

'To what extent does the Ideology of Alternative, Intentional Communities affect the architecture they chose to build and occupy?'

An intentional community by definition is; 'a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values.'¹ (Geoph Kozeny, 1995). These communities are social experiments, some of which draw parallels with the communal ideals of the utopian cities in the works of Bruno Taut; especially his work on 'Alpine Architecture' (1917). He was an advocate of architecture being connected to the inhabitants that would use it, for him these plans were a reaction to the First World War. He saw the destruction as a 'potential new starting point for society in a small, decentralized community'².

People who create or join them are brave enough to try out a different way of living according to their own moral parameters. Though the word 'commune' is often associated with alternative living; it is an economic term meaning to share equity which can describe a subdivision of intentional communities. This often brings confusion and undesirable assumptions due to negative connections to squatting, cults and drug culture. An example of this would be 'Freetown Christiania' in Denmark and its illegal substance street vendors 'the cannabis trade has evolved. Once led by small-time dealers, it is now controlled by large, multinational organisations'³.

The architecture that communities choose to occupy when making such alternative living examples is significant because it is such a large part of their everyday life and they constantly have to interact with it as well as it becoming a physical manifestation of their ideology.

'Alternative' or 'Intentional' Communities are incredibly varied due to the diverse nature of their members. They form when a number of distinctly individual people decide that they have similar goals and lifestyle choices that they want to live by, which are uncommon. There are approximately six categories of intentional community including self-actualising; activist; therapeutic; religious and communes for mutual support.⁴ It is important to note that each community is almost a living organism made up of the human components that form it, which often changes over time with different communities having different turnover rates. This flexible nature can affect the strength of the ideology that each community stands for. 'Any attempt to categorize the different types of communes will involve some distortion and simplification of actual reality, if only because communes change in their nature over time. And each venture is a reflection of the unique nature of its members, and its situation'⁵.

Money and finances are an especially large part of why many communities cannot build the bespoke architecture that suits and supports their ideologies. Hiring talented architects and builders is often too expensive for regular wages to afford. If the individuals who start the community do not have enough money saved up or do not have high earning jobs, sometimes it can be hard to pay for particularly costly things that they would need, for example, wind turbines or solar panels on their properties. When members pool their incomes, as they share the space, the funds can on occasion be sufficient, but this can be very different situations depending on the community. In the long term, finances can often be saved or returned by other means such as the bulk food buying and not having to buy multiples of appliances, for example, machines, books and instruments. In addition, when having installed appliances such as solar panels, it can be a positive investment. Although the costs can be large at first, they become more self-sufficient and do not need to purchase power from the National Grid. It can be cheaper long term, but it is the initial costs to install these types of amendments, as well as the deposits for the property that can be a problem and mean that they have to make compromises on their ideology for the logistical aspects of the project.

¹ Smith, W.I. (2019). 'Intentional Communities'. [online] <https://www.encyclopedia.com/reference/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/intentional-communities>. [Accessed: 20/03/2019].

² Kent, P. (2017). "'Alpine Architecture": an Utopian City by Bruno Taut (1917)'. [online] <https://phoebekentblog.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/alpine-architecture-an-utopian-city-by-bruno-taut-1917/>. [Accessed: 26/03/2019]

³ Cathcart-Keays, A. (2016). 'Paradise lost: does Copenhagen's Christiania commune still have a future?'. [online] <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/sep/23/copenhagen-christiania-drugs-commune-future>. [Accessed: 26/03/2019]

⁴ Rigby, A. (1974). *Communes in Britain*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Pg 5-6.

⁵ Rigby, A. (1974). *Communes in Britain*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Pg 4.



Figure 1: Allen, C (1993) House with solar wall. Centre for Alternative Technology, Wales [Online image] [Accessed on ...]

'The Centre of Alternative Technology' in Powys, Wales, is a good example of how a community can stand firmly for its collective ideology. Now it is a world-renowned ecology centre and charity dedicated to researching and communicating positive solutions for environmental change. They have a selection of short courses available that teach people how to live greener. For example: Retrofitting, Cob Building, Growing Fruit and Earth Oven Building

to name a few. In 1973 the project started out as an eco-village; a type of intentional community dedicated to living sustainably without the need for fossil fuels. The original members who started the project were engineers, architects, builders and growers. The off-grid community runs on alternative technologies including an 'on-site hydro turbine forces 20 litres per second of water against the turbines' blades to make it spin, producing a maximum output of 3.5 kilowatts. [...] We are using water from the reservoir in the hills above the visitor center and water pressure created by the weight of the water to create electricity'⁶.

The Centre is able to live to its ideal due to funding and using the space that has around it to educate people on their courses and who visit their site for a fee. They also have a shop and café as a means of income support. This allows them to remain and build upon their existing ecologically focussed projects, as well as integrating them and their ideas with society so that others can learn. Their architecture includes buildings that are ecologically sound using building methods such as: Rammed Earth, their WISE building is made using this technique; A Straw Bale Theatre and smaller buildings with 'Living Roofs'. Where they can, they also build with locally sourced materials like slate from a nearby quarry.

A notable architect that has worked on over 50 sustainable buildings in the United States is Sunray Kelley. He designs both ecologically sound and completely beautiful and individual buildings using traditional cob techniques. His creations are a reflection of architectural anarchy; 'MANY of Mr. Kelley's current projects are small modular buildings that may cost just \$15,000 to \$20,000: variations on a yurt. You rarely need a building permit or a mortgage to put up a 200-square-foot liveable shed or a sauna with a convertible pizza oven'⁷.

It can be said that Communalism and Capitalism are practically mutually exclusive concepts. Industrialism, which inevitably follows Capitalism, focuses on profit maximisation as well as overconsumption and manipulation. This is why most of the existing architecture has to be amended when communities form and decide what form of dwelling would be best for



them. Most residentially built areas have houses built for the nuclear family model. This concept, based on individualism and private property, separates people from their neighbours and community. One example where people have organised themselves around this in Manchester, in the United Kingdom, is the 'Fallowfield Secret Garden Project' where the residents were given a piece of vacant, unused land and created a community garden area for residents to be socially active as well as engage in growing food and outdoor activities for their children. This has helped the people especially in such a highly built-up area where there is hardly any garden space for each house.

Figure 2: Mandragora, G (n.d.) Hall of Mirrors, Temples of Humankind Damanhur, Italy. [Online image] [Accessed on 3/29/2019]

⁶ CAT. (2019). 'Energy'. [online] <https://www.cat.org.uk/come-to-cat/visiting/energy/>. [Accessed: 22/03/2019].

⁷ Tortorello, M. (2012). 'An Ungated Community'. [online] <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/29/garden/sunray-kelleys-ungated-community.html>. [Accessed: 26/03/2019].

'The Federation of Damanhur' is an intentional community in northern Italy, founded in 1975 by a Falco Tara and approximately 15 of his friends. They wanted to create a 'fertile reality based on solidarity, sharing, love and respect for the environment'⁸. It now has roughly 600 members and has its own constitution, culture, currency and schools within the grounds. They have even won a sustainable eco-community award from the United Nations. Damanhur is best known for its unusual but remarkable underground architecture. They have been building a series of cathedral known as 'The Temples of Humankind' which was dug, mostly by hand, into the mountain by the site. The first cavern, 'The Blue Temple' took 16 years to complete and all the people involved had nearly no prior experience in construction. Now the caves have seven parts including: a trapdoor leading to a staircase; a labyrinth and a 'Hall of Spheres'. They have other examples of architecture, less outlandish than the temples where the residents live, is a series of 25 communities within the location and they used green building techniques.

The excavations were kept a secret for many years as they were hesitant about being given planning permission to start construction, due to the curious nature of the buildings. The subterranean areas are decorated with many intricate artworks including mosaics and wall paintings. They are all related to the 'awakening of the divine spark in every human being'⁹. Their Ideology and architecture are interwoven. Every part of how they have built and decorated their marvellous caverns are an ode to their philosophy of the nouns 'We' and 'I' being synonymous with each other. The way they have created the buildings that they inhabit in are mindfully created by, and for, the people that were going to be utilising them. This way they were able to create an environment that works for the specific actions they undertake, as well as the atmosphere that they want to provide for activities such as meditation. Each wall can be directly representative of the emotion, passion and significance of the people involved.

When the people are part of the act of designing and building they become more invested in the structure as well as the community spirit, not just in terms of their time and effort, but their soul and character is embedded in the make-up of the buildings. This is also true for the artworks and sculptures that make up the design and decoration of the buildings at Damanhur. There are people who believe that places like Damanhur are more cult-esque and not just a harmless community. For example in 1992 the Catholic Church 'urged the local authorities to have the temples destroyed'¹⁰. Italy is a strongly Catholic country and any other ideologies can be seen as hostile or intimidating and opposed to the countries religious beliefs. The Damanhurians had to raise awareness, bringing journalists and TV crews to the temples to reveal what they had created and that it was not offensive or scary.

Location is also an important limiting factor for some community's ideology, if they are located in a highly urban environment, for employment and commuting purposes, they often inhabit an already existing property or piece of architecture due to the limitations of price and space within the city. This means that the architecture they occupy can only be amended and not necessarily built from scratch. Factors like the kitchen and communal space organization are harder to arrange accordingly to their needs. In these cases, a compromise needs to be reached.

Acquiring planning permissions and land usage is another potential problem when communities are attempting to locate themselves. Most countries have restrictions on what land can be built on and in what manner it can be used and it can get complicated when the community's architectural intentions are unorthodox, vague or evolving. Damanhur's Temples are a good example of this as they had started digging without asking for any permission. Their works could have been destroyed or they could have been heavily fined if their awareness-raising had not been as successful as it was.



Figure 2: Andriychuk, O (2013) *In Damanhur Crea*. Damanhur, Italy. [Online image] [Accessed on 3/29/2019]

⁸ Anon. (n.d.). 'What is Damanhur?'. [online] <http://www.damanhur.org/en/what-is-damanhur>. [Accessed 24/03/2019].

⁹ Anon. (n.d.). 'What is Damanhur?'. [online] <http://www.damanhur.org/en/what-is-damanhur>. [Accessed 24/03/2019].

¹⁰ Ananas, E. (2006). *The Temples of Humankind*. New York: CoSM Press. pg 9.

One example is existing housing being changed in some way to suit the community. For example, larger houses or mansions originally designed for more affluent families to have several spare rooms that can be converted into a community house for several families living together where they can split costs and share facilities. 'In Davis, California, over a period of several years, a group of friends brought up houses around in a city block on N street tore down the backyard fences to create a large common area with gardens and children's play areas, and, turning one of the houses into their common house, called it 'N street cohousing'.¹¹ The architecture in this instance already existed and had been modified to account for the ideology of this particular group by both physically and metaphorically breaking down walls.

The Architecture Revolutionary Council (ARC) made a point for linking architects to the public starting in 1974. They wanted to make all Architecture more socially directed rather than something that they would impose upon the people; 'an international movement towards community architecture'¹². In order for this to happen there needed to be less state intervention on regional planning, resulting in more anarchic cities that could represent the people who lived there. Their viewpoint was that Architects ought to stop working 'only for a rich powerful minority or the bureaucratic dictatorship of Central and Local Governments and offer... [their] skills and services for the local community'¹³. Architecture, typically, merely happens to the people or they are subject to it as opposed to being actively engaged with it. The client is often the state, not an individual group or community that would essentially be using it. The buildings are more of a product to be consumed rather a process that the general public is allowed to be involved with.

Shared housing can reduce costs by amalgamating everybody's belongings including tools, books, vehicles and other recreational equipment. Some intentional communities also gather revenue from a business that they run together within the communal spaces; For instance a bakery, café or shop. An example of this is the 'Shrubb Family' whom all had individual bedrooms but shared meals but also were able to 'work together on various projects and enterprises as a community'¹⁴. This way they can work together for money as well as making it cheaper buying in bulk and they have more free time. When each person does the cooking and washing up on different days, it allows them to have more leisure time instead of cooking individually each night. This means that their facilities get more use and they need larger spaces to prepare larger amounts of food. Kitchen and living spaces are the most important to communities like these and in existing architecture, there is no account for these types of living arrangements. In order to produce the vision for their community, it is more efficient to get an architect to build them something that suits that particular community's size, activities and individual aesthetics and aspirations for their living spaces. However, this is where the limitations of this ideal come into play.

The fluidity of ideology in some cases can be affected by increased or decreased membership of a community so the architecture they occupy can become more and less related to how the community engages with their ideology. An example of this is the 'Kibbutz's' in Israel which over time have become privatised and have moved more into manufacture than agriculture. They are still communal but their focus has shifted.

A similar problem occurs in urban communities as they have to fight for their right to exist within 'normal society', but if the members change, the spaces can be underused and there can be a decline in dedication to the community ideology. 'The basic and most important part about design is behaviour, the way we interact with the built environment, and the process of building the environment'¹⁵. It can be argued that is not about architecture that already exists. It's about how we live in it, how we interact with it and how we overcome it. People naturally connect principles with practice if their ideologies are strong enough. If something is not working for them, they work around it and change how they do it.

An opposite problem can occur when communities develop too strong of an identity. This can happen when a leader or 'guru' radicalises or twists the ideology of the commune. The leader's feelings of god-like truth, their own value over the other community members and even belief of special powers or abilities are delusions of grandeur. 'The Peoples Temple' led by Jim Jones is a perfect example of this. The commune was intended to help people in need 'Jonestown was meant to be a utopia. [...] Since there weren't enough cabins built to house people, each cabin was filled with bunk beds and

¹¹ Leafe-Christian, D. (2007). *Finding Community*. Canada: New Society Publishers. Pg 50.

¹² Bottoms, E. (2010). 'If Crime Doesn't Pay' The Architects' Revolutionary Council'. [online] <https://www.aaschool.ac.uk/AASCHOOL/LIBRARY/ARC.pdf>. [Accessed: 22/03/2019].

¹³ AA Prospectus, (1974/5). ARC Manifesto, Draft version. p3.

¹⁴ Rigby, A. (1974). *Communes in Britain*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Pg 142.

¹⁵ Nicholson, S. Katharina, B. (1973). *Community Participation' in City Decision Making*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press. Pg 23.

overcrowded. The cabins were also segregated by gender, so married couples were forced to live apart¹⁶. The eventual result was a massacre of 918 people, a third of whom were children, from drinking poisoned punch.

When individuals live in an alternative community with alternative architecture, values and aspirations need to be balanced with finances and logistics. The choices they have to make can depend on a whole host of interconnected reasons. The most important being the location of the community, especially its level of urban or rurality, as well as their available finances including saved and dependable sources of capital. The architecture does not have to be built from scratch by a professional architect for it to truly represent their values. If alternative communities had unlimited funds, their architecture has the potential to totally match their ideology. The level of finance is directly associated with the degree of ideological expression. One must also consider the fact that the primary information sourced from the communities can be biased.

People engage and change what is already made to suit the needs of their community ideal and attempt their different ways of living. The architecture is made for the nuclear family model and for individualism but this can be and has been rebelled against.

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