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Findhorn Community

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The Findhorn Community is an example of an un-intentional community that grew out of the spiritual impulse of its three founders and which has now evolved into a demonstration of blending spirituality and ecology.

Overview

Started in 1962 by Peter & Eileen Caddy and Dorothy McClean in an aging caravan in the North of Scotland, the community has grown into a major centre of adult education with several thousand residential visitors a year. A registered charity, The Findhorn Foundation was established in 1972 as the legal structure for the educational work, which for many years was the only community structure there was.

The Foundation has two main centers, the original site, The Park, in Findhorn and Cluny Hill College, the main guest residence in the town of Forres, 5 miles away. The Park is the site of the ecological village project.

Cooperation and co-creation with Nature was a major aspect of the community's work from the early days of its founding, and became well known for its gardens. In the early 80's the community took on, as part of a new direction, the building of an ecological village as a continuation of the earlier work in the gardens. We define an 'ecological village' as a human settlement that is sustainable ecologically, economically, culturally and spiritually. This expansion of activity also initiated the purchase of The Park in 1983, which up until then had been rented. Building was begun on a larger scale in 1990 and there have been 20 new buildings erected to date.

By the late 80's the community structure began to diversify along the lines of a village and today there are some 30 different businesses and initiatives. The Foundation and the educational programs it offers occupies a less central role and in terms of people employed is reducing in size while the community continues to grow.

Values / glue

The primary glue that holds the Findhorn Community together is the commitment to a spiritual life and the transformation of human consciousness. The spiritual practice is non-religious and although Christian mystery tradition is quite strong there are many others present from Tibetan Buddhism to Native American. The stated aim of the Foundation in its trust deed is to demonstrate the validity of the underlying common principles of all major religions and spiritual traditions. There is no requirement to follow a particular path but members are encouraged to find their own practice that will allow them to lead a more fulfilled life. The one common practice that is encouraged but not required is group meditation. Meditations are held at various times in the day in the many 'sanctuaries' or meditation rooms throughout the community.

There is a general belief in the power of working in groups and generally work departments are set up in a way that encourages personal growth and sharing of deeper issues that connect us as human beings and not just working colleagues. This way of working leads to a strong feeling of community spirit. But it has also been more difficult to maintain that as the community has grown.

Social structures / leadership / decisions

The Community's structure is in the process of change with the evolution of two main 'categories' of people in the community. The first category up until the late 80's is as a Foundation student or staff. These people are essentially working full time for the Foundation and are fed and housed in Foundation accommodations. The other category is as an Open Community member who decides on their own level of involvement or work with the Foundation and its community life. They are responsible for their own housing and finance.

The growth of the Open Community and relative reduction in size of the charitable Foundation has led to some confusion as to what are 'community' decisions and what are 'Foundation' decisions and who is or is not included in decision making. What is evolving is a structure of inclusion that is a synthesis of both categories called the 'selectorate' and which is made up of people that have been in the community a minimum length of time and completed some minimum curricula or integration process.

The Foundation's day to day business is carried out by a management committee of 6-8 people, which is subject to review and assessment by the selectorate. There is one 'Focalizer' of the community and a 'Core Group' which is more concerned with maintaining the community's social and spiritual health and which is made up of 6-8 individuals chosen by the selectorate. Major decisions are made in large community meetings using a consensus model.

Generally decisions, large or small, are made through 'attunement' or a combination of inner sensing of the 'right' thing to do combined with intuition and common sense. Whether this is always achieved can be hard to determine! And it is often a complaint that making a decision about anything is major process. There is a general feeling that we do end up in the right place most of the time.

The community also has tended to experiment and use different tools available to help with its process of governance, decision making and conflict resolution and there is a general belief that the process is as important as the outcome. This is constantly debated of course.

Plants / animals

There is still much emphasis put on Nature and the gardens, though much of that energy has been and still is spent on ornamental gardens. But with the ecological village project gaining momentum there is more being done with organic food production. A successful community supported agricultural program (CSA) was begun in 1994 and now has over 150 shares being delivered each week, representing over 250 people.

Very little is now done with animals, though there have been experiments in keeping both sheep and chickens in past years.

Energy / water / waste

The transformation of a caravan park to an eco-village in terms of energy has been a challenge. The fuels used prior to the buying of the land in 1983 were coal, oil and electricity. Consumption was high because of the lack of insulation in caravans. Since new building was begun insulation standards have been set by the community and a concerted effort made to reduce consumption as well as the dependence on fossil fuels. Increased use of wood for space and water heating has eliminated the use of coal and where possible a shift has been made to propane instead of oil, as the less polluting option. High efficiency boilers and some small district heating schemes have also been introduced.

In 1980 a company was formed to produce solar panels and many systems are now in use for hot water use. In 1989 a 75 kw wind turbine was erected and currently provides 20% of the electricity to the site. New buildings have incorporated passive solar features and 2.5 times the insulation required by Scottish building regulations. There are plans for an additional two wind turbines. With these and with increased energy efficiency, insulation and other features it is anticipated that more than 80% of the energy will be provided by renewable sources. Currently, including the hydro component of the grid in this area the renewable component is 26%.

Transport for the Foundation is done with a fleet of buses that carry members and visitors between the two main centers 6 times per day. Some car sharing is done but the increasing presence of cars in The Park is a cause for concern. Several proposals for decreasing car population are being considered.

Drinking water for the site is provided by mains water taken from bore holes managed by the local authority in the area. We have our own well for food production and garden use as water is often restricted in summer months. Despite being in Scotland we are in the rain shadow of the highlands and have less than 22" (56cm) per year. Water conserving appliances are used in all new buildings and rainwater collection is standard practice.

After considering several options we have decided to build our own central waste water treatment facility based on the work of John Todd called the 'Living Machine' and design is underway. This will treat all domestic and commercial waste water on site and replace our use of mains sewerage, which has been connected since 1981.

The community also operates an extensive recycling program and has been instrumental in encouraging local authorities to expand the range of recycling services to the local area.

Architecture

The growth of the community in the 70's mainly living in caravans lead to some amazing creative structures. Unfortunately they were largely illegal and had to be removed when the local council discovered them. Now the architecture for our permanent buildings has developed a common language of materials: timber, glass and local stone for walls; clay tiles, turf and/or copper for roofs. The philosophy has been to use materials as the uniting element whilst letting the forms be left to the individual's creativity. Some buildings have a conventional rectilinear style while others are round or multi-sided.

There is an internal planning committee that acts as a filter and all plans must be posted for community viewing and comment before final approval is given.

Energy and ecological standards are not completely formalized but the understanding is that the best in natural and healthy building materials will be used whenever possible. Energy standards are enforced for all buildings and are more stringent than the local standards (which are currently equivalent to Denmark's in 1935).

The construction used has been almost exclusively timber, both for structural elements and claddings. The community is using a unique 'breathing wall' construction that eliminates the need for a vapor barrier and allows the fabric of the building to interact with the indoor climate in a beneficial way. There are plans to experiment with other types of ecological construction including straw bale and rammed earth.

Economics

There are many different financial situations and means of support possible in the community but there are the two general categories: students and staff of the Foundation and Open Community. Foundation 'students' participate in a two year program and essentially pay their own costs and expenses and a fee for the program. After two years they may apply for a staff position where their costs are covered and they receive a small stipend of about US\$300 per month (spring 1995).

Open Community members are responsible for their own finances, accommodation and living situation. Some are also staff of the Foundation that have private means but most are either self-employed or work for one of the many small businesses in the community.

There are two main employers in the community: the Foundation and the Foundation's trading company New Findhorn Directions, Ltd. But there are also around 30 other small businesses and enterprises from a Steiner school to computer software company. Despite a turnover of US\$1.5 million the Foundation usually barely breaks even and large capital expenses for new building is very limited.

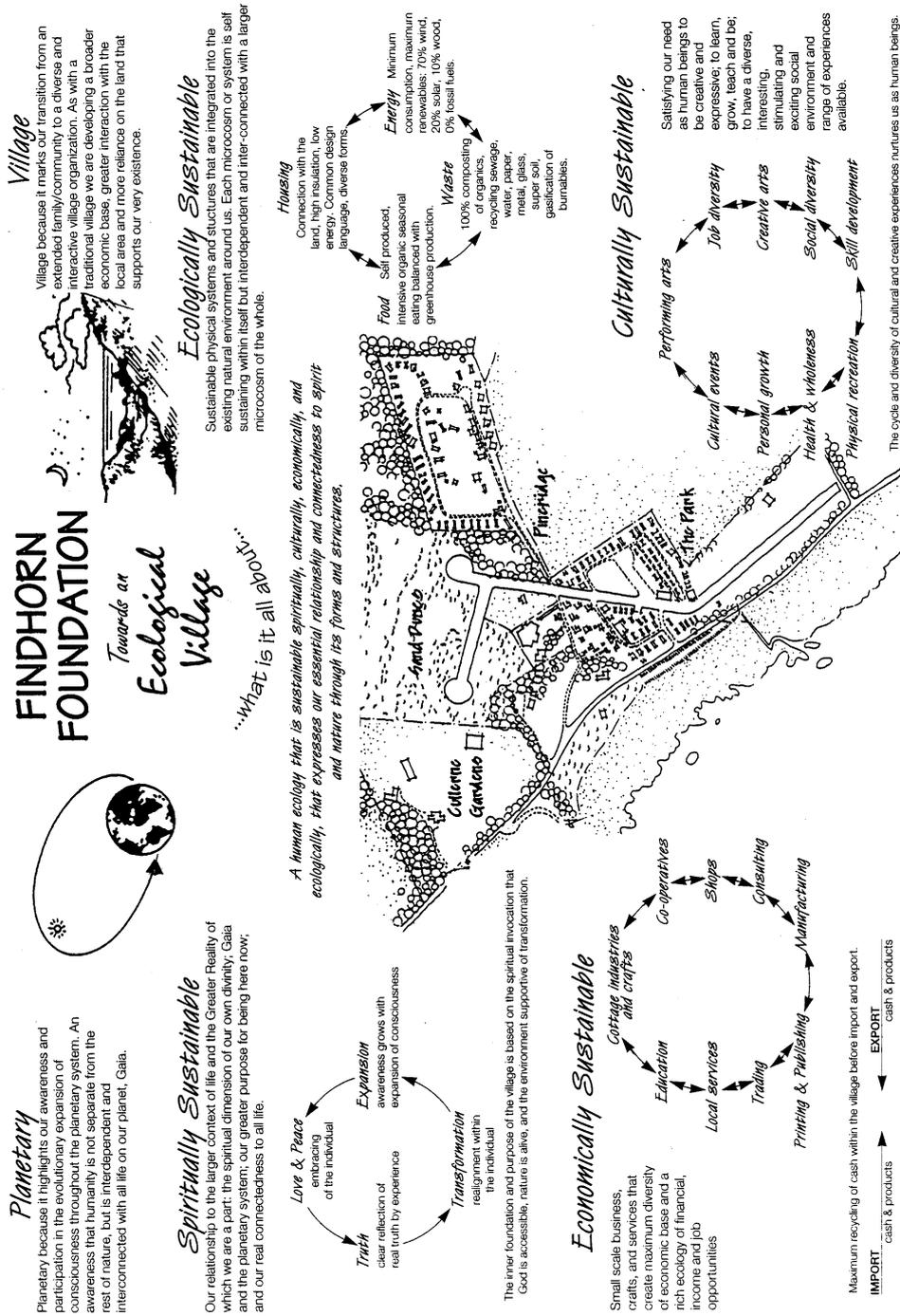


Figure 1: Findhorn Foundation

The current arrangement for Foundation staff is increasingly recognized as being unsustainable, despite many having been there for ten or more years. The advent of building for privately funded houses on the Foundation's land has made the economic disparities clearer. There is a concern that those who have given so many years to the Foundation will have to continue to live in caravans while those privately employed will have the means to build houses.

After many years the Foundation has decided to allow private ownership on its land in The Park to give residents the chance to obtain bank financing, which up till now has not been possible. There are quite a few conditions attached to the title which will keep the land closely connected to the overall village development. The Foundation will also have the right of veto and/or the chance to buy back properties whenever they are offered for sale.

There is an active LETS system which has been slow to grow but which is now becoming more widely used.

Cultural activities

There is a rich diversity of social and cultural activities from the twice daily communal meals served in The Park and Cluny Hill to the various performances put on by both community artists and invited companies from many places around the world. Because of the large influx of people (10,000 per annum) there seems to be a never ending smorgasbord of offerings.

The community also hosts 2-4 international conferences a year on a wide variety of themes and also has a lecture series that brings leading alternative thinkers to Findhorn.

Community members are also encouraged to do their own creative thing and be involved in music, the arts, dance etc. as part of a balanced approach to life.

Strengths and challenges

The main and greatest strength of Findhorn is the collective spiritual orientation that allows a greater perspective and understanding to be brought into the inevitable challenges and conflicts that arise in community life. The size of the community now is also a great strength in providing a wide diversity of people and activities.

The greatest challenge now (there have been many others in the past!) is the maintaining of the close and connected community spirit that has always been a part of life at Findhorn as the community grows and continues to diversify. Providing an economically sustainable lifestyle to the Foundation's staff is also of great importance and will be receiving considerable attention in the near future.