. In Australia, still young in terms of EcoVillage and Cohousing development, community enterprise to date has been sparse. It has proved extremely difficult to entrain whole communities into joint enterprise, partly because idealists tend to be naïve about money (and not recognising that the very act of buying into a Community Title inherently means they are in business together) – or individualists with money do not necessarily trust those without to take on business ventures.

The concept of work is complicated in these communities as they often participate in LETS systems and sweat equity which allow low- or limited-income people to participate in a local economy that greatly improves quality of life or gives them greater equity in their housing.

Fully self-sustaining communities tend to be rural, more isolated and more radical collectives. They often have very successful farms or small businesses in local towns eg (Findhorn), Svanholm (Denmark: www.svanholm.dk/), Alpha Farm (http://www.pioneer.net/~alpha/) and Lost Valley (www.lostvalley.org/) (Oregon USA). Crystal Waters (http://gen.ecovillage.org/) has approximately 150 small businesses.

Ecological Solutions, who are designing Somerville EcoVillage in WA and consult as Greenedge Projects Pty Ltd to communities setting up in Australia, have a good handle on finance, and run well-reputed interactive workshops on EcoVillage Economics. www.ecovillageeconomics.com/. They have also initiated a publically listed Trust to facilitate start-up for EcoVillages in Australia.

In which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world

This eco-responsive principle embeds equality between humans and other living beings as co-inhabitors of and contributors to an ecosystem: we find our proper place and co-operate with Nature in a non-dominating way, thereby claiming the title 'eco'.

Concepts like organic principles, banning toxins including herbicides, in-ground PVC and termiticides, Permaculture design, building site control (water, silt, toxins, building wastes), 'edible landscape' instead of exotic street trees, retention of indigenous vegetation, local indigenous plantings, home offices (avoid transport), companion animal control, pedestrian-priority roads or 'slow ways' (safety for animals as well as humans), on-site sewage and stormwater management (avoiding 'end-of-pipe' solutions, capturing bio-resources, enriching the land), site-percolating paths (encouraging pedestrianism, neighbourliness and natural exercise, minimising cars, providing pathways and escape routes for fauna as well as people) come to mind as examples of integrative strategies.

This implies an eco-cycles, context-constrained, local open system approach to material resources, unlike industrial society's linear approach of 'dig it up, use it once, throw it away forever'. Instead, we use self-generated renewable energy where possible (solar, wind, woodlots etc, not fossil fuels), we compost all organic wastes and return them to the land (rather than landfill, sewer, incinerator), and recycle solid wastes as far as possible, always avoiding toxic or harmful substances. This and the healthy human development items following are both well conceptualised as sustainability principles by *The Natural Step Framework:* a mental model for sustainability. See Glossary *System Conditions for Sustainability* and *The Natural Step Framework, also see* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_Step/ http://www.naturalstep.ca/ http://www.naturalstep.ca/scp/sustainablecommunities.html http://www.naturalstep.ca/understanding-sustainability.html

In a way that is supportive of healthy human development

This includes facilitation of a balance of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health both of individuals and community as a whole, which "has implications for economics, governance and all social relationships". As well as ecological principles, these are the drivers for much that is found in community By-laws. Examples of By-laws: Aldinga Arts-EcoVillage: www.aaev.net/, Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood: www.earthsong.org.nz/, EcoVillage of Loudoun County: www.ecovillage.com/.

Can be successfully continued into the indefinite future.

This can be taken to be a principle and a definition of sustainability, deeply committed to fairness and non-exploitation – towards humans and other beings, today and into the future. It is intended to enforce honesty into the sustainability claim. To be a true EcoVillage, there are blind-spots to avoid, eg:

- Living off the capital accumulated elsewhere in society (*see* note on *EcoVillage Economics* above). This may be hard to achieve: see Overdrevet Case Study, Svanholm entry in Fellowship of Intentional Communities: Communities Directory (2007).
- Being dependent on anti-ecological activities off-site. Examples coming readily to mind include:
    - Use of some building and furnishing materials such as Styrofoam foundations or insulation, PVC plastic curtains or ordinary PVC pipework (toxic to workers in manufacture; a non-toxic version of PVC moulded items has been developed in the UK but it still uses the toxic glue), making built-in furniture, especially kitchen fitouts with MDF (medium density fibreboard which outgases formaldehyde)
    - Taking moss rocks from other ecosystems to decorate your garden
    - Sending mixed garbage off site to landfill
    - Large scale irrigation, sewage treatment, water transport and other centralised 'end-of-pipe' strategies
    - Excluding major aspects of life (eg children, adolescents, education, old age, one gender, specific races, disabled).

Difference between EcoVillages & Sustainable Communities

EcoVillages are always geographically located, urban or rural, and small enough to be human scale.

'Sustainable community' is an umbrella term including EcoVillages, clusters, networks of EcoVillages, even non-geographically based green businesses. A city made of EcoVillages could be a sustainable community but not an EcoVillage itself on size grounds. EcoVillages & other types of sustainable communities have much to learn from each other.

EcoVillages are not about a reversion to former agricultural methods. They are a post-industrial and probably post-agricultural response to a new human situation: new awareness of Earth seen from space and new recognition of the need for sustainability.

Rich resource: Fellowship of Intentional Communities 2007 Communities Directory.

These Challenges are presented along with some summary-version larger-scale *Principles* presented by Perks & van Vliet, then of the University of Calgary in their now out-of-print research report in 1993 concerning objectives espoused by some 30 EcoVillages in Scandinavia. They were put together after the Brundtland Commission Report 1987 "*Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living"* from IUCN, UNEP & WWF (Perks & van Vliet 1993: 4). They provide the context within which the Gilman *et al* Principles operate at village scale, but also rely on personal attitudes: '*Think globally, act locally, respond personally'*.

1. Respect & care for the community of life
2. Change personal attitudes & practices in respect of consumption & waste
3. Enable communities to care for their own environments
4. Improve the quality of life in urban & rural settlements
5. Conserve the Earth's vitality & diversity
    a. Conserve life-support systems
    b. Preserve & enhance biodiversity
    c. Ensure that uses of renewable resources are sustainable
6. Minimise the depletion of non-renewable resources
    a. Increase energy economisation, reduce energy consumption
    b. Minimise transport requirements, improve collective transport systems
7. Ensure that development does not destroy the Earth's carrying capacity (keeping within Nature's limits of tolerance)
8. Provide a national framework for harmonising development & conservation
9. Create a global alliance for action, incentives, regulation & monitoring.

THE CHALLENGES

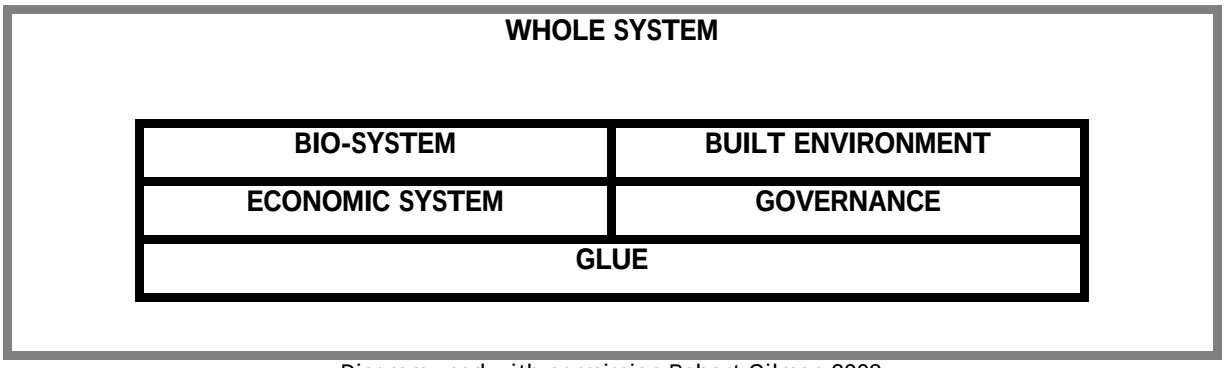

Diagram used with permission Robert Gilman 2008

The beauty of the Context Institute model is its simplicity, providing mental hooks for the different aspects of eco-community challenge. A block diagram is presented, with a hierarchical interpretation in that the higher blocks are more visible and 'the easy bit', but rest in turn on the integrity and functionality of the lower levels. The whole system aspect speaks of overall integration and the maintenance of 'right relationship' between them all: 'a living wholeness'. It might also represent the actions of the Village as-a-whole in its relationship with the outside world, that is active and inclusive. The following wisdom comes from wide experience and a survey of 90 communities in 21 countries for Gaia Trust (Denmark) by Context Institute (Washington State, USA).

The Whole-System Challenge

This is about critically honest scoping of the project, with sustainability embedded in thought and action from the outset. Risks include trying to do too many things at once, too fast and beyond available resources. Expect intra- and interpersonal stresses, cost and time blowouts and unpredictable happenings.

The Glue Challenge

Without 'glue' a village will fall apart under stress, and with intentional community there are many stressors. Shared Values and Vision are critical. *See* DH Fickeisen article on "Skills for Living Together" including vision development : (http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC29/Ficksn.htm/). (*Also refer* Section 3). Other issues identified:

- Process for discovering, specifying, developing & evolving the collective vision
- Interpersonal closeness and how best developed
- External relations beyond the community.

Examples:

Aldinga Arts EcoVillage's 'Vision': "Caring for the Earth, Caring for People, Living Creatively – Together". Process included an uninspired 'mental' process: canvassing suggestions from all by email, collecting suggestions in the form of single word concepts, then a listing and brainstorming session at a strategic planning day where under facilitation the 'right' vision 'suddenly' emerged, which has been happily embraced ever since. Its simplicity makes it easier to remember and use and apply. *See* other examples in Section 3. We are now challenged by Sociocracy's functionally different concepts of 'Vision, Mission and Aims'.

'Values' from older women's cohousing (London UK) (http://www.owch.org.uk/):

- Acceptance and respect for diversity
- Care, respect and support for each other
- Providing a balance between privacy and community
- Countering ageist stereotypes
- Co-operating and sharing responsibility
- Maintaining a structure without hierarchy
- Safeguarding the environment
- Being part of the wider community

Vision of Earthsong Cohousing Eco-Neighbourhood (West Auckland NZ)(www.earthsong.org.nz/):

- Design and construct a cohesive neighbourhood whose layout, buildings and services demonstrate the highest practical standards of sustainable human settlement
- Develop and foster a living environment which uses clear communication, decision-making and conflict resolution guidelines that promote tolerance, safety, respect and co-operation
- Assist in education and public awareness of sustainability by demonstrating and promoting innovative community design and environmentally responsible construction.

Interim principles for interpersonal relationships for Aldinga Arts-EcoVillage were adopted by the early core group (from Don Miguel Ruiz' book The Four Agreements, 2002). The expanded version of some of these does not hold up on deeper examination, but they were intended to counter gossip rife at the time:

- Be impeccable with your word
- Don't take anything personally
- Don't make assumptions
- Always do your best.

The Governance Challenge

The principal issues here relate to ways to systematise and optimise the resource and the challenge provided by the existence of different personality styles and types of experience – in the context of collective ownership and management of the community organism. Decisions must be made. Conflict will arise. Maturity takes learning, experience and time. Eventually with continuing goodwill and an over-arching purpose, the existing wisdom can be drawn on and allowed to inform quality decisions. This scene can be heaven or hell, depending on how it is handled. Mutual accommodation is one goal, hearts must be engaged and caringly heard, commitment and goodwill will carry the day. It can be a magnificent thing, as in a happy family – or the inverse.

As well as internal focus, the community will need to have a position about external relations, including the regulatory framework, but also, there is usually an ethic of service, inclusiveness and mutual exchange in the bioregion and beyond. This includes being involved with the local community events, the welcoming of endless curious visitors, and the sharing of all kinds of experience with each other, other communities, politicians, local government, guests and others wanting to set up communities themselves. In the end a small fee may be charged to show people around and some communities confine visitors to one day per week. A substantial visitor-management system may be needed in larger places, and public liability insurance, public safety, toilets and other amenities become an issue.

In relation to official bodies, the community needs to anoint trusted spokespeople to avoid confusion. This is all taken in good part as a contribution to human journey to sustainability and

pride in collective achievement. Knowledge about governance, By-law structures, decision-making structures and conflict prevention and resolution strategies are usually avidly discussed and freely shared. If they are not well understood and subscribed to by all community members, community conflict is highly likely. For this reason, a comprehensive induction system is critical, especially for people entering the community after its foundation stage.

Approaches to power and leadership are best made explicit, to everyone's advantage. Equal fairness has been found to work better than pretending that power in a group is equally expressed. Once the community population stabilises, it is a good idea to limit the tenure of elected positions.

A wave of interest in the Dutch Sociocracy approach to organisational democracy, based *inter alia* on ISO9000 quality management, is spreading through the Intentional Community circuit at present. It provides an elegant and inclusive way to honour the need for hierarchy for some purposes (eg action settings), yet involve stakeholder people at every level in policy and decision-making circles (leading and measuring). It uses 'governance by consent' to underpin its decision-making, rather than 'democracy', which inevitably votes to have winners and losers, and rather than consensus, which impossibly requires everyone to agree 100%. The only text in English is presently "We the People: A Guide to Sociocratic Principles and Methods: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy: How to apply the principles of Dynamic Self-Governance to our workplaces, governments and organisations" by John Buck & Sharon Villines (2007), Sociocracy.Info, Washington DC. *See* http://www.sociocracy.info/ and http://www.sociocracy.info/book.html/.

The Economic System Challenge

Economic activity is part of the EcoVillage concept, but there is a greater emphasis on the Sustainability Principle of fairness and non-exploitation. Gilman points out that this implies that EcoVillage members should seek sustainable types of income production, ie they should not exploit people, places, ecosystems or the future.

Economic issues will include consideration of what is and is not acceptable for income production, how common assets will be managed for the benefit of all, how to get anxious or untrusting people to agree to economic development at all, what legal structures may be used for collective ownership beyond just the land, whether perhaps the Village might invest in a distant wind turbine or a guest lodge for financial benefit (precedents in Scandinavia), and on what basis people might use community assets to generate private income. In South Australia (for example), some of these issues are constrained by the Community Titles Act and 'MOSS' regulations (Metropolitan Open Space System SA).

Other opportunities come from either community or regional LETS systems. As mentioned above, Greenedge run very popular and much needed workshops on EcoVillage Economics, and advertise that they cover the following (2007):

What knowledge and skills will be gained?

- The mechanics of raising funds for an EcoVillage project
- Developing a key "value-exchange" strategy for funding
- Information regarding appropriate corporate structures
- How to develop a process which enables you to decide the cash flow
- Step by step process for engaging people within an EcoVillage project
- Creating an approach that provides high flexibility with the lowest risk
- Understanding the importance of community engagement in EcoVillage Economics
- How to avoid common economic pitfalls within communities and EcoVillages
- Understanding when things need to happen in order to succeed
- How to carry out an assessment of what "social capital" exists
- How to develop a people-centered economic development strategy
- How peoples passions can be converted into successful enterprises

·Why collaborative efforts produce better outcomes for individuals as well as the community
·Leveraging off the minimisation of economic leakage as a kick off strategy
·Understanding the concept of enterprise synergy and how this multiplies economic activity
·Where to locate funds for cultivating enterprise
·Leveraging off community and EcoVillage assets
·The connection between social and economic sustainability.

The Built Environment Challenge

The built environment also needs to harmlessly integrate into the natural world, and all the elements listed in the document UrbanEcologyElements.doc/ will contribute. In general terms, to meet this challenge, one needs to build for low local impact, avoiding disturbance of local habitats and waterways, using local materials (minimising transport), using non-toxic and ecologically friendly materials (taking the whole life cycle into account and also the ability to recycle), sustainably using renewable energy and minimising waste – questioning the need, reusing, recycling and appropriate disposal where unavoidable – right down to reclaiming and building with waste materials, offering surplus materials to others instead of landfilling, offsetting unavoidable impacts perhaps by planting extra trees or regenerating scrub, planting habitat etc. See EcoVillage at Currumbin Case Study. Much recycled timber has been used in structures seem in the images.

All this needs to be thought out beforehand and carefully integrated into the Master Plan and Design Brief. The placement of buildings will depend on the condition of any remnant vegetation and it is common for intentional communities to lock away large chunks of forest or other natural resources as permanent sanctuaries. The 'rape & pillage' approach of most estate developers, who totally clear sites before development, is very much frowned on by intentional communities. With the luxury of space, small lots will carefully place passive solar sited housing and plantings, set not to block a neighbour's solar access. Edible landscapes may well be established along paths and roadways, and density may be overall low. In more urban settings or to reduce building foorprints, housing may be clustered densely, go up rather than out, and be bedecked with vertical and roof gardens eg Christie Walk in Adelaide has 27 dwellings on 2000m^2.

The Bio-System Challenge

This challenge relates to the principle of harmless integration into the natural world. It is thus concerned with conserving, restoring, mapping and managing all potential impacts and working with the land. Impact potential that requires protection will arise, needing By-laws that constrain any toxic risks, liquid or solid waste management and processing and require avoidance of ecological on-site impacts from off-site imported substances or processes and vice versa. Many Australian native plants are adapted drought and nutrient scarcity, so awareness of the phosphate and nitrogen other mineral cycles are critical.

On the other hand, in relations with any natural habitat (and bioregion), suitable parts of a working landscape can be identified that provide integration opportunities in the production of food, bio-waste, wood and other bio-resources.

An ecocyclic, systems approach is taken in design work, with stormwater capture and grey and black water being regarded as resources, linked to food, garden produce or timber production. Organic 'wastes' are composted and used on gardens. Chickens, fish, frogs and other living partners are likely elements.

TO BUILD AN ECOVILLAGE: GUIDELINES

The following lists the headings to be found in Robert Gilman's article (and pp 170-179 of the Context Institute Report) and hints at the contents. It is recommended that the reader download the full {Article by Robert Gilman} or purchase the Journal.

- *Recognise it will be a journey – and enjoy it!*
- *Develop a vision – and keep developing it*
- *Build relationships and bonding*
- *Make the whole-system challenge explicit ~ honour and balance both planning and experimentation*
- *Get help to become more self-reliant –skills toolbox needs specific task skills, task management skills & group process & interpersonal skills*
- *Develop clear procedures: decision making, resolving disputes, finances, membership, meta-procedures for changes to these: start with something simple and written*
- *Maintain balance – sustainably: group/private, today/tomorrow, hardware/software, love/light/will (heart/mind/action), learning or cognitive styles eg Myers-Briggs types (right relationship, appreciate inevitable diversity & different contributions), current consumption/investment for longer term – spirit of sustainable service*
- *Be open & honest: power issue – reframe equality of power (never happens with humans) as equality of fairness.*

Paraphrased and extended by Dr Vanda Rounsefell
Ecoweb Human Ecology Services and Aldinga Arts-EcoVillage community
from the Gilman & Context Institute & other material mentioned above
& internaltional PhD research
Diagram and other related content used with permission from Robert Gilman
Email: ecoweb@adam.com.au/

Colour key:

pink = internet links
green = documents for download from within EcoVillages or Cohousing Fact Sheets on Your Development website
red = Glossary entries (full Glossary available for download as above)
blue = Bibliography entries (full Bibliography available for download as above)