

Research in Community Liaison Between “Scientific” and “Intentional” Community

by Marcus Andreas and Felix Wagner

Let’s start with the story of two married couples, the Jacksons and the Gilmans. Their cooperation led to the influential Gilman’s Report in 1991, from which stems the “classic” definition of an ecovillage¹. This report described ecovillages as a strategy for a more sustainable world. And shortly after its publication, the two couples invited people for a conspiratorial cup of coffee in Denmark, in order to fulfil this promise. Ecovillage practitioners and theorists responded to their call and planned cultural change.

We were talking about major change, long term fundamental change—nothing less than a new culture with new values. How do you bring it about? Is it even possible, with so many forces opposed? Are we just dreaming?²

The two groups’ approaches were rather different. According to the Jacksons, think tanks would be unlikely to save the world – therefore they didn’t invite the intellectuals to the next meeting and continued to work with the practitioners instead: “What is special about ecovillagers is that they are not writing papers for the next conference, or philosophizing over the back fence about what we ought to do about the global crisis. They ARE doing it”³. The strategy seemed to come together: the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) was created in 1995, which to this day supports ecovillages and other intentional communities as the hearths of sustainable culture. A success story – even if its sparks have not jumped that far. The great bush fire of cultural change has yet to be kindled.

We would like to proclaim a new “heyday”. It is time for academics and activists to try it with each other (again). Will there be sparks? As we know from history, couples can move mountains! However, before getting into something so long-term, it’s worth clarifying a few questions...

Why get involved with one another?

Science strives to gain insights, both for society or “just” for individual disciplines. These are seldom practical, and communities often benefit only indirectly, if at all. Professors and students research not least for their own aspirations and careers. However, many also wish to make a difference to the wider world and contribute to transformation; they

„[An ecovillage is 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.” See Gilman, R. 1991: 10. The eco-village challenge. In InContext 29: 10. <http://www.context.org/iclib/ic29/gilman1/>

² See Jackson, Ross J. T. 2000: 63. *We can do it! We will do it! And we ARE doing it! Building an ecovillage future.* San Francisco: Robert D. Reed.

³ Jackson, Ross J. T. 2000: ix. *We can do it! We will do it! And we ARE doing it! Building an ecovillage future.* San Francisco: Robert D. Reed.

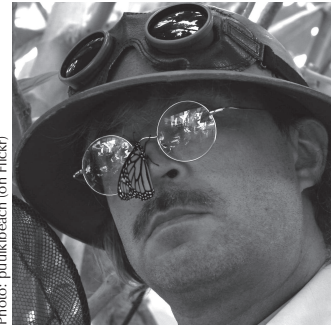


Photo: puukibeach (on Flickr)



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too can be “pioneers of change”! A distinguishing characteristic of academic research – which it shares with many communities – is that it goes hand in hand with education. It gets out of the universities and into the wider world along winding paths (people, conferences and publications).

Of course there are also lines of questioning with “practical” applications. One common research focus is measuring a carbon footprint which reveals potential for development and can also be used for PR purposes⁴. Academics also serve communities in terms of adding to their reputations, e.g. as scientific advisors. According to our evaluation, communities could make more specific use of academic research by approaching it in an organised manner with precise questions.

To bring these two partners together should ideally also serve a higher purpose: world salvation (or at least the improvement of life). One path towards this goal is the exploration and development of sustainable culture. We define this as a cultural change towards a way of life that does not harm the planet and concurrently benefits the “humane”. Some communities, particularly ecovillages, describe themselves as “models and research projects”⁵. They try things out, experiment, and yes, research!

This kind of research is necessary. Although the in-house experiment may be considered successful when it results in “feeling better” and in everyone having learnt something in the process, more formal standards apply in scientific research. Communities can only provide these to a limited extent, since for them the act of “living the good life” takes precedence. And often they are lacking the comparison with the world outside of their own scene and are therefore easily subject to under- and over-estimations.

To get on with one another

Just like in every relationship, there are various pitfalls between science and community. One of the challenges is the tolerance of different world views. The rational, often soberly abstract science, based on palpable facts on the one hand – alongside the consciously subjective approach marked by emotions, “open hearts instead of closed minds”, which is often encountered in communities. There is most certainly scope for relationship counselling! One comment from a participant in the community workshop at the Lebensgarten Steyerberg in 2008 clearly demonstrates this: “You scientists in your white coats are the ones who are responsible for all this misery!” This comment was aimed – from her point of view – at the limited world view of science, which oppresses the freedom and bubbling vitality of life rather than supporting it.



⁴ See Simon, Karl-Heinz et al. 2004. Concluding final report of the project „Gemeinschaftliche Lebens- und Wirtschaftsweisen und ihre Umweltrelevanz.“ Kassel: Universität Kassel.

⁵ Sieben Lindens Ecovillage, for example, used to call itself just that, see Andreas, Marcus & Wagner, Felix 2012a: “For whom? For the future!” Ecovillage Sieben Linden as a model and research project (RCC Perspectives 2012/8), S. 135-147. München: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC).

Photo: Yoga Vidya: „Namaste“

A further challenge consists of avoiding the “monkey in the zoo”-effect whilst researching – but with the following suggestions in mind, a good rapport should be possible:

- One antidote to superficial acquaintances is to stay with the community for an extended period of time during the research phase. In order to enable this, community visits should remain affordable for students (in Sieben Linden, for instance, researchers pay a reduced “partner guests” rate for their stay). Ideally, these stays should include the possibility to work together.
- In order to avoid repetitions, it is advantageous for everyone involved to have an overview of previous research (the ecovillage Ithaca does this in a particularly exemplary manner)⁶.
- Defined contact persons and processes simplify cooperation. A fixed component of any research process should be a final presentation by the researcher. It happens rather often that communities do not hear anything, or anything useful, from the researchers about their work upon completion, once academic titles have been received.

Both sides must make some concessions. Research is difficult to implement without access to archives or events. But at the same time, privacy must be respected – not only the privacy of individuals, but also that of communities. Also bear in mind that researchers are not completely “scientifically neutral.” They are necessarily trapped between different roles during their research and are naturally also being “researched” by the communities. One of the authors, for instance, clearly remembers being publically questioned about their research in the Sieben Linden sauna at the end of a long and hard working day... even researchers get hot under the (discarded) collar at this point.

It is usually the case that the power over the research process initially lies with the communities, who allow access and have sovereignty over self-definitions. Roles are reversed only towards the end of the research, when the researcher finally becomes the author: now the products of their research (such as expert interviews, presentations at conferences and dissertations) contribute to forming the community’s public identity. This brings us to the “babies” of this relationship.

Fruits of the relationship

The good news is that they are multiplying. There is an increasing amount of scientific work about, and with, communities⁷. Researcher networking has clearly increased and, in cooperation with many communities, a publically accessible database about ecovillage research is currently being created⁸. And academic discourse seems to be increasing the respect for communal efforts in these circles. Examples include conferences such as “Climate from Below” or the symposium “Pioneers of Change”, where community members appear as equals alongside scientists.

⁶ <http://ecovillageithaca.org/evi/index.php/education/respources-evi-publications>

⁷ Wagner, Felix 2012. *Ecovillage research review*. In Andreas, Marcus & Felix Wagner (Hg.): *Realizing utopia. Ecovillage endeavors and academic approaches (RCC Perspectives 2012/8)*, S. 81-94. Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC).

⁸ the database requires (free) registration: <http://db.researchincommunity.net/>

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What follows, we hope, are concrete and hopefully constructive shared projects! The signs are looking good: The fact that change is necessary – even unavoidable – has entered societal consciousness. The German federal government's Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU - "Wissenschaftlicher Beirat für Globale Umweltveränderung") speaks of the necessity for a "large-scale transformation" in its pioneering flagship report of 2011⁹. It emphasises the need for cooperation between many players within society. Out of their societal niches, "pioneers of change" would thereby create the knowledge for innovation and transformation, demonstrating sustainable ways of living to the mainstream. According to the WBGU, science should take on the task of exploring this living knowledge and bring it to broader society.

But even politics are getting into motion; invitations are being extended. The premier of the German federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate, Malu Dreyer, has the slogan: "A communal housing project in every village". In her January 2013 government declaration she elaborated as follows:

I have a vision of communal housing projects being created in every local authority district in our country so that people of all ages, rich and poor, people with or without handicaps, can live together – if they so desire.

On the community side, there is also an increasing desire to pair off. Communities have become more socially acceptable and "dare" to engage more with established society, rather than wanting to be pure "anti-models". New initiatives, such as the "Project Lebensdorf", aim for cooperation with science from the very beginning. GEN has also been placing more emphasis on cooperation and alliance with other "change and policy makers" for a number of years now.

In 1996, shortly after the founding of the network, GEN made its first request to the United Nations. Ross Jackson demanded 100 million dollars for the establishment of 50 ecovillage projects worldwide: "I cannot imagine any single use of funds that would have more leverage in moving the planet toward sustainability." The application was refused. In the meantime, GEN has moved away from wanting to fight a solitary battle to save the world. Not only has the diversity of the scene multiplied (co-housing models alongside communities, communes, ecovillages and transition towns), so has its increasing openness towards the outside world. At the 2012 GEN-Europe conference in Hungary, GEN president Kosha Anja Joubert presented the collaboration with science as one of the main goals of the network. To commit to a sustainable culture together – wouldn't that be romantic?



⁹ <http://www.wbgu.de/hauptgutachten/hg-2011-transformation/>

Felix Wagner (l) lives and travels in communities and researches them since 2006 - starting with a master thesis in psychology which he researched for in Tamera. Marcus Andreas (r) studied pedagogics and ethnology in Munich and just completed his Ph.D. thesis on Sieben Linden Ecovillage.

Together they founded "Research in Community" in 2008. This association is now a successful platform facilitating cooperation between academics and activists that has won several awards...