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Project Prospectus
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“The Replicable Strategies of Intentional Communities: Identifying Sustainable Solutions in Spain and France.”

Purpose:

This project seeks to conduct case studies in cooperative living where effective communities have been sustained in order to later compare European and American cooperative models, policies and initiatives. The overall goal is to take elements from effective case studies in cooperative living and intentional communities in France and Spain in order to create a replicable model with the goals of:

- providing community and support to a variety of members and demographics
- providing housing and food at a subsidized cost
- securing an element of public/government funding
- maintaining environmental and economical sustainability
- promoting fair compensation for labour contributions

Timeline:

Field work would take place approximately June 18th-August 12th, 2009.

Relevance:

As the world prepares to face an imminent recession, mass property foreclosures, and a depleted sense of economic and social power, the need to test alternative living solutions is highly relevant. In addition, the push for environmental sustainability has also increased, resulting in agro-ecological design theories such as ‘permaculture,’ which incorporate natural ecologies into methods for agricultural growth. A culmination of these ideologies has been realised in the establishment and replication of intentional communities through out the world. Intentional communities is an inclusive term representing ecovillages, communes, cooperatives,

residential land trusts, and other similar community projects. According to the Fellowship for Intentional Community, most communities are multi-generational, catering to the needs of families, individuals, or both. While the communitarian movement may have stemmed from the counterculture of the 60's and 70's, today's intentional community often represents a commitment to democratic process, work ethic, environmental sustainability, community support, outreach and education.

Intentional communities have enabled cooperation not only in terms of housing, but also in reference to worker collectives and labour-shares. Many intentional communities utilize egalitarian models to provide a safe space for creativity, production and sustainability. One of the possible case studies is of a cooperative in Spain which houses an artist-based worker collective. Many of the other potential communities have been able to sustain themselves through agricultural work or education initiatives in their communities. The ties between worker collectives, egalitarianism and the cooperative model could be highly important in replicating new strategies for housing developments in western society which are more impervious to the waxing and waning of the economy.

Methodology:

The field work conducted in this project is the first part of a two-part comparative study of intentional communities in Europe and the United States. The study purposefully seeks out cases which include a multitude of housing varieties (ecovillages, communes, co-housing, etc.), common ideological paths without religious mandate, a live-in membership of five contributing adults or more (non or semi-familial) and communities with the ability to include and support a variety of backgrounds in membership.

While the FIC Directory shows that the U.S. has around 1500 intentional communities, many are still in the forming stages or have small (fewer than five adults) memberships. Upon editing the criteria to include only communities with more than five adult members, democratic governing styles, and those who are well past the forming stages, 277 intentional communities in the United States were eligible.

The same search in the European countries yielded a comparable amount of communities. The specific interest in communities established in France and Spain is due to the demographics of their membership, proximity to one another and the length of their tenure. Many of these communities were established within the past decade and have attracted expatriates in addition to local members. The ability to include many nationalities is important in sustaining a diverse yet cohesive membership, as well as in designing sustainable solutions which are replicable for different regions. The recent establishment of these communities also makes replication more feasible since the laws, policies and other factors remain largely unaltered. Additionally, there was a larger concentration of intentional communities, which fit the criteria, in France and Spain, making it possible to visit a greater number of cooperatives in the eight week time frame.

The following list of intentional communities has been formulated based on the above mentioned criteria:

Spain

Benificio (Granada)
Can MasDeu (Barcelona)
El Bloque (La Nucia)
Valle de Sensaciones (Granada)

France

Eco-Chic (outside Avignon)
Dharma House (Ales)

FolleTerre (Belfort)
La Sorga (Campagne)

All of these communities accept visitors or short-term members, thereby making it possible to visit each for one week's time. By conducting interviews with long term members and participating in the labor shares, meetings, and community activities, enough information should be garnered to examine the negative and positive externalities of the intentional community on the environment, economy, personal development of members, and their surrounding communities.

Limitations of this project include the time restrictions, the potential for altered perspectives due to an outside visitor, and of course, the need for a second stint of field research in the United States to complete the comparison and develop a replicable model. However, past visits to cooperatives, ecovillages, and similar housing projects have proved to be open, honest and informative experiences, even in shorter amounts of time. Most projects are forthright about their goals and ideologies.

Questions:

-How is the necessary funding for establishing and maintaining the cooperative acquired, and what responsibility should the government hold in facilitating economically and environmentally sustainable solutions to living through subsidies or monetary contributions?

-How are the residential zoning restrictions different than in the U.S.? Is there a reason many cooperatives are in rural areas outside of agricultural endeavours?

-What organizational structures are most conducive to large group dynamics in terms of decision making, labour shares, and other necessary functions?

-Which organizational structures offer the best sense of democracy and individual empowerment while maintaining the overall goal of cooperative living?

-What effect does the cooperative have on the surrounding community? Are they a benefit or completely withdrawn from society?

-Are these processes or structures replicable in the United States? Should they be urban, suburban, or rural?

-How could the notion of private property be reconciled with the need for community building in America?

-Does this model represent a viable solution for individuals, families, or both?

-How important is it to maintain common ideologies within the group—i.e. religious affiliations or mandated spiritual paths, similar gender identities, political identities or other commonalities?

Potential Bibliography:

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