

# **The Danish ecovillage network 1993-2004**

By Hildur Jackson

## **The Beginning**

The Danish ecovillage network was initiated in April of 1993 at the country manor of Meilgaard exactly 10 years ago. Ross and I had then just moved to the other end of Denmark to create an eco/spiritual community: Fjordvang, with a group of people, among them Robert and Diane Gilman from the Context Institute, Seattle. We invited ecological, social and spiritual projects to join a network hoping that they could accept and share the vision of making a common organization of ecovillages. A famous Danish actress Jytte Abildstrom was the "midwife" and helped give birth to this new child. When formulating the charter of the organization, the wording created difficulties and almost made people give up. The ecologically inspired found "love" too overwhelming in a formal statement. I then proposed the purpose to be: "Re-establishing of whole circulatory systems on all levels in nature and people". The ecologically minded thought about the circulatory systems of soil, water air while the spiritually minded thought about the chakra system and everybody was happy. This definition is very close to the concept of "integral personal practice" proposed by Ken Wilber in his new book: *A Theory of Everything*. Since then we never had any major problems of co-operating.

## **Learning from Each Other**

The different ecovillages have during the 10 years been visiting each other and learning from each other, as the board meets every second month in different ecovillages. All board meetings are open to all members and this opportunity is frequently being used. The board is large in order to allow many ecovillages to be represented. For 10 years we have now published a Danish ecovillage magazine: "LOSNET" 4 times a year. Some of the issues have covered special themes such as businesses in ecovillages, social ecology, ecological building, free-zones, education. In the beginning the editing of the magazine circulated as well as the secretariat, but in the later years we have had a secretariat with two secretaries (Troels Dilling Hansen and Allan Elm) with an office in the ecovillage Hertha doing the job. Luckily we have had public funding as well as the Gaia Trust funding. 6 different persons have been president of LOS, half of them men. Gender seems irrelevant in the ecovillage context. Women are natural ecovillagers. Only in one case have we had a special experience around gender. That was at the big ecovillage conference at Findhorn in 1995. They found the energy of the meeting very special as for the first time ever there were as many men as women. ( Of the "Cultural Creatives" 65% are women according to Paul Ray.) Every year we have a major celebration or summer camp in an ecovillage. Often this has been an occasion for new people to meet the movement. New ecovillage initiatives have always chosen to make a tour to visit the established ecovillages in order to learn from them and thus build on their experiences. LOS is balancing between initiatives, which make the organization interesting and attractive to ecovillages and on the other hand influencing the public debate creating a positive vision of localization, bioregionalism and Agenda 21 thinking as an alternative strategy to globalisation. Meetings, seminars, celebrations, booklets, books, exhibitions, a

CD-rom and several videos have been the means. A new big book with all ecovillages in it is on its way.

The board and its chair/president always work for free while secretaries have had wages as staff. Often the chair/president has had a big work load and it may seem unjust that she is not paid. The board/chair gives directions, take initiatives, discuss the table of content and format of magazine and books and carry the formal responsibility to funders and ecovillages. The secretaries carry out the tasks. A clear division of work has proved important on the local Danish level as well as the European and global level. It is important for the people involved often sitting in different parts of the county /Europe or even continents to know their different roles and it is equally important with this clarity to attract funding.

### **Developing an Ecovillage Culture.**

What stands out after 10 years? To me it is the idea of developing a new culture, an ecovillage culture made up of free people. The sustainability circle describes this new culture. (See *Ecovillage Living*) We always sit in circles. We meditate or observe silence together quite often. We learn to listen. "Heartkeepers" observe that we do not lose focus. The whole person and body is accepted and not only talking heads. During meetings this means frequent disruptions in order to move, sing, massage or do practical work. All work is considered to be equally important. Titles are non-existent. We make our own rules according to real needs. Only first names are used. Love is still a big word to use, but I feel a great solidarity among people in the movement. A strong network has developed. Friends from Africa stated at a visit the ecovillage of Dyssekilde when watching a new adobe-building coming up, that they would rather be with us than with aid-workers. For the first time, they felt accepted and equal in the North. Often we learn from their experiences. They know much more about community. Vinya from Sri Lanka (Sarvodaya) is often asked for his opinion as he has been co-ordinating 13,000 villages for years.

I would like to develop the concept of "free people". I believe that only in community may true individualism be developed. Here people dare to be who they really are. Of course we have problems. It takes time to change a culture. We bring all our hang-ups from current culture along with us. But people can change rapidly. Below are some highlights from the 10 years.

### **Habitat II in Istanbul.**

The formal inauguration of GEN, the Global Ecovillage Network took place in Istanbul in 1996. We were 5 people preparing and participating from Denmark and 15 from other countries. Kai Hansen, Hamish Stewart and Heidi drove a van all the way down with materials, built a strawbale wall for our exhibition, put up Steiner waterstairs, a windmill, solar panels, a global map with all ecovillages, TV for several videos and Internet access to our 4000 [www.gaia.org](http://www.gaia.org) pages of ecovillages. I planned 40 workshops on all relevant topics in co-operation with GEN and Rashmi Mayur from the International Institute for Sustainable Future (IISF) Mumbai and edited a booklet, which was printed in 5000 copies. It was a major breakthrough for the movement and we had lots of fun staying in Agathe Christies old "antique" Pera Palace hotel within walking distance of the NGO forum. Many people made our stand their home and joined the daily circle dances led by

Declan Kennedy from Lebensgarten (The first Chair of GEN). Behind the architect school we arranged to have local craftsmen build an old stonehouse during 10 days based on old traditions as an example of sustainable building. Several Danish ministers joined the dancing down there. Through our exhibition many Turkish projects met for the first time and formed a Turkish network.

The inauguration became a huge party at the exhibition itself. The Danish Minister of Housing participated as did the Danish organiser of the whole NGO-Forum. Street children from Malaysia performed, we sang and danced before signing the new GEN charter. The last evening all the GEN people joined a belly dancer with Declan taking the lead. Gaia Trust paid the bills well realizing that the money went a long way.

### **National Competition for the Best Sustainable Settlement for the 21 Century.**

In 1997 LOS initiated a Danish national competition for the best sustainable settlement for the 21-Century in co-operation with Gaia Trust. We managed to get 5 ministries to support the project and each give some money for prizes. The Ministry of Environment paid for the organisation of it. A booklet with the conditions for participation was printed. Instead of merely coming up with requests for houses, this competition was about whole settlements including renewable energy, local wastewater treatment, creation of a well-functioning social environment, health, food-production etc. 53 groups had the courage and capacity to participate. Many of the proposals were really good in very different ways. The judges appointed by the ministries and LOS had a hard time but decided to distribute the 500.000 among 9 projects with a first and second prize. Munksogaard, even if only on the drawing board then, won the first prize as a possible mainstream model, Hertha the second (for its reversed social integration project with beautiful Steiner wooden houses and an organic farm producing food for the inhabitants and the local village. It is in Jutland and LOS has had its office there for 5 years now) The prizes were handed over in the Ministry of Environment on the darkest day of the year at a celebration with the minister in Japan signing the Kyoto treaty on the very same day. Susan Marcia Pedersen (now Klaus) in 1998 edited a beautiful, inspiring book with the best ideas from the competition entitled: "Welcome to the Future, Sustainable Settlements in Denmark".

### **Financing reform.**

One big obstacle to building ecovillages is financing of houses and infrastructure. Often this is because of unusual clauses relating to joint ownership of land, rights of purchase when someone leaves etc. In some cases, windmills, biological wastewater treatment and other ecological features complicate matters. These special factors are inconvenient for banks and credit unions because they require special risk evaluation. LOS lobbied the government successfully for a 30% state guarantee on credit union loans to ecovillages. In spite of this reduced risk, the credit unions continue to automatically reject applicants.

### **"This is How We want to Live"**

Kai Hansen and Hamish Steward initiated a research project to find out how people want to live if they have a free choice. It had its office in the LOS office. The result of the project, which was based on interviews was: it is the social part of ecovillages that really

change peoples' lives. That is what they want. People want community and it improves their lives.

### **100 million Kroner Proposal to the Parliament.**

Creating an ecovillage is a work of Sisyphus and by definition almost impossible. Still it happens as miracles also do. It is evident that people want it to happen. Our analysis is that the best way to support speeding up of the process is to give land to new projects and provide necessary permissions. Building and creating the infrastructure is so expensive that there is no money for enough land. You may provide the land to new projects without risk of attracting the wrong people and of creating envy and inequality. LOS therefore developed a proposal to the Danish parliament to give 100 million DKK for 20 new projects i.e. 5 mil for each. This is enough to get sufficient land for a project in Denmark. In return each ecovillage has to adopt an area (e.g. waste-water treatment, conflict resolution) in which they will become specialists, in this way creating 20 research institutions for free. It was sent to all members of parliament and we still hope to see results one day.

### **Participation in Creating a National Declaration for Sustainability.**

40 Danish NGO's made a process of creating a Danish National Declaration of Sustainability, a really wonderful initiative. Most of the thinking, which went into this, was about ecology. This declaration made it evident to which extent there is a need for a broader definition of sustainability also comprising social and cultural dimensions. Ecovillages have a lot to offer in this context. Sustainability always happens in a social, cultural context. This should always be remembered or else the solutions will be suffering and not offer a real alternative.

### **Participation in GEN, the Global Ecovillage Network.**

From the outset there has been a close connection between LOS and GEN. We always have international co-operation on the LOS agenda. For years Danish representatives have been on the board of GEN Europe and lately Insa Freese from the Growth Highschool has been elected president of GEN Europe. We have participated with 5 women at the Damanhur women's ecovillage meetings and had a strong representation also at the International Communities meeting at Zegg in 2001. Ross Jackson is still on the board of GEN international.

### **Earth Day in Munksogaard April 2002, in Hjortshoj in 2003 and in Dyssekilde 2004**

Earth Day has been celebrated in many countries for 30 years. LOS decided to make it an ecovillage feast celebrating the Earth, ecovillages and springtime. Munksogaard in 2003 again volunteered in organising the event. All 4 clusters took part. First half of the day was workday. We painted, planted 4 walnut trees and collected stones. Then celebration in all 4 commonhouses: music, flea-markets, coffeshop and lunch and seminars. Three Earth Day prizes were given to people who had done something special for ecovillages and the earth. Jytte Abilsstrøm, Muksogaard, Preben Maegaard from the Folkecenter in Thy and Bo Laessoe from Svanholm.

In 2003 Earth Day was celebrated in Hjortshøj, near Aarhus. We built a herb spiral under the guidance of Tony Andersen. The Gaia Prize was given to ecological builder Flemming Abrahamsson for his pioneering effort to introduce Finnish mass ovens, compost toilets, and cob building. We hope to continue and develop this day.

### **Freeland.**

A new inspiring project (not yet member of LOS) started in 2002 is worth mentioning. Steen Møller managed to get a national TV station interested in following the building of a new village on Djursland called "Freeland". The TV station built the first house (with 7 different kinds of natural insulation visible in small windows) and will follow the process for 3 years. It has become immensely popular and is an idea that may be duplicated in other countries. The project is built on 4 pillars:

1. No debt. People have to earn enough to buy building materials themselves. They start small. With the core of the house.
2. No waste. This is a different way of stating that it needs to be ecological building. This way everybody can accept and understand.
3. No subsidies. They want to create a self-reliant group and village
4. Self activity, meaning that you have to create your own job locally, to create life where you live.

The principles are well worth giving a thought as a way to get mainstream to accept the ideas.

### **Bottom Meeting at Christiania.**

In December 2002 in Christiania Britta Lillesø and Nils Vest arranged a Bottom Meeting for those on the bottom of the global hierarchy parallel to the EU Summit for the enlargement with Eastern European countries and to the NGO Forum 500 meters away. (Nobody was against the wish of the Eastern European countries to become members.) Father X-mas (Nils) came out of a door at the backstage of the tent (-5 degrees outside the tent) every morning giving gifts of spirit to the world. The 4 days had different themes:

Day one: **Rituals for peace.** People from all over the world performed peace rituals singing, reciting, praying and dancing.

Day 2: **The Heart in the Coin.** Economy to serve people. Troels and Allan from LOS together with Ditlev put together a program of a new economic order to create global justice. Jonathan (from Findhorn) and Ross talked about localization (Next Spring Conference at Findhorn: *No Place Like Home.*)

Day 3: **Small among the Big.** How to heal the wounds of Europe. Chances, challenges and taking risks.

Day 4: **Forgiving and Reconciliation.** Ecovillages were here presented as one among many ways of reconciling us with nature, oppression and other cultures.

Nils filmed all of it as it flowed continuously over the scene. A truly visionary program, partly paid by government money (100.000 DKK) in order to give grassroots a voice. In the meantime 6000 policemen made sure that streets remained quiet- a government spending of 600 million DKK.

### **Conclusion.**

Ecovillages are not yet on the official Danish agenda. The agenda is still focussed on right and left. The new conservative government eliminated subsidies to all green purposes including ecovillages. But the idea is spreading in the population. 500 were already on the waiting list of Munksogaard, when people moved in 3 years ago. All the antiglobalisation groups from Seattle to Gothenburg, and latest Firenze and Copenhagen to Mumbai need to develop a positive vision. I think the ecovillage movement has many of the answers.

Illustrations:

The Earth is our Habitat. 1995

Frontpage of competition.1998

Frontpage of Welcome to the Future1999

Frontpage of 100 mil kr proposal 2002

Økosamfund i Danmark(Ecovillages in Denmark) 2003

Earthday reward- Flemming Abrahamsson

Munksoegaard. Akimura visits- or planting of walnut (on a bike)

Picture from Hertha

Uddeling af priser i Miljøministeriet