

Creating an ecovillage

The trials and tribulations of building a sustainable
community



Picture 1 Ecovillage Zuiderveld, screenshot of the Talis Youtube-video "woongemeenschap Zuiderveld"

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Picture 2 drawing made by one of the residents

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Concepts

<i>Circles</i>	Circles is another term for committees, groups of residents or members who are responsible for a part of the administration and maintenance of the ecovillage. The intention is that every member of CVEG and resident of Ecovillage Zuiderveld joins at least one Circle.
<i>CLIPS</i>	Community Learning Incubator Program for Sustainability: A program developed for and by ecovillages in eight different European countries providing courses and books regarding techniques and methods to shape a group or ecovillage.
<i>CVEG</i>	Co-operative Association of Ecovillages Gelderland: an association with the goal to create ecovillages in Gelderland, a province in The Netherlands.
<i>GER</i>	Communal Ecovillage Space: A communal building where people gather for lunch, coffee, activities and/or dinner.
<i>GM</i>	General Meeting: a meeting that is usually about the overall logistics, shifts in roles, suggestions, and financial statements. Every decision is made with consensus-based decision-making.
<i>HvEZ</i>	Renters association Ecovillage Zuiderveld: An association for- and managed by the residents in the ecovillage. Mainly for logistic decisions, interests of the residents and centralized communication with the WBVG.
<i>Member</i>	<i>To be a member at CVEG you have pay 12 euros a month and can join meetings or activities. As a member, you qualify for aspiring residency in the residential communities. How this works differs for every</i>

residential community and their own allocation policy. Members can be elected as a coordinator or delegate of a Circle and thus fulfill a function in the Middle Circle. Members can also be chosen as a buddy.

Middle Circle The Middle Circle is a group of chosen delegates from the other circles. The delegates keep each other informed of what is going on in other circles, coordinate general plans and pass along information to members of their Circle.

Resident As a resident of Ecovillage Zuiderveld you live in one of the houses and have to be a member of CVEG. You have to be active in a Circle of HvEZ and CVEG.

Talis Talis is a housing corporation that builds, rents, and manages around 14.000 homes in the Nijmegen and Wijchen region.

Trebbé Trebbe profiles itself as a construction company for sustainable and healthy living environments. A family business that has been around since 1911.

WBVG Housing Association Gelderland: The WBVG is an admitted institution and serves a specific market: housing social tenants who want to live in a collective housing form. The WBVG is active within the province of Gelderland.

Introduction

As I am walking around in the communal garden - which at this point is nothing more than rock hard, dried sand with a few deep puddles of muddy water – I see a young blond man dressed in casual chic clothing connecting some speakers and a microphone. While he tries to connect the speaker on the higher part of the communal garden where the foundation for the communal barn is poured, he softly curses while he speed-walks back to get another extension cord. The one he is using now is too short to cross all the way from a power source to the speakers. The residents of Ecovillage Zuiderveld are gathered and spread out across the garden, sitting in second-hand lawn chairs, pallets which were used as garden paths for the last few weeks or gathered in small groups sitting on the ground. They are waiting patiently for what exactly is going to happen during this ‘delivery-day’. It doesn't seem like the residents are very much concerned with the logistics behind the day, but they do enjoy the festive mood. Most of the residents put on their nice clothes, a big difference with what they were wearing the past month during the construction of the houses. Still, they are easy to distinguish from the visitors of this delivery-day, who are suited up and are mostly standing on the pallets to keep their shiny shoes clean from the not yet landscaped garden.



Picture 3 & 2 'Delivery-day' at Ecovillage Zuiderveld, pictures by: De Brug Nijmegen, www.brugnijmegen.nl/nieuws/nieuwsflits/1056461/samen-leven-in-ecodorp-zuiderveld

When delivery-day officially begins Leslie, Wouter and two men in suits start to speak. Pride and perseverance seep through all four speeches, the sun is shining, and everyone gets a sparkly apple cider in a paper cup to toast on the completion of Ecovillage Zuiderveld. After all the speeches, during applause, Sacha drums on his djembe which can be heard across the whole garden. He keeps drumming in the background while people scatter across the garden and chat for a while. The atmosphere in the ecovillage is noticeably lighter than before, despite the concerns regarding a moral conflict that is still going on among the members of the ecovillage and has been for the past few weeks. The common faith and unity in vision seem strong today.

But this was definitely not the case after the decision was made public by the Middle Circle to evict Marnix from the ecovillage and deny him housing in the community. The day feels two-faced, on the one hand it celebrates a common vision becoming reality and on the other hand this past week has shown that life as a community filled with people who don't really know each other – and who all have a different motivation and vision for the ecovillage – is not always that easy.

Society is composed of distinctions on multiple levels, distinctions between friends, neighbors, work, and people often use these distinctions to categorize and regulate relationships with each other (Kamau 2001, 18). The ecovillage, especially in its start-up phase, exists outside of the structures and normal institutions of everyday life (Kamau 2001). Residents of Ecovillage Zuiderveld have multiple statuses and identities, but simultaneously these statuses shift and change during every phase of the ecovillage. They are residents of the ecovillage, members of CVEG, but at the same time part of a Circle, single mother, student, unemployed, professional harpist and so on. Constant transformative interplay among residents, at the individual level, the communal and local level and macro dynamics, complicate constructing a fixed lifestyle but provide alternative means to organize different life modes (Hong & Vicdan 2016). These are characterizations of the manifestation of ecovillages into liminal spaces, which relates to Foucault's (1986) conceptualization of heterotopias (Hong & Vicdan 2016; Turner 1967).

Ecovillage Zuiderveld is the largest and newest ecovillage in The Netherlands to date. Before we explore the theoretical framework, it's essential to construe the settings in which I conducted my fieldwork. CVEG started building this sustainable community in the Zuiderveld district in Nijmegen Noord (near Oosterhout) in the summer of 2020. For this project they worked together with the housing corporation Talis, housing association Gelderland (WBVG), Architectenbureau Hoogte Twee, a contractor called Trebbe and the municipality of Nijmegen. The ecovillage houses over 100 people in 46 houses, all residents of different ages, family compositions and (cultural) backgrounds. Ecovillage Zuiderveld only provides social rental housing, which is defined by the Dutch government as homes for which the initial monthly rent is under the rent limit for liberalized tenancy agreements; the current limit for social rental homes is €752,33 (Rijksoverheid 2021a). Housing is caught within a number of simultaneous social conflicts. Houses are not only used as a lived social space, but also as an instrument for profit-making, making it a conflict between housing as home and as real estate (Madden and Marcuse 2016). This results in housing becoming a subject of contestation between different ideologies, economic interests, and political projects.

In modern society we all play our specific roles, where we contribute only a small part to the overall functioning of society (Durkheim 2013 [1984]; Royce 2015, 77). The individualization of housing and social life, driven by capitalist and neoliberal discourses result in a shortage of homes and an increase in loneliness. These social-cultural developments inspire groups of people to create alternative ways of living. In reaction to these developments and due to a major shift in values, communal living arrangements are becoming more common (Walker 2005). The emphasis is shifting from economic achievement to post-materialist values that emphasize self-expression, subjective wellbeing, and quality of life. These emerging values are important in supporting a shift beyond narrowly focused materialism to a broadly oriented concern for more sustainable and satisfying ways of living (Walker 2005). This form of social movement is oriented towards the promotion of 'life politics', lifestyle choices and human self-actualization.

Ecovillages are often a response to the global sustainability crises of recent decades. These crises derive largely from the dynamics of capitalist (and in some cases communist) development (Burke and Arjona 2013). It is a way for residents to try and regain agency and autonomy, increase their quality of life, livability and try to create an alternative for the unsustainability of the untenability of today's growth due to capitalism. Ecovillage Zuiderveld is partly a rejection of normal economic life in which members turn away from ordinary ways of living and an experimental bubble to show other alternatives to the current status quo (Kamau 2001). The agency and autonomy that residents are trying to regain is a primary vehicle for social activism. This agency is imbued with a new kind of individualism, but with this individualization and self-actualization the ecovillage movement tries to bring life-political issues to the fore, and forcing them on public attention (Giddens 2013, 288; Hopper 2017). I explore Hopper's (2017) argument of a new kind of individualism in social movements and the term 'radical engagement' that entails this mobilization and contesting action (Giddens 2013). In short, ecovillages are often an interplay between achieving a fuller self-realization and creating and living in a more sustainable environment (Burke and Arjona 2013). This reaction can be described as a form of 'radical engagement', where people take contesting action to confront common problems and causes of anger, instead of resorting to individualism (Giddens 2013; Hopper 2017).

In this thesis I will explore how the members of Ecovillage Zuiderveld experience the start of constructing a sustainable community and illustrate the trials and tribulations they navigate during this process. This thesis will highlight the multifaceted characteristics of the concept 'sustainable community' as Ecovillage Zuiderveld is a response to capitalist processes

of individualization and policymaking, whilst at the same time these policies instigated the radical engagement needed to create an alternative vision on housing. This thesis outlines how residents try to structure life in the ecovillage; by creating certain structures, residents focus on searching for similarities in beliefs and visions. I use different chapters of the book by Lockyer and Veteto (2013) to explore the ecovillagemovement, especially Dawson's (2013) notion on ecovillages and 'mainstream society'. Consensus-based decision-making processes and sociocracy form the basis of the culture Ecovillage Zuiderveld seeks to incorporate in their community. Certain conflicts complicate this process; these conflicts test the hierarchy and decisions and visualizes the volatile nature of the ecovillage in its start-up phase. Christian (2003) writes extensively about creating practical tools to grow ecovillages and communities. Her work is used as a comparison to the dynamics I observed in the ecovillage. Weber's (2019) notion on charismatic leadership and Kamau's (2002) notion on liminality, *communitas* and charisma in community settings are the basis of exploring hierarchy and leadership in the ecovillage.

There are four dimensions of sustainability: ecological, economic, cultural, and social sustainability. The design of the ecovillage reflects what the community thinks is important, such as an increase in livability and a more social and ecological lifestyle. Ecovillage Zuiderveld tries to manifest community building, social sustainability, and ecological sustainability through design, during the creation of common spaces the community has to consider requirements and demands of different stakeholders (Fox 2013). The developments of more individualistic modes of behavior engendered by the primary process of late modernity have a detrimental impact upon local communities and social capital within advanced industrial societies (Hopper 2017). Communities like Ecovillage Zuiderveld, are a response to the increased uncertainty and anxiety due to the debilitation of social structures, globalization, and increased individualism (Dawson 2013). Ecovillage initiatives have shifted from being relatively isolated countercultural experiments to a more formal and informal alliance with progressive elements in today's society (Dawson 2013, 217). Ecovillage Zuiderveld is funded by the Dutch government and other non-commercial parties. The houses are social rental properties, which makes it economically sustainable and accessible for people with a lower income. The residents worked together with organizations who share similar values and visions and try to create a connection with the surrounding neighborhood, non-members and other ecovillagers from different communities. The ecovillage is seen as an experimental bubble in which they can explore and show others how to live more sustainably (Dias et al. 2017).

The field

Ecovillage Zuiderveld is a communal housing project which is founded by CVEG (Co-operative Association of Ecovillages Gelderland). CVEG works on the development of ecovillages in the Netherlands since 2015 following the pillars sustainability (ecological living), good neighborly relations, care for each other and care for the environment. One has to become a member of CVEG, to be considered for a home in one of their ecovillage projects. Membership includes a monthly payment of 12 euros. CVEG consists of different Circles, in other words committees, residents who live in ecovillages such as Ecovillage Zuiderveld have to participate in Circles from the ecovillage as well as Circles from CVEG.

Ecovillage Zuiderveld is not to be confused with the area Zuiderveld itself. Zuiderveld is the newest residential area of the Waalsprong in Nijmegen-Noord, near Oosterhout. 75% percent of the houses are owner-occupied homes, the other 25% of the newly built houses are (social) rental properties. Ecovillage Zuiderveld fill 46 of the 550 homes that are built in this area. Social housing is intended for people with lower incomes, 80% of all social houses owned by housing associations are intended for people who earn a maximum of €40.024 per year, 10% for people who earn between €40.024 and €44.655 per year and 10% for people who earn more than €44.655 per year (Rijksoverheid 2021b). The 46 homes at Ecovillage Zuiderveld are divided into 19 single-family homes, 21 apartments and 6 studios. All houses have their own living room, (second-hand) kitchen, bathroom, toilet and one or two bedroom(s), with the exception of the studio, which does not have a separate bedroom (CVEG n.d.). The ecovillage has a common area, with a common room and a kitchen which is accessible for all residents. This is a place where residents and neighbors can come together for a chat and where people can dine together. On the first floor of the common room is a multifunctional space, an office, and a work/conference room. On the ground floor of an apartment complex there is a shared laundry room, and a luxury bathroom and guest room will be built after construction is completed.

Ecovillage Zuiderveld has the ambition to build a large communal garden that the residents will develop and maintain together in an ecological way. The garden will consist of food gardens, several terraces, walking paths and a water collection basis (such as wadis). The residents have the desire to use the garden in as many ways as possible and also create some form of permaculture. Permaculture is a design method, based on ethics, ecology, and other sciences, for designing the human living environment in a way that is ecologically sustainable and economically stable. Complex ecosystems in nature and old or traditional horticulture often

serve as an example (Fox 2013; Mars 2003). On this land a large communal shed will be built, which will be made from second-hand materials and will be used as extra storage for the residents.

During my first week I received a spreadsheet with names of all the residents who gradually moved into the ecovillage and in which house they live. It also stated which residents lived in a studio, apartment, or single-family home. I added some columns, in which I registered peoples age, family compositions or other interesting characteristics. This helped me learn people's names faster as it functioned as a kind of cheat sheet. A few of these people, mostly people in the apartments and studios, have indicated that they need extra care from within the community. The oldest resident is almost 80 years old and the youngest was born just before I left the community. The single-family homes are reserved for families, parents with children, single parents or young couples who wish to have children in the near future. All three of the young couples who occupied a single-family home, and didn't yet have a baby, had a baby during my time in the ecovillage. One of the single-family homes was appointed to be the so-called "exchange house", a place for students and young people who receive a temporary housing contract of a maximum of 1,5 years, this house also received guests who stayed overnight or for a week during my time in the ecovillage. The residents who live in the apartments and studios are most diverse, not only in age but also in background, beliefs, visions, and their reliance on care. There are three single mothers in the apartments, two young couples who moved in together, five younger and five older women who live on their own, three young men and seven older men who live on their own.

Methodology and operationalization

When I was enrolled in the pre-master of Cultural Anthropology at Utrecht University, I already knew that I wanted to research sustainable communal living. One of my classmates connected me to Sam. A young man who lived in Utrecht, just like me. Sam is an activist who cares a lot about sustainable living, so I followed Sam on Instagram for a while and then decided to send him a message. We met up for coffee and that was the start of Sam being one of my key informants, although we both did not know that at the time (O'Reilly 2012, 114). This meet-up almost automatically produced a snowball effect as I obtained further contacts and recommendations via Sam (O'Reilly 2012, 44). We also talked about ecovillages in The Netherlands and Europe, and he introduced me to CVEG. I reached out to CVEG, and I came into contact with Wouter, who is a chairman at CVEG. After discussing my research ideas and

goals with him, he forwarded my message to all the ecovillages he was connected to so they could reach out to me if they thought I was a good fit.

Ecovillage Zuiderveld, was interested in having an anthropologist in their midst to document their project. Wouter kept me up to date about the decision of Ecovillage Zuiderveld and after a month or two of email correspondence and videocalls, I could introduce myself to this group of future-residents during one of their general meetings. After all the residents gave their consent, there was still a lot of uncertainty what shape or form of my fieldwork would have. It was not even sure when the completion of the ecovillage would take place and decisions about the exchange-house had not yet been made. At the end of December 2020, I received a phone call from Leslie, one of the residents and founders of this ecovillage, who told me that I could live in the exchange house for the duration of my fieldwork. This process took place at the start of COVID-19, so except for my coffee with Sam, all contact was online. It made the process feel very impersonal and unreal. It also made me question whether the residents would all give their consent to let me do my fieldwork and live there. This process took place six months prior to starting my fieldwork and I just let these six months of slow progress and uncertainty wash over me as there was really no other option to do ‘real’ fieldwork during COVID. This was my only shot of doing the type of fieldwork I wanted to do, where I could live in a community which fitted my budget, time schedule and the COVID-rules put in place by the university (students could only do fieldwork in the country they currently lived). The first time I met the residents in real life was when I moved into the exchange house which simultaneously was the official start of my field research.

I consciously chose to interview a mix of residents and stakeholders; a resident who is a single mother, someone that has her own company, residents that do daytime activities provided by the government for people with a disability, students, neighbors who live next to the ecovillage and stakeholders such as Trebbe and WBVG. All information is anonymized to respect the privacy of the respondents (O’Reilly 2012). Alongside semi-structured interviews, I conducted participant observation, which is a method “through which one takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 1). Since building the homes was part of the daily routine in Ecovillage Zuiderveld, participating and observing also meant helping with construction work, plastering walls with loam, working in the garden, serving lunch, and resupplying the coffee during breaks. I was also present at communal gatherings, online CLIPS courses, Zoom-meetings, and other meetings of both CVEG and the ecovillage. I actively took notes on my laptop, as I lived

in the community and I could sit with my laptop in the communal building or just walk over to the exchange house where I lived, I could write out any interesting encounters and I kept track of analytical ideas and flashes of insight in relation to my research (O'Reilly 2012, 104). I also had a notebook in which I took notes about “informal conversations” and observations I had during the day, when I was not able to document them immediately on my laptop (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011).

Ethnography enabled me to explore how people actually establish and conduct their lives in the community (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). My fieldwork helped me grasp the everyday realities of building a sustainable community, the insecurities of liminality and living in a heterotopia and how residents' lives are shaped through economic and social discourses like capitalism and individualism. Ethnographical comparison plays a crucial role because it enabled me to engage with the fact that community is not an abstract principle but a lived and vital human experience (Prus 1996; Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Hopper 2017). Through my fieldwork I observed how the residents created and maintained social relationships and how social identities emerged or adjusted.

Positionality and ethics

The timing of my fieldwork was great for my position as a researcher because construction for the apartments and studios was not completed yet. This meant that I already lived in the ecovillage when the second half of the residents gradually moved in, and I experienced a part of construction. Construction felt like a crucial part of understanding the community in its early stages as tensions were building up. Stress, fatigue, insecurities, and the lack of deep sharing possibilities left little room to share and express emotions among residents. As a young and extraverted woman, it was fairly easy to come into contact with other women at the ecovillage. I established some deep connections early on with women at the ecovillage through shared experiences or sexual and social identities, such as being a part of the LGBTIQ+-community. As a (flex) vegetarian, I also connected with residents on the subject of sustainability. One of the motivations for many residents to move to Ecovillage Zuiderveld was in search for stronger social relations, and people were very interested in me as a person and my research, this made it fairly easy for me to connect with them. Because the exchange house was the communal kitchen for the first few weeks, a lot of people came into contact with me.

The first month I lived in the exchange house with Wendy, a young woman who was living there until her studio was delivered. The friendship we built during those weeks eventually contested my role in the field. This became clear during a conversation about

possible relationships between residents, at some point it was not clear whether we were gossiping or transferring knowledge. Wendy asked me “*Is this Kelly asking or Kelly the Researcher?*” and I told her I did not know the answer to this either. Gradually I accepted that Kelly and Kelly the Researcher are one and the same person, but sometimes it was very hard to draw a line between my research and my social life. Due to COVID, I could not really escape my fieldwork or go somewhere else, and I did not have much of a social life outside the ecovillage. The ecovillage felt like some kind of bubble where COVID did not have that much impact on everyday life and social contact. At some point people felt like I was part of the community, but also viewed me as a neutral person because I did not participate in the community’s social hierarchies. This made me grow as a person and a researcher, in my personal life I often like to lead the way and fix things, but as a researcher it was not my position to actively intervene. After all, this community is not *my* community, feelings of frustration or compassion I had during my research helped me understand the passion residents felt during difficult processes, such as the eviction of Marnix, and how they are connected to the visions residents have for the ecovillage. During a conflict where my ethics were tested, I sensed that it was not my place to share my opinion on the content of this conflict or the Middle Circle’s decision. At some point I did become aware that there was a serious risk to someone’s safety if this conflict was not resolved in the right way, but I trusted the community would find their way in resolving this conflict, which they did. Because of the trust placed in me and the openness of the residents I chose to maintain their privacy while describing the moral conflict in this thesis. It is also my opinion that this conflict would derive too much attention from the actual research. I agree with what Lockyer (2017, 538) writes: “One of my goals as an activist-researcher is to help translate from the particular ecovillage as a living laboratory for sustainability to more broadly applicable theory and practice.”

Outline

Chapter one describes how residents try to structure life in the ecovillage through sociocracy, membership, CLIPS courses, meetings, and sharings. It examines the role of CVEG, the decoupling of Ecovillage Zuiderveld from CVEG at certain fronts and experiences and tribulations during sociocratic decision-making processes. I conclude the chapter with an example of a conflict that played out during my stay at the ecovillage and how these test hierarchical structures in the community. This chapter provides the context in which Ecovillage Zuiderveld operates and shows how different dynamics inside the ecovillage influence decision-making processes at all facets of ecovillage life.

Chapter two explains how CVEG started the process of building Ecovillage Zuiderveld and the roles and experiences of different stakeholders during this process. I highlight how the communal areas, such as the garden and the GER (communal building) serve as a platform for envisioning and developing alternative frameworks for social relations and social practices (Eizenberg 2011). The common garden is explored through commons theory and the process of communing is directly linked to community, the group amongst who it is created and shared (Gibson-Graham, Cameraon, and Healy 2016). In this context, the common garden can be characterized as a commons, where it serves as a platform for envisioning and developing alternative frameworks for social relations and social practices. Consequently, this chapter explicates how the communal garden symbolizes different things for different residents, the emotional values of the common spaces and how the design of the ecovillage influence the social relations inside the ecovillage.

The third chapter draws a brief background on housing and social housing in the Netherlands in order to expand on the reasoning of residents to move to the ecovillage and how this reasoning is connected to the effects of globalization they experience in their daily lives. Subsequently, I display how the community tries to counter some of the effects of capitalism and individualism by creating a greater solidarity among residents and improving livability. By positioning the ecovillage in the context of a heterotopia, I explore the liminal space the ecovillage operates in. Finally, I conclude this chapter with the role of ecovillages in today's society and focus on the contribution of Ecovillage Zuiderveld in social movements and sustainability.

Chapter 1: Governance, meetings, and decision making

Ecovillage Zuiderveld is the first project of CVEG (Co-operative Association of Ecovillages Gelderland). CVEG is an association with the goal to create ecovillages in Gelderland, a province in The Netherlands. Ecovillage Zuiderveld is their newest project and the biggest ecovillage in the Netherlands to date. The ecovillage houses over a hundred people whom each have their vision and opinion about how things should be structured. This chapter illustrates how Ecovillage Zuiderveld tries to structure life in the ecovillage; I focus on how social and relational dynamics, governance and individual- and communal-level negotiations are the common thread that affect all facets of life in the community (Hong & Vicdan 2016). As Cohen (2002 [1994], 11) argues, groups have to struggle with their own contradictions because they are composed of individuals whose differences have to be resolved and reconciled to such a degree that it allows the group to be viable and united. Devising specific terms and symbols helps with bridging the gaps between individual visions. These terms and symbols are not random; their creation is within the terms that characterize the community. The potency of symbols and certain names for processes and functions in the ecovillage, lies in their capacity to refer to those ‘other things’, but those symbols do not impose the constraints of uniform meaning (Cohen 2001). An example of this are the Circles, which is another term for committees. By using this terminology, the residents negate the feeling of hierarchy and bureaucracy, aligning with the wish for equality throughout the community. Despite the discourse of equality and specific structures aimed at preventing hierarchies, inequalities and hierarchies do appear, which mainly has to do with the volatile nature of the ecovillage in its start-up phase.

As a resident of Ecovillage Zuiderveld, and a member of CVEG, there are different kinds of meetings one should attend. CVEG hosts general meetings which are usually about the overall logistics, such as shifts in roles, suggestions, and financial statements. Every month CVEG hosts a member’s day, an interactive day for members to get to know each other and strengthen the mutual trust in the vision and philosophy of CVEG. This day often starts with a plenary introduction; subsequently, members are divided into groups to participate in an interactive activity. At the end of the day, everyone gathers to reflect and share their experiences and feelings. Because Ecovillage Zuiderveld operates separately from CVEG, the ecovillage

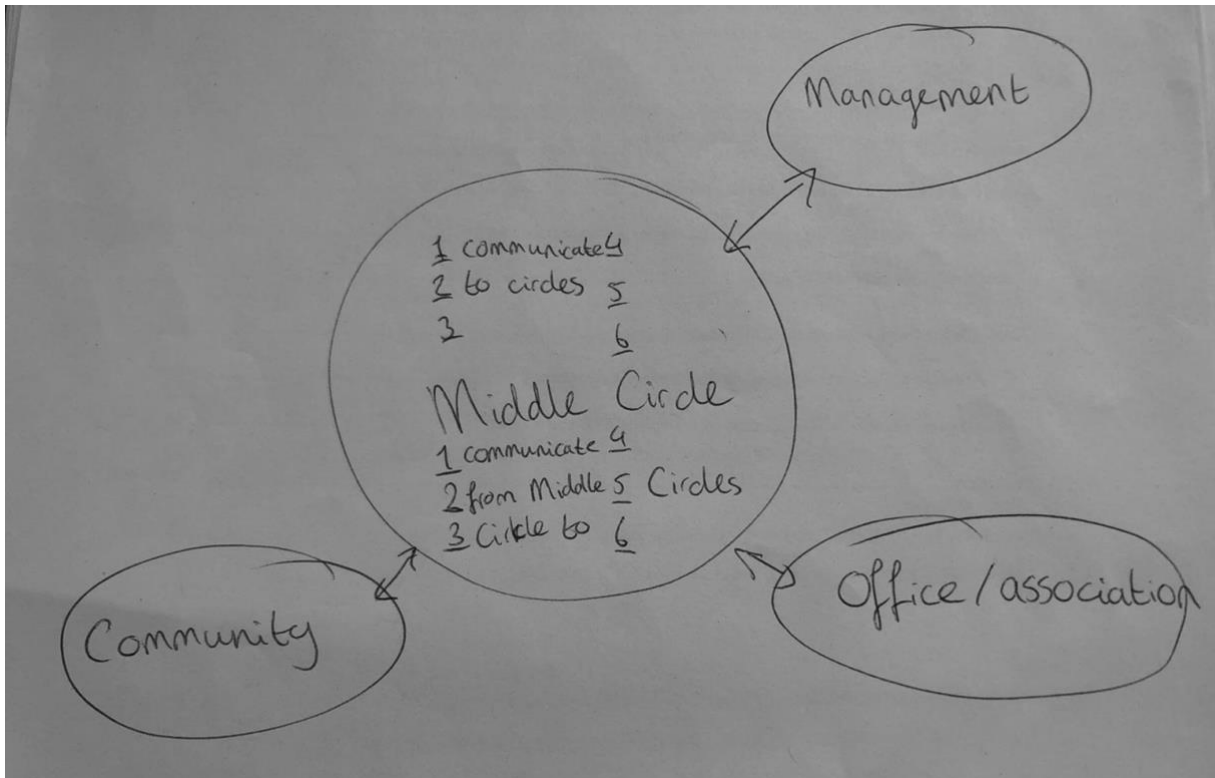
has its own meetings. Such as Circle-meetings, general meetings, CLIPS courses, and ‘sharings’. Sharings are a specific type of group circle where residents come together and, the group practices active listening when an individual speaks. I will start by explaining sociocracy and sociocratic decision-making, followed by a description of the circles. Subsequently, I will describe the CLIPS courses in more detail and follow up with the sharings that followed after one of the CLIPS sessions. This chapter is concluded by an explication of the hierarchy and leadership in the ecovillage and the conflict which tested the hierarchal structure.

Sociocracy and consent-based decision-making

Sociocracy is a form of governance that spreads responsibility within a group by distributing power among different circles. Double links connect the circles; one person represents the Middle Circle in the smaller, specific circle or working group and one person represents the more specific circle (working group) in the general circle. In each Circle, decisions are made based on consent. The most suitable candidates fill various roles by an “election without candidates”, this method tries to prevent an “us versus them” atmosphere (Cañada et al. 2017; Christian 2003). Consent-based decision-making means that a decision can only be made if everyone present gives their consent, which does not mean everyone has to love every aspect of the proposal (Christian 2003). Members can block a proposal if they do not feel safe giving their consent.

There are four Circles in the ecovillage, the intention is that every resident joins at least one of them:

- Management Circle: is responsible for contacts with the housing corporation, the communal building, and the communal garden.
- Office/association Circle: administrative work, members and allocation, the exchange house, and shared services
- Community Circle: focuses on the atmosphere in the ecovillage, keeping residents informed, mediating if conflicts between residents arise, and organizing activities.
- Middle Circle: Delegates from all other Circles take place in the Middle Circle and delegates from the Middle Circle take place in one of the Circles.



Picture 4 A visualization of the Circles from my fieldnotes

The residents made a conscious choice to limit the number of Circles and allocate tasks and responsibilities based on personal interest and skills within those Circles. For example, if a resident likes gardening, they do not necessarily have to help with building the barn or are required to join meetings about the barn. The range is duties of each Circle reminds residents of the essential values of the community and to pursue these values. Indirectly, residents exert pressure on those who do not engage in community work (Hong & Vicdan 2016). To establish the double link, each Circle chooses a delegate via sociocracy to represent the group and take place in the Middle Circle. All residents choose who take place in the Middle Circle and represent the Middle Circle in each individual Circle.

A sociocratic selection process is as follows: during a meeting, every member writes down the name of the person they to represent them. In the second round, the facilitator reads the names aloud. In the third round, members can clarify their choice. People's preference can change after the third round of clarifications, so members vote for who they think is most suited in the fourth round. In the fifth round, the member who gets the most votes comes forward, and everyone present must say they give consent for this person to fill the position. The decision is made if no one has a predominantly reasoned objection - this is called consent. "Good enough for now, safe enough to try"; is a phrase that expresses the spirit of sociocracy in terms of

decision making (Cañada et al. 2017; Christian 2003). After everyone has given their consent, they ask the person in question whether they want to fill the position. If they do not want the position, the process starts again.

CLIPS courses

Ecovillage Zuiderveld tries to structure life in the ecovillage by providing CLIPS courses (Community Learning Incubator Program for Sustainability). CLIPS is a training program developed by members of the ecovillage movement. Eight European countries offer training and books about techniques and methods to shape an ecovillage or similar initiatives. The format is used for ecovillages in their start-up phase such as Ecovillage Zuiderveld and ecovillages that are stuck somehow. CLIPS courses are focused on searching for similarities in the shared beliefs and visions of residents. The goal is to teach (future) members to adhere to some structures and submitting the individual to rites and purifications (Cañada et al. 2017; Foucault 1986, 26).

Residents from another ecovillage facilitated the CLIPS session I attended. The monthly courses took around three hours per session via Zoom (due to COVID). During one session emotions ran high among residents, as the decision to evict Marnix was made public the day before, which shook the ecovillage. This conflict will be extensively discussed in the subsection “conflicts that test the hierarchal structure”. During the check-in, there were a lot of negative emotions. Residents indicated they felt “*sad*”, “*confused*”, “*uncomfortable*”, “*angry*” and “*unsure*”. After the plenary start, we were divided into groups of five or six persons and tasked with answering the question why we moved to this ecovillage. The answers were mostly about connection, solidarity, and sustainability. A few people answered they mainly focused on the social aspect of the ecovillage, but almost all of them mentioned ecological living and sustainability as one of the top reasons. Siemen’s statement summarizes this:

Siemen

“We were looking for a place where we can connect with several other people. People you know, who care about you and care what you care about, sharing things. We are also interested in sustainability, which is not necessarily secondary, but we find people around us especially important. We missed that connection very much. Not only in connection with each other but also with the world.”

Drawing on Hong & Vicdan (2016) this explanation from Siemen highlights how elements of sustainability as a practice often evolve from dialogues and compromises. During the second

break-out group session, we were tasked with answering the question “*What do you contribute?*” This round I was paired with Hazel, she is a part of the Middle Circle that decided to evict Marnix, and Kevin, who is in the lead for the communal garden. Kevin explained how he is still searching for his role inside the community. At first, he wanted to be a part of the Middle Circle, the group of residents that makes decisions, because he felt like he would sometimes make different decisions than the current group does. However, for that same reason, he eventually chose to avoid this struggle and not be a part of this group. When I asked him why he was not interested in voicing that other opinion, he indicated that he did think about it, but it would have cost him too much energy to keep defending contrary opinions.

Kevin

“I like working in the garden and thinking about how to design a garden. That is why I am now a member of the Garden Circle.”

Hazel starts to get emotional after Kevin’s contribution. Hazel desperately wants to be “just Hazel” again, a regular resident. She starts to cry and urges Kevin to choose for what gives him energy. Hazel wants to return to work positively with people, as she does at her job in healthcare, the eviction of Marnix and the situation surrounding that decision has been very hard on her. I saw her actively talking and mediating with Marnix and other residents the past few weeks. Her involvement made some residents feel like she wanted to claim the role of community confidant, which was not always appreciated, as the community did not yet decide whether to bring in an external community confidant or if one of the residents should be the confidant.

We all gathered again after the break-out sessions, and I noticed that some people dropped out of the meeting. Afterward I picked up some different opinions about this CLIPS session. Some residents liked talking about the reasons of why they joined the ecovillage in the first place, and others thought it was “*stupid*”. Some felt like the trainers pretended nothing happened and that the atmosphere was “*weird*”, and that there was no moment to discuss what happened seriously, and how it impacted the community. The decision of the Middle Circle and the CLIPS session made some people consider canceling their membership. After the session, Wouter (the chairman of CVEG) came to Zuiderveld and sat down in the common room, creating the opportunity for an informal get-together. Around ten residents are present and sit in a circle around the table in the communal building. I am hanging back a little with Cindy because it felt inappropriate for me to be up close during such an intimate and emotional

moment due to my role as a researcher. Cindy is a member at CVEG but not a resident at the ecovillage, she often helps out a few hours a day, making lunch or doing dishes in the common room. When she suggests something, I noticed that residents did not really listen to her. They may not appreciate her advice because she is not a resident of Zuiderveld. The topics discussed during this informal meeting let on that it was based on something serious. Wouter urged residents to respect Marnix' privacy and not share the information on which the decision was based. Cindy had even less information to base her advice on, in less difficult situations, her advice would probably have been received normally. Maybe she felt this too because she backed off and started cleaning coffee cups after not receiving any responses. The tension and emotions in the room were palpable. When someone entered the communal building and saw the circle of residents, few of whom were crying, they immediately lowered their voice, and refrained from the usual happy greetings.

Meetings and sociocratic decision-making

The community on Zuiderveld has its own general meetings, making decisions with all present residents. Furthermore, residents are also still a part of CVEG, they have to join these meetings as well. Meetings are called to share information, make decisions, or, to brainstorm about plans and activities. All meetings are supposed to be consensus-based meetings; this means that they are not "run" by a chairperson but served by agenda planners and a facilitator (Christian 2003). One meeting illustrated how complex consensus-based decision-making could be, especially if it is not clear to everyone how sociocracy works and the meeting is via Zoom. Wouter, one of the founders of CVEG offered to be the facilitator during one of the meetings I attended. As the facilitator, his job is to consider the group's needs as a whole and create an atmosphere of trust and safety. He has to help those who want to participate in the discussion and not let anyone dominate. Other tasks are helping the group keep to its agenda, keeping focus, and assessing the level of agreement before testing for consensus (Christian 2003). During meetings a heart keeper is appointed, someone who will ask for a moment of reflection when they think the debate is becoming too heated. Before they address the agenda, Wouter explains sociocracy and the manner of voting. I knew the basics of sociocracy, but Wouter uses so many passive verbs during his explanation that it becomes incomprehensible for me. The general rule is to mute yourself during a meeting when someone else is speaking, but when I look at the other people who are present, I see frowns and people who move their hands around, which makes me think I am not the only one who feels confused. After discussing a few miscellaneous items

on the agenda, it is time to choose a new treasurer for CVEG. Choosing and voting in someone for a position at CVEG follow the same sociocratic process as choosing delegates for Circles.

Reasons for nominating someone differ from personal experience with the person in question or their professional background. Experience, punctuality, reliability, and accuracy are characteristics many of members look for in a treasurer. It can get a little chaotic during some rounds, as not everyone agrees with all facets of sociocracy. Some members feel like their opinion could change if they knew whether the person with the most votes would want the treasurer position. An interesting dynamic emerged during this process, some people from CVEG preferred it if someone who is not a resident of Ecovillage Zuiderveld filled the position. Which is an example of the tensions and contradictions the liminality of the ecovillage creates for residents concerning their membership at CVEG. The ecovillage is an active part of CVEG, but at the same time, other members of CVEG see them as a subgroup. During the meeting to choose a treasurer, the first nominee was blocked because she was a part of Ecodorp Zuiderveld and filled a position for HvEZ (Renters association Ecovillage Zuiderveld). After the nomination was blocked, it became clear that the nominee in question did not want the position.

Consensus generates a different dynamic among meeting participants than majority-rule voting. The latter often has competing factions that try to win over members to their position, often by criticizing the other position, creating an “us versus them” atmosphere. Sociocracy creates an incentive for members to seek out those who disagree with their proposal and try to understand their objections, eventually reforming the proposal to incorporate other members’ concerns (Christian 2003, 58). During the second round, Vivian – apparently a relatively new member of CVEG – is nominated for the position. Vivian is not a resident at Ecovillage Zuiderveld, and she is not taking part in this meeting. Objections are raised against Vivian, and during the reformation of the proposal, participants discuss new information, making members who previously gave their consent change their view. Some suggested another voting round based on the new information, Wouter mentions this is unnecessary as the only member who blocked the proposal now gives her consent. Some members start blocking the proposal because they do not like the current process. Wouter disagrees and seems irritated; he is rubbing his face, sighs frustratingly and tries to explain how there is nothing wrong with the current process.

This process displays that conflicts and differences can arise using consensus-based decision-making. In sociocracy, conflicts are often seen as a catalyst to creating more innovative solutions and crafting an agreement out of member’s different concerns. Indicating that consensus is not a compromise, which weakens everyone’s interests, but a creative meta-solution, which ideally strengthens everyone’s interests (Christian 2003, 58). Eventually, some

members at the meeting called for a committee to suggest new solutions at a later meeting. Wouter's opinion seems to mix with his role as the facilitator, as he does not fully agree to another solution. His role is a tricky one, on the one hand, Wouter facilitates the meeting and is very educated about sociocracy, but on the other hand, he has his personal opinions about candidates and decision-making processes. He has to maintain a balance between his own opinion and facilitating the meeting. As the facilitator he can steer the group and communication in a particular direction. Christian (2003, 55) write how some people have the power and ability to influence, without the people in a group being aware of it. Not everyone in the group is educated in sociocracy, so it is not clear whether Wouter's role surpasses his responsibility as a facilitator to the group when he denies other people's suggestions of alternative processes for decision-making. Because as a member of CVEG, Wouter can also block a proposal. Eventually, the group decides on a creative meta-solution, which is postponing the voting until the next GM and creating a committee to gather more candidates for the position as treasurer.

Sharings

A few days after the CLIPS session, some residents organized a sharing. A sharing is a specific type of group circle where residents come together, and the group practices active listening when an individual speaks. The original purpose of a sharing is to give people a chance to show less wonderful and hidden aspects of their personality, and frustrations or annoyances about others or themselves. Sometimes just the opportunity to talk about these kinds of inner moods in a safe environment is enough to resolve them. The goal of "deep sharing" is to contribute to the "community glue" (Cañada et al. 2017).

When unpleasant things are not shared and eventually do come to light, tensions and pressures increase and can lead to an "explosion" in the group. In consensus-based decision-making it is believed that everyone has a piece of the truth (Christian 2003, 56). Because Middle Circle decided to evict Marnix without consulting residents, some people felt blindsided. Some residents suggested that the Middle Circle acted outside of their authority. Stories took on a life of their own, and tensions were almost at the "explosion" stage between some residents. A small group of residents organized two sharings, one to provide the residents with all the details on which the decision was based and the second to share emotions, stories, and concerns (Christian 2003). Residents who knew the whole story were convinced that by informing other residents, trust and (feelings of) safety among the community would be restored (Christian 2003). The goal of the first sharing was to share all the sensitive information that played a role in this

conflict. The second sharing was more open for residents to speak their mind, by creating a safe space for reflection upon the conflict and emotions, residents attempted to create space for healing and understanding. Not everyone lived in the ecovillage yet, therefore the sharings could be participated online and offline via Zoom or in the communal building. Residents gathered on the first floor of the communal building and created a circle with chairs, the laptop connected to the Zoom-meeting was positioned on a chair in the circle, and during small breaks and moments of silent reflection, Sacha would use his singing bowls. As the contents of the sharings are deeply personal and confidential, I am unable to elaborate any more on the sharings. The sharings did have the intended effect of bringing residents together, increasing feelings of safety and relieving pressure.

Hierarchy and leadership

Weber and Kamau argue that communal societies are often led by charismatic leaders (Weber 2019; Kamau 2001). Kamau, for instance, explores how liminality manifests itself in intentional communities, such as through the rejection of everyday economic life, reversals of sex roles, attempts to establish equality and common identity through the use of symbols and rituals, and the role of charismatic leaders (Kamau 2001). Leslie, a resident, and pioneer of Ecovillage Zuiderveld can be seen as the community's charismatic leader, at least while building the houses. Her authority and ability to inspire the other residents to move to the ecovillage rested upon the potency of her message, her moving to the ecovillage herself as the pioneer, how actively she participated during construction, and the righteousness of her mission (Weber 2019; Royce 2015). This righteousness was emphasized by how Leslie acted toward other residents. For instance, when she gave up her two-bedroom apartment and chose to live in a studio so Sacha, a recently divorced man, could let his two daughters stay over when they visited. Leslie also enjoyed certain privileges other residents did not have, because of her status in the ecovillage, such as subletting her studio. Leslie's status secured her partner Patricia by default. Patricia is not in a Circle, even though every member of the community must be active in at least one Circle.

When I overheard a conversation between two residents, they mentioned how much they look up to Leslie and her wife. These residents told me how Leslie started the ecovillage with some other members of CVEG, but some of them dropped out because their visions did not align anymore. Residents also mentioned how committed Leslie is to the personal life and wellbeing of residents even before they moved to the ecovillage. She offered emotional support

to one of the residents I talked to, and I saw her offering support to many other residents during my time in the ecovillage. Leslie wears her glasses on the top of her head like a headband to prevent her hair from getting in the way. Her curly, dark brown hair has some lighter grey streaks, and she wears baggy clothing, such as overused jeans and a fleece vest or a checkered blouse when it is sunny. Walking around nonchalantly, always astir, and in quiet moments rolling or smoking her roll-your-own cigarette, Leslie can only be described as a particular appearance in the ecovillage.

Interestingly, Leslie is not chosen through the sociocratic method to be part of the Middle Circle or to be the captain of the construction team. During my first few weeks at the ecovillage, her position as the community leader established itself organically as residents needed someone to look up to and guide them through the chaos of doing construction work while simultaneously moving into the houses. But, the validity of charismatic authority is contingent on leaders' continued success and quality of their accomplishments, which makes it inherently unstable and transitory. Leaders may lose their gifts and the confidence of their followers (Weber 2019; Royce 2015). According to Weber (2019), charisma appears as a temporary interruption of more enduring forms of leadership, not because of its arbitrary nature but because of the routinization of charisma. In Weber's (2019) terms, charisma over time becomes an "everyday" matter, and hence devoid of charisma, which sets up an inherent tension. The first weeks of ecovillage life are marked by the chaos of building the houses and residents constantly moving in, the "social experiment" – as many residents called it – was in full swing. This made many processes visible regarding decision making, governance, and to which degree residents accepted regulation. During this time, Leslie was a beacon of security and structure for many residents. However, after the most stressful period of construction was over, residents question the current hierarchical processes. Hierarchy and decision-making processes were mainly questioned when tensions and conflicts arose and the consequential decisions regarding conflicts had to be made in a short period of time. After they finished most of the construction, residents rearranged the Circles and created their own Circle-structure apart from CVEG.

Conflicts that test the hierarchical structure

During my time in the ecovillage, a significant moral conflict arose with substantial implications. This conflict was stretched out over multiple weeks and was very chaotic and emotional. Because of the sensitive nature of this conflict and because I want to respect the privacy and hospitality of the residents of Ecovillage Zuiderveld, I will not share too many

details. The culmination of the conflict was the eviction of a resident, Marnix, of Ecovillage Zuiderveld. Marnix was a member of CVEG and was in the process of renting an apartment at the ecovillage. The apartments were not yet finished, so Leslie offered Marnix the attic in the communal building for the time being. This way Marnix could stay at the ecovillage before he officially moved into his apartment, he had not signed his lease agreement yet. At various times Marnix overstepped boundaries of several residents in the ecovillage. Some people questioned if they still felt safe at the ecovillage, but also to which extent by-laws should be created that register acceptable and desired residential behavior and boundaries. Some people feared a restriction of their freedom, others felt scared because the conflicts made them relive traumatic experiences from their past. This aligns with Hong & Vicdan's (2016) argument, stating that policies and community by-laws guide people to lead and organize a sustainable lifestyle, but they also create the greatest tensions in community meetings.

It is not an exaggeration to say the moral conflicts, in which Marnix often played a central role, divided residents. Three camps could be distinguished; residents who sided with Marnix or who felt like making extra rules or by-laws would not benefit the community. The second camp felt like creating ground rules in the by-laws regarding the conflict or discussing people's feelings and experiences was needed to better understand each other. These two groups mainly were discussing with each other and about one another. The third group was not up to date about the conflict, either because they did not live in the ecovillage yet and missed most of the events or because they did not care enough about the conflict to join the meetings or engage in discussions with the first two groups. However, almost all residents did find this to be an instructive moment to explore how they communicate and resolve certain things and disagreements with each other and where they will set boundaries as a community.

At some point, the Middle Circle made an unexpected and swift decision to evict Marnix; they communicated this with the residents via email. They decided this so quickly because Marnix had to sign his contract in less than three days. The people in the Middle Circle chose to respect Marnix' privacy, which meant that they did not share all the reasons which led to their final decision. Because sociocracy is paramount in the ecovillage and CVEG, a decision made by only a few people and behind closed doors was unique and for some residents terrifying. As Zigon (2007) would argue, a break-down occurred; the moment of problematization is the moment in which ethics must be performed. Consensus decision-making is a decision-making process in which a group must all agree, or consent, before action is taken. It is based on the belief that everyone has a piece of the truth (Christian 2003). Not only did the Middle Circle act without consulting the residents, but they also omitted the

information on which their decision was based. Pieces of truth were dispersed among residents; a part of the community was therefore confused what the Middle Circle based their decision on. Some residents were worried if they could be evicted too, mostly residents who were discredited or who lived a more alternative lifestyle. The moral breakdown provided a window through the uncertainty of the liminal stage and visualized the contradictions with which residents had to live (Zigon 2007).

After the first sharing, it became clear that Marnix used the unrest and disbalance of the residents in his favor as he planned to object the Middle Circle's decision. His charisma caused a power imbalance as residents habitually deferred to his opinion (Christian 2003). His attempt could have been successful were it not for the fact that the Middle Circle disclosed all information regarding their decision. In this situation, the Middle Circle considers the individual's privacy against the community safety and concluded that all information should be shared to guarantee safety. This situation shows that even in a sociocracy, or consensus-based community, certain members may still have considerably more power than others. The argument of residents that the Middle Circle acted outside of their authority, is an issue of unequal distribution of power (Cristian 2003). Some residents felt like they placed their trust in the members of the Middle Circle, but others felt like the Middle Circle went beyond the authority associated with their role. Other events contributed to this, Hazel positioning herself as a potential confidant for the community, for instance. Some residents agreed with the decision, but because of the way the decision was made they would have voted against it. When I spoke to members of the Middle Circle, they told me they would have never foreseen such an event in such early stages of the ecovillage. *"You don't expect this to happen, yes you expect it, but you don't expect it to happen so soon. We used to talk about how we are going to deal with such a situation, but back then we thought that will come and then suddenly it happens!"* The community was forced to step-away from the unreflective everydayness and figure out how to respond to this ethical dilemma. They found a way to keep going by organizing a sharing, and eventually return to the everydayness of life in the ecovillage (Zigon 2007).

Chapter conclusion

This chapter displays structures in hierarchy and leadership in the ecovillage and how these are experienced by residents. Residents try to establish structure based on sociocracy and consensus-based decision-making. Despite the discourse of equality and specific structures aimed at preventing hierarchies, inequalities and hierarchies do appear. This is caused by the volatile nature of the ecovillage in its start-up phase and power imbalances. These power

imbalances are generated by leadership based on charisma, differences in knowledge about sociocracy and consensus-based decision-making, and level of presence at meetings. Due to a moral breakdown and other tensions, abrasive structures become visible (Zigon 2007). These structures and hierarchies influence how people feel, feelings of safety among residents and influence the decisions that are made. For sociocratic methods to succeed, members have to be educated in using this as a decision-making method, which not every member of CVEG nor resident at Ecovillage Zuiderveld is (Christian 2003).

Chapter 2: Creating a community through design

This chapter will explicate how CVEG started building Ecovillage Zuiderveld and the roles and experiences of different stakeholders during this process. I will also highlight how the communal areas, such as the garden and the communal building serve as a platform for envisioning and developing alternative frameworks for social relations and social practices (Eizenberg 2011). The design of the communal spaces and houses of residents contributes to and shapes the identity of the ecovillage. The ecovillage design reflects what the community thinks is important, such as the spiritual, social, and ecological lifestyle. Fundamental design goals revolved around themes such as livability, a connection to nature, social relations, and the overall appearance of the ecovillage. As Lockyer (2017, 523) describes: “Intentional communities come in all shapes and sizes, and display amazing diversity in their common values, which may be social, economic, spiritual, political and ecological. Some are rural; some urban.”

The goals of Ecovillage Zuiderveld are manifested in specific efforts to create green space, maximize energy efficiency, and make optimal and sustainable use of space and materials (Van Schyndel Kasper 2008, 17). Residents’ imaginations and visions stems from the varying degrees to which they want to imagine and live in ways beyond the dominant models of progress (Fox 2013). In this chapter, I will look at how Ecovillage Zuiderveld engages with change in the context of crisis and how progress and hope were imagined and practiced (Fox 2013). I use commons thinking as an epistemological tool to inform my ethnographic findings of how implicit and explicit visioning of the future and the desirable way of living relates to the integrative design of Ecovillage Zuiderveld (Fox 2013).

Forming alliances

Because Ecovillage Zuiderveld is built on an empty plot, the residents had more liberty in designing the ecovillage and reach the beforementioned goals. However, residents did not have complete autonomy; factors such as the municipalities destination plan for the area, costs, and regulations regarding social housing were also considered. Before designing the ecovillage, CVEG went through the process of securing funding and connecting with stakeholders. This all

started with the matching day Marcus from the housing association WBVG organized. During an interview he told me about the start of Ecovillage Zuiderveld from his point of view:

Marcus

“Well, it's been quite some time since the very first initiator approached me. This person lived in a central housing project in Arnhem from another housing corporation, so not from the WBVG. He wasn't too happy with how things were going. He had other ideas about living in a community and he tried to get a foothold somewhere for those ideas. In his search he also came across the WBVG, and he contacted me. We had conversations with him, and I was like ‘okay, let's see what we can make of those ideas.’ But... the idea was too big for the WBVG to take up, so the idea was, we need to match the initiative to a housing association that can handle this kind of project size. So, they were one of the initiatives who presented themselves at the matching day, and there were a number of other initiatives. These initiatives prompted me to organize a matching day.”

Talis is a housing association that builds, rents, and manages approximately 14,000 homes in the Nijmegen and Wijchen region. They provide suitable, affordable, and future-proof housing in neighborhoods (Talis n.d.). Their goal is to help make neighborhoods more social. They try to achieve this by working together with social organizations such as welfare institutions, municipalities, and residents. This collaboration represents a shift between ecovillages as more secluded communities to integrated parts of broader society (Dawson 2013).

Niko, one of Talis' project managers who worked on Ecovillage Zuiderveld told me that Talis wanted to use the location for something special: *“Not the ordinary standard new construction, but something special.”* Together with Trebbe, a construction company for sustainable and healthy living environments, they facilitated the design of the houses in the ecovillage after the matching day that the WBVG. During an interview, Niko told me how he experienced meeting members of CVEG on the matching day:

Niko

“So, with that idea I went to that matching day, like “We'll see if there is a group that fits, that would like to live in this place and that also fits in size on this, on this plot.” And then everyone presented themselves there. The housing associations presented themselves and the groups did too. And then there were people from CVEG, and they had a very enthusiastic presentation, and I went to talk to them, because that was of course the idea behind the matching day, first presenting and then dating. I immediately had a good feeling about their vision and their size and their level of organization. That is always important to me. That they are a bit well-organized.”

The initial architectural design was almost two times the entire budget. Niko guided the members during the architectural process. It was important to Niko whether the group did not give up too many of their ideals to save money. *“That’s a pitfall when you start a process with the goal of realizing a project. At some point you can forget what you were doing it for. At one point I asked, ‘is this still what you want?’ And then it turned out that we had given up too many ideals, so then we took a completely different path.”* The residents brought Trebbe in because they have a few formats for building social houses. With the format Trebbe used, the architectural design was under budget and the members had more money to implement extra things, to realize their ecological ideals. The ecovillage made some concessions regarding the design by using a social-housing format from Trebbe. The houses are smaller due to the shared laundry rooms and guestrooms, which resulted in 46 homes on a plot of land originally intended for 35 homes. Which is a profit of 11 homes, something the residents are very proud of. One of the single-family homes was appointed to be an exchange-house; the idea of the exchange-house is that people who are unaffiliated with ecovillages or Ecovillage Zuiderveld can become acquainted with living in an ecovillage. Another purpose of the exchange-house is to increase the flow of new faces in the ecovillage, as residents concluded that people plan to live in the ecovillage for a long time. As one of the guests of the exchange-house pointed out: *“It’s usually the case that people in these kinds of communities stay very long so they like move in and never move out. So, it’s difficult. It’s not very accessible a lot of times. So, I think that’s why they, from what I understood from them, that’s why they wanted one of the houses to be more accessible. For like younger people or for shorter stays, or for just yeah that you don’t have to be a member for so many months before you can get in, and then maybe if somebody leaves then there’s a spot available and so on. But here [for the exchange house], for example, the contract is for like 1,5 years.”*

After completing the design, some extra budget was left over, and residents decided to make the houses more sustainable. They chose to isolate the walls with recycled jeans and to plaster the walls inside with loam, a form of clay or earth that retains more heat, keeps steady and pleasant levels of humidity, and cools the room when it is hot. This loam was plastered by the residents with the help of two professionals, keeping workmanship costs as low as possible. These improvements would not have been possible for most residents if they had to pay for it themselves or because they are physically unable to do heavy work.

The communal garden

The first time I traveled to Ecovillage Zuiderveld, I noticed how the ecovillage is the front view of the neighborhood. One could see the ecovillage traveling by train, but you also drive by the communal garden as you exit the adjacent roads. Mainly because the ecovillage is positioned next to an archeological site, which means that no buildings or trees can be placed on this site. The archeological site creates an open view of the communal garden. This visibility made the municipality of Nijmegen very apprehensive of a messy appearance because the ecovillage's communal garden would be the first view of the neighborhood, and not all social housing projects maintain their gardens or façade gardens. The landscape architect of the municipality of Nijmegen – who designed all the green spaces in the neighborhood – was therefore very involved with the design of the communal garden. The design and maintenance of the communal spaces say a lot about the vision and ideals of the residents regarding the ecovillage and community building (Van Schyndel Kasper 2008). The communal garden is a multipurpose space where residents of different ages and levels of mobility can enjoy themselves, reflecting the needs and visions of the residents.

Commons thinking is an important skill for rebuilding political, community, and personal resilience (Fox 2013, 167). 'The commons' has a multitude of meanings; historically the term has been used to denote material forms of the natural world or common resources that are collectively owned or owned by no one, forests, for example, pieces of land or the ocean (Williams 2016, 2). There is much literature written about the commons, featuring a more extended debate. Chibnik (2011) argues that two bodies of thoughts compete for a voice in this literature. One responds to Hardin's tragedy of the commons, being primarily concerned with the problems of achieving collective actions to conserve natural resources that are both depleted and unregulated. The other is influenced by notions of moral economy and entitlement, dealing with the problem of creating and sustaining resource access for poor and vulnerable groups in society (Chibnik 2011, 408). Chibnik (2011, 408-409) differentiates between the "collective action scholars" who analyze the rules and sanctions that encourage individuals to conserve the commons and the "entitlement scholars" who emphasize the historical struggles that determine resource access, entitlement, and the how formal and informal rules create and reinforce unequal access to the commons. Fox (2013) emphasizes how dominance thinking has been the primary epistemological mode of Western modernity, assuming that one's wellbeing ultimately depends on controlling the devalued other (whether that be other life forms, humans, or aspects of oneself). "Moving toward a society based on commons requires relinquishing the dominance approach, the dualistic problem-solving approach underpinning non-egalitarian and

unsustainable social systems, and collectively relearning the political and personal skills of envisaging and enabling a viable common future (Fox 2013, 166).” This corresponds to the vision of residents regarding their communal garden; the garden is a place where they can experiment with new ideas regarding sustainability that could not be incorporated in their houses.

The plan is to create permaculture in the garden, build two compost toilets, and build a barn stocked with tools and a packaging-free shop where products are bought in bulk so residents can refill pots with rice or biological cleaning products. The compost-toilets, for instance, could not be placed in the houses because it is against the regulations of social housing and buying (ecological) products in stock reduces the price and packaging per person, making it more accessible for low-income households. The garden will grow medicinal herbs, edible plants, fruit trees, and greens. Sharing practices of the produce are not yet discussed amongst the residents. By characterizing the communal garden as a commons, it serves as a platform for envisioning and developing alternative frameworks for social relations and social practices (Eizenberg 2011). Fox (2013) argues that people practicing permaculture are often highly aware and explicit that ecosystems present complex interdependent relationships. According to Fox (2013, 166), problems within socioenvironmental relations stem from not considering existing relationships between elements of ecosystems, and, in order for people to thrive within socioenvironmental relations, these relationships need to be restored, nurtured, and cared for.

Researcher: *“I hear the phrase ‘alternative housing’ a lot, what do you think is alternative about this way of living?”*

Kay: *“Well, I’ve also sometimes thought like; ‘what makes this building style, for example, very different?’ I don’t know how ecologically different other newly built construction work is. But what I find very characteristic about this project is... we have connected a lot through building the houses together, but that intensive period is now over and what happens next? You know? That is the question, but we have a very large backyard, and the layout of the community is designed that everyone has their own house, but you also have a shared garden and partly common areas and I think that will create a whole different culture.”*

Erika: *“I also think because people are consciously deciding to come live here, to do something together, right? We have some core values, including neighborhood, right? If you say ‘Hey, we want to be neighbors and we want to do that together’ and the other neighbor thinks ‘Well, I don’t need it’... You know those pillars beforehand, so you know that everyone here has the*

wish to do it together and if someone has a bad day and does not have much space for it, that's possible and that is also allowed."

Eizenberg (2011) for example, did a study on community gardens in New York City, which she labeled as urban commons in the neoliberal city. She argues that different forms of property ownership do not restrict the commons, but we must see the commons outside of the public-private dichotomy and introduce the social, cultural, and political practices that allow new possibilities, thus reconstituting the commons as an object of thought (Eizenberg 2011). Commons are not necessarily open to all, which is the case with the communal garden of Ecovillage Zuiderveld. The garden is not enclosed and is thus freely accessible, but it is officially private property. As the municipality of Nijmegen assigned some public space at the border of the garden for the ecovillage to use as they wish, so the boundary of what is public and private space is not really clear. It also depends on the level of openness residents wish to have towards the neighborhood.



Picture 5 Design of the garden by Hoogte Twee, retrieved from: <https://cveg.nl/projecten/ecodorpzuiderveld/>

The residents make sure to regulate the garden and public space assigned by the municipality, in order to ensure its long-term sustainability (Williams 2016). The community is wondering what to do about curious visitors from the neighborhood. Unknown people sometimes walk around in their backyard, treating it like a public space, making residents question whether the communal garden should be an accessible place. Opening up the communal garden for the neighborhood is weighed against the lack of privacy it entails.

Residents in WhatsApp group chat:

Resident 1: *“I have seen 'strangers' walking through our garden a number of times now, without any of us being present. These people are possibly visitors who are walking the tourist*

route, but I'm starting to get the idea that there are people who experience our garden as a public park. Are there circles/persons who have investigated this, and are there already some rules for this?"

Resident 2: *"No. We can all tell them that our garden is private and they can't just access it... we should put up a sign for that we live in the Netherlands. That it is forbidden to walk on the grass... With criminal rules pointing to the local police officer."*

Resident 3: *"Not kidding, a sign seems to be the best solution to me, at least in the evening asking people not to enter the site. In addition, it would also make it clear that access is not obvious since they do walk right past people's back doors."*

Resident 4: *"A large part of our garden is public space, the hedges can offer shelter there... I also think that it decreases when the bicycle and walking paths of the municipality are there. 😊"*

Resident 2: *"Bicycle paths?!"*

Resident 5: *"I also saw 2 people walking, as long as it doesn't get worse. It's private property anyway. Soon hang youth who knows..."*

Resident 6: *"🤔 maybe they are curious about the ecovillage and want to join CVEG 🦋"*

Resident 7: *"I also regularly see people from the neighborhood walking in front of Westblok. People are curious about what we are all doing. Seems like a one-time thing to me."*

Resident 8: *"I think it would be nice to put up some kind of information board. Positive info with guidelines and invitation to start a chat for info etc.."*

Resident 9: *"Yes put it on the road with info on it"*

Resident 10: *"Fixed coffee hour for visitors, e.g. on Sunday afternoon?"*

Resident 7: *"I like it and they also indicate that we like our privacy."*

The process of commoning is directly linked to community, the group amongst whom it is created and shared (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016). One of the most important properties of the communal garden is that it is a place to socialize and build the community as residents work together towards a common goal. Many residents became tired and frustrated while building the houses, and the communal garden was a place where people actively came outside their houses at 20:00 to spontaneously help and toss some soil around. Every new development gave residents energy and hope, looking forward to a shared first summer in their new garden with their new neighbors. A community that commons is not necessarily a given; rather, communities are constituted through the process of commoning (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016, 196). There appears to be a dialectical relationship between the

formation of commons and community formations: one does not necessarily precede the other (Huron 2015, 370). The commoning process of the garden is not a straightforward process; members of Ecovillage Zuiderveld have different visions, expectations, and needs. Some residents want most of the plants to be edible, some parents want an inground trampoline for children where others don't, some are considering cordoning off their personal area in the garden because there are tensions between them and other residents, and there are residents who need to use a part of the garden to park their mobility scooter for instance. One can see the divergence in age and household through the different needs and visions for the communal garden.

The extent of sharing things differs for every community. However, there are shared characteristics by groups that are otherwise very different. According to Kamau (2001) these are the conditions of liminality, charismatic leadership, and an emotional state that is known as *communitas*. These conditions create a way of life that is very different from life on the outside (Kamau 2001, 17). There are, however, different levels regarding intentional communities. Ecovillage Zuiderveld is a living community, not a commuting community. This means that people live together but most of the residents work outside of the community. Although there are not many commuting communities in The Netherlands, some of the residents consciously made a choice to move to a living community, as Kay and Erika did, a young couple with two small children.

Kay: *"I felt like I was homesick for living with friends and stuff and then we decided to travel around with an old Mercedes camper and see different communities."*

Researcher: *"Was your son born yet during that time?"*

Kay: *"Our son was just born. He was around 2 years old at the time. By traveling we've seen different ways of living. As far as communities are concerned, there are actually two extremes that differ in character."*

Researcher: *"What was the difference?"*

Kay: *"One was very, very orderly and there's some of that here [in Ecovillage Zuiderveld]. You should consider that you were busy at least 5 days a week for the community and those others? That was much more laidback and came across as a lot more as a hippie-like community where everything you want was quite non-committal. So, there was less productivity."*

Researcher: *"Where do you think Zuiderveld falls on that spectrum?"*

Kay: *"A little off-center. But, well, it's not really comparable, because the Zuiderveld does feel very structured. But it's not self-sufficient, for example."*

Erika: *“The difference is that those two communities where we were, they were both commuting communities, so that means living and working is in one place. The difference with Zuiderveld is that everyone has an income here. Everyone has work outside the community, so this is not a commuting community. That is a residential community. And yes, there is now a question of, how do you do that, how do you work or participate in the community? How do you combine that with your life outside the community with still having to earn money?”*

The communal garden symbolizes different things for different residents. One mother mentions how the communal garden and the area around the ecovillage help her child grow up. After just a few weeks of moving to the ecovillage she noticed changes in the behavior of her son, her son gained the confidence to go out by himself and communicated his needs more clearly. Another parent also mentioned that the garden and the social control in the community ensure that her daughter can play more independently and explore the area. Before they moved to the ecovillage, she felt like she was walking her child and watching her play at the playground, like one walks a dog. A young woman who lives in an apartment with her boyfriend tells me: *“It feels so much larger than the actual square meters of my apartment and that is simply because of the common spaces.”* Before moving to Ecovillage Zuiderveld she lived in a student residence. She moved in together with her boyfriend for the first time, and although the apartment is not that spacious, the garden and the community building make her feel like she has a lot of space. As Eizenberg (2011) describes, lived space is space as it is experienced through images and symbols, which do not submit to quantifiable rules. The emotional quality exerted from a certain space, such as emotional values and meanings experienced in the communal garden at Ecovillage Zuiderveld touches upon expressions in emotions, identity, and everyday practice. Residents experience the garden as a connection to nature which they seek to incorporate into different facets of their lives (Eizenberg 2011). The communal garden is an essential common resource for making meaning and enhancing a positive emotional experience of the living environment (Eizenberg 2011, 8).

Chapter conclusion

Ecovillage Zuiderveld is the biggest ecovillage in The Netherlands to date, and most of its residents met each other via Zoom meetings due to COVID. Ecovillage Zuiderveld can be described as a social housing project and laboratory of sustainability for people with lower incomes (Dias et al. 2017). The term “ecovillage” is self-assigned, residents started out with the basic regulations and code of conduct provided by CVEG and try to create economic

sustainability as well as ecological sustainability (Dias et al. 2017). The definition of an ecovillage as an intentional community is therefore complicated (Dias et al. 2017; Dawson 2013). As Dias et al. (2017, 82) argue, the concept of ecovillages is therefore evolving. Beyond seeking for solutions to create a more sustainable lifestyle, an explicit goal of Ecovillage Zuiderveld is aimed at exchanging experiences with the world (Dias et al. 2017; Van Schyndel Kasper 2008). This ambition is expressed through design of communal spaces such as the communal building and creating a garden through permaculture (Dias et al. 2017).

Chapter 3: Capitalist contestations in the ecovillage

As Kamau (2001, 20) argues, the rise of intentional communities is not accidental; it corresponds with the development of modern society. Globalization and the increasing amount of intra-multinational trade hinder the ability of national governments to follow independent economic management (Hopper 2017). There is a general movement by many European countries comprising the state and the private structure, many states privatize commitments they traditionally fulfilled for their citizens (Hopper 2017). Hopper (2017) argues that the development of more individualistic modes of behavior engendered by the primary process of late modernity have a detrimental impact upon local communities and social capital within advanced industrial societies. According to Kamau (2001) modern society contains a paradox, the individual became increasingly paramount, whereas society has become increasingly restrictive, with social distinctions becoming more nuanced and social categories becoming narrower. This chapter draws a brief background on social housing dynamics in The Netherlands, residents' reasoning to move to the ecovillage, and the connection between this reasoning and the effects of globalization they experience in their daily lives. Subsequently, I display how the community tries to counter some of the effects of capitalism and individualism by creating more solidarity among residents and improving livability. Finally, I explicate the liminal stage of ecovillages, the ecovillage as a heterotopia and the role of ecovillages in today's society focusing on the contribution of Ecovillage Zuiderveld regarding this discourse.

The combined effect of globalization, individualism and the debilitation of social structures and institutions introduced greater uncertainty and anxiety into residents' daily lives. Communities are a response to these developments, which is visible at Ecovillage Zuiderveld where residents describe their way of living as an alternative lifestyle or almost 'anarchic'. Their description is reminiscent of the term 'radical engagement', entailing mobilization and taking contesting action to confront common problems and dangers (Giddens 2013; Hopper 2017). Some residents feel like society itself is the crisis, they worry about climate change, housing, and social relations. They want to regain agency and autonomy, increase livability in their lives and worry about the unsustainability of the untenability of today's growth due to capitalism. Ecovillage Zuiderveld is partly a rejection of everyday economic life in which members turn away from ordinary ways of living (Kamau 2001).

An ecovillage is a solution for what Foucault proposes as: “knowing what relations of propinquity, what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification of human elements should be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve a given end. Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites (Foucault 1986, 23).” We live in a world where climate change and urbanization create some of the most significant shifts in society; it affects how we live, what emotions we feel, and how we relate to people around us. As a result of capitalist policies, urbanization directly influenced the way of living for many people. Individualism influences the design of houses and neighborhoods which effect livability, social connections, and family ties. Housing is caught within several simultaneous social conflicts. Houses are used as a lived social space, and as an instrument for profit-making, making it a conflict between housing as home and as real estate (Madden and Marcuse 2016). As a result, housing becomes a subject of contestation between different ideologies, economic interests, and political projects. This relates to Madden and Marcuse’s (2016) argument that the housing crisis stems from the inequalities and antagonisms of class society. Housing simultaneously makes class society visible in neighborhoods as residents of social rented housing now have a low income much more often than before. As a result, social problems like poverty and aging, often concentrate in certain neighborhoods. Ecovillage Zuiderveld and the motivations of its residents to change their way of living embodies many of the contestations seen in modern society.

Marcus from the WBVG explains his view on how the Dutch government tries to build from some kind of Excel Sheet, looking at the numbers and what is needed now instead of looking at the long-term effects. The Dutch government built many single-family homes over the years, but due to the long waiting lists and the lack of apartments for single people, the people whose children have left the single-family homes are not moving.

Marcus

“You just have to choose other solutions. You have to start using that living space much better. Look what happens when aging strikes at Zuiderveld. What then happens within such a community, so in 20 years in 30 years. Instead of the fact that the households change but people stay put and stick to their homes, you get a lot more dynamism there and you get a lot more that matches the needs and the offer. In such a community it is much easier. You can usually stay, for example you can move internally to a house that suits you better. Or, as a group, you give a somewhat different destination to a house, or you go into your allocation policy and ensure that there is rejuvenation. As a community you will ensure that you remain a lively community.”

Social rental housing is usually affordable for people with lower incomes. If you spend a large proportion of your income on rent, you may also be eligible for rent benefits (Government of the Netherlands n.d.). In order to be eligible for social housing, you are not allowed to earn too much, and you must register with a housing corporation in your area. The longer you are registered, the higher your place on the waiting list. Many people therefore register as a precaution to have a better chance if they are actually looking for social housing. Certain groups are given priority: people who have to move for medical reasons, residents of a social rental home they plan to demolish, ex-prisoners, asylum seekers and people from psychiatric care institutions also take precedence in many municipalities. The demand for private rental housing is increasing because waiting times for social housing have increased, income requirements have become stricter, and not everyone is able or willing to buy a home. Nevertheless, for most home seekers, there is nothing else to do than line up at the back and wait your turn. While the demand is rising, housing corporations are selling off more social houses than in previous years (Van Ginneken 2021; Lennartz et al. 2019). Most of these houses are bought by (international) investors. Low interest rates make commercial letting attractive at the moment and increases the supply. Since the economic crisis of 2008, investors have also invested in residential property with the feeling that this would be the safest investment (Lennartz et al. 2019).

A noticeable number of residents in Ecovillage Zuiderveld lived in communal living arrangements or low-income housing, such as social housing or anti-squat buildings, before moving to the ecovillage. There are three main groups of motivations for moving to Ecovillage Zuiderveld: increase in livability, following personal beliefs and visions, and social motivation. Sam once told me that the word ‘sustainability’ in ecovillages means much more than just ecological sustainability.



Picture 6 Logo of CVEG and Ecovillage Zuiderveld

Four dimensions of sustainability

There are four dimensions of sustainability: ecological, economic, cultural, and social sustainability. These dimensions are visualized on the clover logo, which is visible on the website of CVEG and at Ecovillage Zuiderveld. Amongst others, one of the most significant considerations to move to Ecovillage Zuiderveld was the accessible improvement in livability. Marcus, who works at the housing association WBVG explained how communal living arrangements can offer a higher standard of livability, arguing that affordability plays a significant role in achieving this. Marcus, who was very enthusiastic while explaining everything to me during a Zoom call, explained how people organize themselves in communal living arrangements.

Researcher

“What is the value of this form of housing?”

Marcus

“The affordability, also from the point of view of exploitation is favorable. There are extra facilities available, such as a communal living room and a laundry room and you name it... These are of course cost-increasing, but that is more than compensated by the fact that you can make the houses smaller. Because not every home has its own laundry room and guest room and so on. The fact that the residents themselves arrange all kinds of things themselves. That they arrange the allocation themselves, the fact that they collect the rent themselves makes it so much more manageable for all of us. We only need to check the box once a month. And then 46 tenants have paid their rent. That is of course fantastic. But also, from a purely internal point of view. Residents can make things affordable together that they cannot afford individually. For example, they can share a car, an electric car that they could never afford individually, or build a sauna. Collectively, yes. Fantastic.”

Researcher

“No, exactly, well, that sounds good. As if it can really improve the quality of life.”

Marcus

“Well absolutely it does, it absolutely certainly does.”

When I interviewed Rita, she told me she wanted to isolate her last house, when she lived in a social rental apartment. *“We were so annoyed with some things our flat. It was a drafty hole anyway. It was really, just really windy. I called the housing construction a number of times and told them that they should insulate the building. Just... Nothing happened.”* Another

ecovillage resident, named Linda, casually told me how she mostly lived in anti-squat buildings. Linda is a young woman who is a single mom of a teenage daughter. She is chronically ill, causing tiredness and pain in her limbs. By squatting she had to move around a lot, as contractors planned to demolish most buildings within a year or three of living there. She described how most anti-squat arrangements were sad and dreary places, which corresponds with many other stories of people living in social or low-income rental properties. When her last building was demolished, she told me if Ecovillage Zuiderveld did not come along, she and her daughter would not have had no place to live.

Hopper (2017) argues that if people no longer feel like they can rely upon the state for adequate welfare provision, their commitment will likely diminish. The housing organization refused to fix basic things, which made Rita feel like she has a lesser stake in the society and community she is a part of (Hopper 2017). Rather than just resorting to individualism, Rita had another adaptive reaction that Giddens (2013) calls, 'the risk profile of modernity'. The profiles Giddens (2013) describes range from pragmatic acceptance to cynical pessimism and the inclusion of radical engagement. Radical engagement is an approach in which social movements play a key role. Hopper (2017) argues that this more optimistic analysis is not entirely convincing, as social movements are rooted in a kind of 'new individuality'. He argues that the environmental movement is also rooted in an individual, personal quest for a better life, free from visual, commercial, and environmental pollution, and an attempt to define one's relationship and identity in relation to other species. However, as Hopper also argues, many members and supporters of the environmental movement are driven by altruistic motives. Lockyer (2017) argues how concerns about ecological damages and environmental justice have come to the forefront of intentional community building. Residents of ecovillages often attempt to live in ways that reduce social and environmental injustice patterns, resulting from uneven distribution of resources and resource use among rich and poor on both local and global levels (Lockyer 2017, 522-523). Interestingly, Ecovillage Zuiderveld enables a more sustainable way of living for people with a lower income. The sustainable solutions in the ecovillage design would not have been possible for most individual residents if they had to pay for them or execute these by themselves.

For some residents, the ecovillage is an experiment or bubble in which they can explore and show the government or other people how to live more sustainably. The ecovillage movement can be seen as a reflection of complex societies' very differentiation and individualization, as social movements often facilitate greater individual self-expression (Hopper 2017). Members of CVEG, and bigger associations like GEN-NL (Global Ecovillage

Network the Netherlands) and GEN Europe (Global Ecovillage Network Europe) aim to pave the way for a new type of politics, regarding sustainability, livability, and community. Giddens (2013, 9) notes that the political engagement of new social movements orientates towards the promotion of 'life politics', lifestyle choices and human self-actualization. So, the agency, which is the primary vehicle for social activism, is imbued with this new individualism, but the ecovillage movement tries to be an example where individualization, and self-actualizations play a role in bringing life-political issues to the fore and forcing them on public attention (Giddens 2013, 228; Hopper 2017). Some residents practice this form of self-realization by moving to the ecovillage to live up to their visions, ambitions, and beliefs. Most of these visions are associated with sustainability, spirituality, or social support. This group believes that the ecovillage can be an example of how more sustainable lifestyles can be achieved. They see the ecovillage as an alternative to the perseverance of the unsustainability of the untenability of today's need for growth due to capitalism. Miller & Bentley (2012) argue, research has not fully explored how residential locality might impact how easy it is to live more sustainable and make more sustainable choices. Working together as a community, Ecovillage Zuiderveld achieved sustainable solutions which were unobtainable for individual residents. However, apart from sustainable solutions that could be achieved as a community, I did not see people changing major facets of their life to achieve a more sustainable lifestyle.

Sam is one of the most activist and sustainably inclined residents I met in the ecovillage; he is an activist and a member of different protest organizations such as Extinction Rebellion¹. He wanted his living situation to match his beliefs and visions. Sam's experiences with sustainability among residents aligned with what Isenhour's (2010) in-depth ethnographic research revealed, mainly that citizens committed with leading ecologically sustainable lifestyles encounter significant barriers. Barriers that Sam also encountered in the ecovillage, social challenges when someone cooks something not vegan and economic challenges such as high prices for sustainable products. Sam is a person who radiates tranquility, in a conversation he always chooses his words very carefully and he is often lost in his own thoughts. He is overall a very kind person who has the best interest of people at heart. Most of his clothing is from vintage kilo sales or second-hand, often consist of earthy colors, which suit his tall appearance and bright red hair well while looking effortless. Most other residents did construction work in old clothing or had special clothing and boots. Whenever Sam and I did

¹ Extinction Rebellion organizes itself into small, autonomous groups around the world protesting measures for a better climate. They organize creative, peaceful, and sometimes disruptive actions to pressure the government and force them to take the necessary measures.

construction work together, I could never really assess whether he was dressed for it or if he wore vintage clothing and did not anticipate on doing construction work that day. Sam was well-liked by some of the women in the ecovillage, although he probably did not notice as he was often unaware of certain social cues.

Sam

“I think ecovillages are a bit like bubbles in which you can create an alternative kind of society. Some sort of experiment in which you can practice other ways of living together and... where you take care of each other more. But I also see them as inspiration places, like ‘hey we meet up and we are going to do things totally different. We believe it can be different than what the current benchmark in society is’ and that is what we want to convey.”

During my interview with Rita, who lives in one of the single-family homes, I asked her why she thinks the ecovillage is an alternative way of living. In her answer she mentioned that most people are inclined to keep buying stuff and try and earn more money. Rita refuses to participate in living materialistically. Her interior agrees with this statement, which very straightforward; instead of a television she has some artwork on the wall, and what stands out most are the different kinds of harps lined up in the living room because she is a professional harpist.



Picture 7 A spontaneous performance by multiple residents

In Rita's opinion, 'mainstream society' encourages us to take care of ourself and mainly ourselves. *"If someone is not doing well, it's up to you to improve your own live and somehow make it better. I think if you have those settings, you always want to make sure that you won't get adversity. But you also want to show that you're doing well or make sure you earn a lot of money. You get the feeling that you need a lot of stuff."* What Rita describes is a sense of individuality where a person has to take care of themselves and the feeling that one must show others how well they are doing. Rita's opinion coincides with Hopper's (2017) argument that the increased insecurity felt by many people in the contemporary period is encouraging greater individualism: "Unable to rely upon traditional forms of support, the citizen increasingly has to depend upon their own enterprise and actions." Rita mentions how it is easier for her to ask for help in the ecovillage and compares this to her previous living arrangements. When she and her family had to quarantine because of a possible COVID contamination, she believes her previous neighbors would have helped them out, but she finds asking for help in the ecovillage more accessible.

Rita

"We had to stay home yesterday. I don't even have to ask. If it really turned out that we could not go outside for the next five days, I didn't even have to ask if anyone wants to go shopping for me. Because people immediately offered and said, 'call me, if you need something!'"

At my previous house I know for sure that there had also been people who would have liked to help out. But they just wouldn't know what was going on with us, because we only saw them in the hallway and that's the only social contact we had."

Sam, who lives in one of the studios, also addresses the communal way of living and helping each other during an interview, comparing it to the way he was living before. Sam lived in student housing before he moved to the ecovillage. He was very involved with his three roommates, but only knew one neighbor from his neighborhood, because this man was the landlord of the house he rented.

Sam: *"And I actually didn't know the other neighbors there at all... Yes, so that's crazy, while you see them every day."*

Researcher: *"Why do you think it is that we have so little contact with the people who live near us?"*

Sam: *“Our whole culture is actually built on individualism. It is very much focused on how you have to achieve things yourself. In different field such as work, relationships, careers. Basically, you have to do everything for yourself. At a certain age you are expected to just fix everything yourself.”*

When I asked Sam what he would like people to know about Ecovillage Zuiderveld he stated that he thing it is important that residents in the community communicate with each other and adjust to different people’s needs. He coins the question: *“How can we take care of each other and full fill each other’s needs instead of everyone having to fend for themselves?”*

Rita and Sam’s notion of individuality coincides with Aarseth (2017) description on the distribution of resources being increasingly based on competition. The shift in market dynamics instigates a self-energizing ‘positional competition’, where the aim is not to maximize one’s potential but to gain advantages over others (Aarseth 2017; Brown 2000). There is extensive literature associating the expansion of the modern capitalist economy with rationalization, a depersonalizing attitude towards life, and affecting the world of personal relationships (De L’Estoile 2014; Aarseth 2017; Hopper 2017; Weber 2019).

The third motivation, social reasons, overlaps with both beliefs and livability. On the one hand, people who are trying to live more sustainably are searching for a social support system; they want to connect with people who share the same visions and beliefs and try to build something together. The people who try to increase livability do not only care about their house, but also connect livability to social connections between them and other people in the community. Three groups of people in the community immediately benefit from stronger social relations and solidarity: single parents, the elderly, and residents with special needs. Stronger social relations and solidarity gives single parents more freedom and decreases feelings of loneliness in single parents, elderly, and residents with special needs such as informal care. One of the implications of a more individualized society is an increase in feelings of loneliness. Almost half (47%) of the adult population in the Netherlands indicates that they feel lonely (Volksgezondheidszorg.info 2021). The people who experience the most and most severe forms of loneliness are the elderly, low-skilled, and divorced or widowed people (Volksgezondheidszorg.info 2021). The residents who mentioned social relations as one of the main reasons to move to Ecovillage Zuiderveld were often single parents, residents over 60 years old, and lower-skilled residents who are assigned daytime activities by the government.

There is a difference in the kind of loneliness experienced by these groups; the lower-skilled residents endured emotional loneliness as a resulted of emotional isolation, the perceived

absence of close emotional attachment (Swader 2019). This group's main social contact moments are with professionals who only have a certain amount of time each day or week to check in on this person and help them with their daily tasks or during their assigned daytime activities. Because of the communal areas in Ecovillage Zuiderveld this group experienced more social contact. Some even felt like they did not need the assigned daytime activities anymore. Elderly residents and single parents mainly experienced social loneliness, due to 'relational isolation', the absence of socially integrative relationships or an engaging social network (Swader 2019, 4). Some of the elderly residents mentioned how they like to engage in conversation with younger people. One particular resident felt like his last neighbors, who were the same age as him, were boring. He wants to connect with people of different ages, he also joined a climate protest organized by Sam. During my fieldwork, I attended small parties or get-togethers organized by residents and held in the ecovillage. More often than not, I saw at least two or three parents with a baby monitor attached to some part of their clothing while drinking and dancing. They were now able to go to a small social event without having to hire a babysitter. The fact that they could meet up with people without having to set a date in advance and leave at any moment gave these parents a lot more freedom. One of the single mothers mentioned how her life has positively changed after only two months of living at the ecovillage:

Karlijn

"And now I just open the back door and [daughter] just walks out on her own. She knows everyone here, people know her, so she's also being watched by everyone. Suddenly I can just vacuum or read a book. And my daughter, she certainly enjoys being outside, so my life has changed very positively since living here."

Motivations of each group for moving to the ecovillage overlap, but differences in motivation and vision create interesting tensions and contradictions in the creation and realization of the community. The CLIPS courses discussed in the first chapter provide insight into how the community focuses on searching for similarities in the shared beliefs and visions of residents.

Liminality, heterotopia and 'mainstream society'

Ecovillages have shifted from being relatively isolated countercultural experiments, a more alternative vision and lifestyle from the mainstream culture, to a more formal and informal alliance with progressive elements in today's society (Dawson 2013, 217). According to Dawson (2013, 217), the ecovillage vision, which is often heterogeneous and disparate, is no

longer alien or threatening to the broader society, and the relationships most ecovillages enjoy with their surrounding communities have improved. This section outlines Ecovillage Zuiderveld's relations with the Dutch government, the surrounding neighborhood, and other parties. Positioning the ecovillage in the context of a heterotopia, I explore the liminal space of the ecovillage. I conclude this chapter with the role of ecovillages in today's society with a focus on the contribution of Ecovillage Zuiderveld.

Ecovillage Zuiderveld can be understood in the context of a heterotopia. This context introduces the idea of a place that is more conceivable, livable, and sustainable than the current social and spatial configurations. Ecovillages as heterotopia are also criticized by connecting them to escapism and utopianism (Dias et al. 2012). A heterotopia, however, is not necessarily the absolute opposite of society (Foucault 1986; Hong & Vicdan 2016, 121). Hong & Vicdan (2016, 122) describe heterotopia in the context of ecovillages as: "Unlike utopia, heterotopia actually operates to embrace unintended consequences from the ongoing process that often involve considerable communal interactions and relational efforts." These unintended consequences from ongoing processes, communal interactions, and relational efforts happen internally at Ecovillage Zuiderveld but also affect communication and relations with external parties. An ecovillage is neither an ideal to be realized in a certain way nor a completed process, people change, needs change, residents move out or in, relationships start or end, and children grow up (Hong & Vicdan 2016).

Significant shifts have been visible within the ecovillage movement worldwide over the last decade. These shifts transformed the identity, role, and potential impact of ecovillages moving forward (Dawson 2013, 217; Metcalf 2012). Dawson (2013) describes multiple communities, which often limited social contact with the broader society. These were often privately owned communities where people bought the houses and land. These communities did not ask nor had a realistic chance of receiving financial support from the state (Dawson 2013, 222). Dawson (2013, 223) argues that there is a significant transformation taking place where ecovillages, central and local government, and other organizations who share similar values and visions, are forming alliances. These developments are at the heart of Ecovillage Zuiderveld as the government funds them to create social housing. Residents also work together with different contractors such as Trebbe, Talis and the WBVG, who want to help them actualize their vision and proudly present this project on their websites.

One day Leslie was cleaning up the communal building, which I noticed because I saw her do many things, but I never saw her clean. I asked her what is up with the cake on the table, because a lot of times residents baked cakes or pies to leave them in the communal building for

everyone to eat. Leslie said: “Don’t touch it, this is for Stichting Volksbelang!”. Leslie tells me that Stichting Volksbelang (the Public Interest Foundation) is visiting. The foundation initially started as a housing association, after selling everything, they invest money in social projects such as a clubhouse or the communal space for this ecovillage. Leslie, together with Thalís arranged a subsidy from them to build the communal building. In total, the ecovillage has raised around 100,000 euros in subsidy, according to Leslie this is a normal amount of subsidy for the scope of this project. The communal building will also be rented out to external parties, who can use this space to give workshops and hold meetings. During my fieldwork, people who did not live in the ecovillage but wanted to visit could stay overnight. The people who stayed there ranged from students visiting for school and staying for a week, friends from residents who did not have space to let someone stay overnight, and people who wanted to explore if communal living is something that appeals to them.

The geography of the ecovillage directly influences the propagation of the ideals of the community. High visibility and the opportunity to stay overnight in the ecovillage links to a larger social setting (Dias et al. 2017). Ecovillage Zuiderveld also actively tries to establish a relationship with the neighborhood. One of the Circles’ responsibilities is ‘communications with the neighborhood’, intending to involve the surrounding neighborhood with the ecovillage’s projects and events. The idea is that when COVID regulations will allow it, people from the neighborhood can come in for a cup of coffee and help in the garden.

As Kamau argues, society is composed of distinctions on a multiplicity of levels: distinctions between possessions, work and leisure, friends, neighbors, and so on (Kamau 2001, 18). These distinctions are often used to categorize people and regulate relationships with each other. Liminal constructions, however, exist outside the structures and normal institutions of everyday life. Liminality can be seen as anarchic, sometimes even dangerous (Kamau 2001; Constandse 1979). Before the decision was made to evict Marnix, I wondered if living in the ecovillage would be safe for everyone if external parties, the police, would not get involved. Individuals lose their old statuses and identities, in contrast to regular society (Kamau 2001). CVEG and Ecovillage Zuiderveld provide members with a negotiated script through allocation policy, meetings, and by-laws (Hong & Vicdan 2016). But, these by-laws are not finished yet and the allocation policy had some flaws because there were not enough members who wanted to live in the studios. Moving to an ecovillage with 99 other people you primarily know from Zoom-meetings while finishing construction and simultaneously trying to build a new life felt very chaotic for a lot of residents. I heard many residents complain that construction and moving was too much for the community to handle. The transition was in full swing when I started

living in the ecovillage and even when I left, people went from being members of CVEG to being residents of Ecovillage Zuiderveld, new roles were created, and existing ones were constantly adjusted. Constant transformative interplays among local residents, at the individual level, the communal and local level and macro dynamics, complicate constructing a fixed lifestyle but provide alternative means to organize different life modes (Hong & Vicdan 2016). These are characterizations of the manifestation of ecovillages into liminal spaces, which relates to Foucault's (1986) conceptualization of heterotopias (Hong & Vicdan 2016; Turner 1967).

Chapter conclusion

This chapter explored how the rise of intentional communities correspondent with the development of modern society (Kamau 2001). The housing crisis, caused by the primary process of late modernity, has a detrimental impact upon livability and social sustainability for people with lower incomes. Residents try to regain autonomy and agency, and increase quality of life, by employing a form of radical engagement (Giddens 2013). The four dimensions of sustainability is what attracts residents to living a more alternative lifestyle. The ecovillage as a heterotopia, being distinct from 'mainstream society', acts like an experiment or bubble in which people can explore new ways of living more sustainably. As a social movement, ecovillages have redefined their relations with external parties. This transformation in collaborations is at the heart of Ecovillage Zuiderveld, as it is funded with subsidies different parties and provides social housing. The liminality experienced by residents is one of the characteristics of a heterotopia. An ecovillage it actually operates to embrace unintended consequences from the ongoing process that often involve considerable communal interactions and relational efforts (Hong & Vicdan 2016). Agency in their own allocation policy makes sure the residents are in charge of keeping the community healthy and choosing new residents as they see fit.

Conclusion

Ecovillages offer the opportunity to plan, present and put into practice alternatives for an increase in four different dimensions of sustainability; economic sustainability, ecological sustainability, cultural sustainability, and social sustainability. The ecovillage is a place to embody and articulate norms, patterns and principles that explore sustainability and holistic living. However, the term “ecovillage” is self-assigned, the question still remains how ecologically sustainable the community actually is (Dias et al. 2017). The most sustainable aspect was the fact that most residents realized more sustainable solutions in their houses by working together as a community, they realized things that would be inaccessible for the individual (Dias et al. 2017).

Close connections with mainstream culture provide more opportunities to propagate values about sustainability. The ecovillage movement is a place of experimentation and has the potential to help reshape human societies in this and the coming centuries (Dawson 2013). Indeed, the practices developed and put into practice by residents of Ecovillage Zuiderveld are helping to lay the groundwork for an alternative vision to the unsustainability of the untenability of today’s growth due to capitalism (LeVasseur 2013). Ecovillage Zuiderveld contribution seems to be focused more on economic and social sustainability. By creating and living in the ecovillage, residents are able transform their beliefs and needs into a lived reality; they are able to bridge the gap to practice holistic values related to community, livability, and sustainability.

Ecovillages are a response to the implications of capitalist processes such as the global sustainability crises of recent decades, individualization, and the housing crisis. These crises derive largely from the dynamics of capitalist (and in some cases communist) development (Burke and Arjona 2013). Instead of retreating to an even more individual lifestyle, these processes triggered ‘radical engagement’ in residents of Ecovillage Zuiderveld, entailing mobilization, and taking contesting action to confront common problems and dangers (Giddens 2013; Hopper 2017). Alternative communities like Ecovillage Zuiderveld are a way to try and regain agency and autonomy, increase quality of life, livability and try to create an alternative for the unsustainability of the untenability of today’s growth due to capitalism.

Their journey is not without its trials and tribulations. Residents try and incorporate structure and equality in the community by governing according to sociocratic values. These values are also displayed in terminology for certain structures such as the Circles and the double links. Residency at Ecovillage Zuiderveld includes a range of statuses. Consequently, these

statuses carry different kinds of responsibilities. Residents have to be present at a number of meetings, help during construction, and are expected to join at least one Circle. Certain conflicts create a moral break-down and test these hierarchy and decision processes (Zigon 2007). Constant transformative interplay among residents, at the individual level, the communal and local level and macro dynamics, complicate constructing a fixed lifestyle but provide alternative means to organize different life modes (Hong & Vicdan 2016). This relates to the liminal construction of the ecovillage, an ecovillage as a heterotopia exists outside the structures and normal institutions of everyday life (Kamau 2001).

The integrative design of communal spaces reflects what the community deems important (Fox 2013). Incorporating permaculture in the garden and plastering walls with loam displays the ecological values of the community. The communal building, guest rooms and openness of the garden show the desire to propagate an alternative form of living. The allocation policy provides residents with the opportunity to maintain a healthy community and counter the effects of aging in a social housing neighborhood.

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