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## Making a place of their own

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## 5 ECOLOGICAL AND COMMUNAL GROUPS: ORGANIC EXAMPLES

### 5.1 Introduction

As ecological communities and communal groups share similar ideals and lifestyles, they are discussed in the same chapter. They were identified as different types in the first place, mainly because of differences in ideology and location. Ecological communities largely define themselves in terms of environmental ideals such as minimising their impact on the natural environment, and are predominantly located in remote areas, while communal communities focus on functioning as a group, and interaction among the members, and are often located in villages. However, some communal groups also value environmental ideals, and most ecological groups are explicitly concerned with how to live communally. Furthermore, both types are rooted in the hippy communes of the 1960s and 70s, which is important in the context of the focus on the life course of intentional communities in this study. These similarities allow the two types of communities to be treated in the same vein. The central research question in this chapter is: *Which underlying mechanisms can help explain the life courses of rural ecological communities and communal groups in Northwest Europe?* In answering this question, the emphasis is on how these communities realise their continuity, and how this is threatened. In order to conceptualise the discussion, the most characteristic features of ecological and communal groups are reiterated. As was stated previously, most ecological and communal communities withdraw to remote locations or villages, and combine sustainable lifestyles with communal living. The members often live in nuclear families. Social networks focus on interpersonal relations with other community members but do not neglect social contacts with family and friends outside the communities. Furthermore, several communities remain involved in the wider society through organising courses for interested outsiders, for example on organic farming, or through participating in environmental social movements such as Friends of the Earth.

Three ecological communities were studied: Toustrup Mark on Jutland in Denmark, Chickenshack Housing Co-operative near Tywyn, in Wales, and Tweed Valley Eco-Village, a project in the Scottish Border region which has not secured land yet. Communal groups that are the subject of this chapter are Eden in Oranienburg, Germany, and the Hobbitstee in Wapserveen, the Netherlands (for their locations, see Figure 3.1). Toustrup Mark was chosen as representative of an old ecological community, as it was founded in 1971. In October 2005, interviews were held with 18 of its 80 members, and one resident from the neighbouring village. Chickenshack was visited in August 2005, and is an average ecological community, founded in 1995. Five of the six current members were interviewed. Tweed Valley, an average eco-village in the making since 1996, with about eight members, was studied through telephone interviews in January and February 2005 with three members and two former members of the group. Eden is an old communal group, founded in 1893. With 1,500 members, the community is also by far the largest in terms of membership. Thirty of its members and eight Oranienburg residents were interviewed in May 2005. The Hobbitstee is an average communal group, which was founded in 1969. In

February and March 2005, six of the seven current members and three former members of the community were interviewed, as well as one resident of Wapserveen.

As scarce data are available on some of the cases, and the themes that emerged from the data analysis were relatively similar, the results are presented thematically rather than per case. In section 5.2, the five communities are introduced. Subsequent sections are on shared ideological beliefs (5.3), community structure (5.4), and the communities' relations with society (5.5). In the conclusions and discussion (5.6), the results are related to the general characteristics of communal and ecological communities, and implications for their life courses are discussed.

## 5.2 Toustrup Mark, Chickenshack, Tweed Valley, Eden, and the Hobbitstee

Toustrup Mark was founded in 1971 as a rural hippy commune. Its members were active in the hippy movement, from which Christiania also originated. Christiania is a community in central Copenhagen on former military territory, which was squatted by a group of hippies in 1971 (Christiania 2006). Current members described Toustrup as the rural and legal counterpart of Christiania. The main aims were to live and work together, to share resources and to be self-sufficient, but also to be involved in politics, the environmental movement, and cultural activities such as concerts. Over time, these ideals diminished. Still, the houses are commonly owned. Furthermore, communal dinners are organised on weekdays, and attended by all members. Each member has to cook or do the dishes once a week. In the preparation of the meals, predominantly organic ingredients are used. However, the community functions mainly as an attractive place for young families who want their children to grow up in a protected, rural environment (see Figure 5.1).

*Figure 5.1: Toustrup Mark as a place for children\**

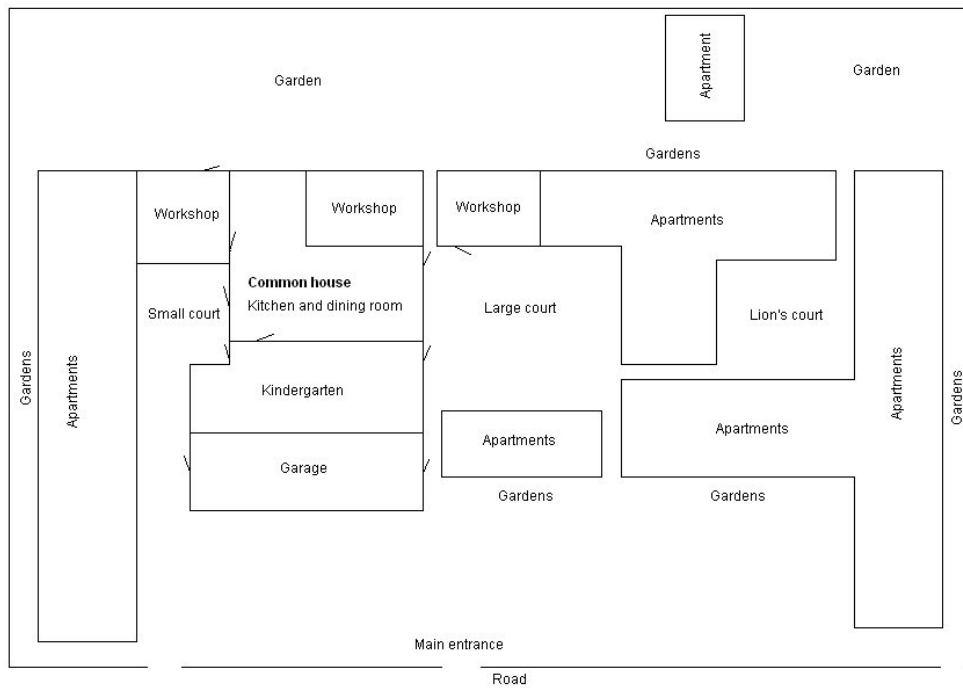


\* Large court

## Ecological and communal groups: organic examples

In October 2005, the community had 80 adult members, with most of them between 30 and 65 years. The spatial structure of Toustrup is presented in Figure 5.2. The layouts of the built case communities are presented in this section, to give an indication of how their space is arranged. How the spatial structures facilitate everyday life is discussed in section 5.4.

Figure 5.2: Layout of Toustrup Mark



Chickenshack was established in 1995 and is located in a remote area in North Wales (see Figure 5.3). In August 2005, the community had six adult members. The layout of Chickenshack can be found in Figure 5.4. The community is a housing co-operative, which functions as a company with several shareholders. An important goal is to provide affordable housing through the co-operative structure. In addition, the members want to live in harmony with nature, and to exert as minimal damage to the environment as possible. This is realised amongst others through organic gardening, and use of solar panels. The community wants to develop into an example of eco-friendly building and living, and to run a centre for visitors.

The ideas of Chickenshack resemble those of Tweed Valley Eco-Village, for which an initiative arose in 1996. A core group of around eight people are trying to buy land to build the eco-village near Innerleithen in the Scottish Border region. Their intention is to create a community with a low impact on the environment, through building their own houses, sharing vehicles and providing energy on the site. In addition, they want to secure affordable housing and work from home in a community where people have real interest in each other. Ideally, the community should be a prototype of a sustainable housing project, with an information centre for visitors.

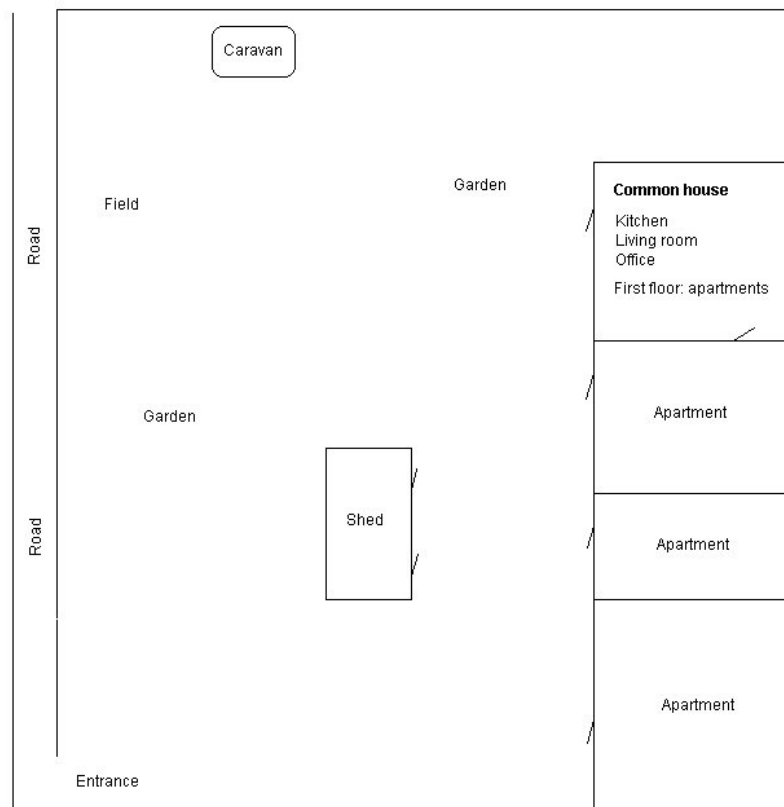
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Figure 5.3: The rural setting of Chickenshack\*



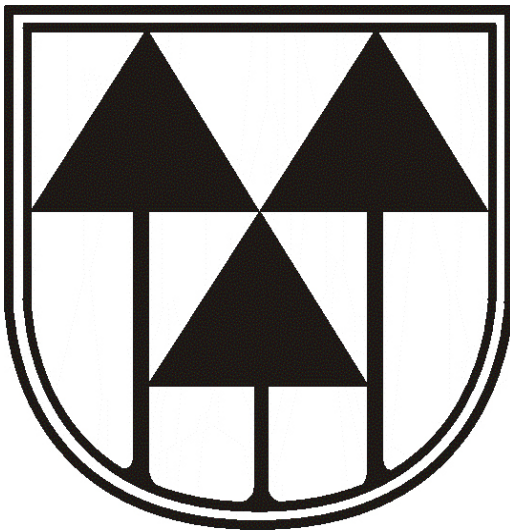
\* Located in the nearest valley

Figure 5.4: Layout of Chickenshack



Eden is a communal group on the fringe of Oranienburg, around thirty kilometres from the centre of Berlin. The community was founded in 1893 by a group of intellectuals from Berlin, who bought the land of Eden together. The founders wanted to escape the crowded and polluted city, and to enjoy a simpler, natural life in the countryside. They built the so-called 'Heimstätten' (homesteads) on plots of land which were large enough for a family to grow the fruit and vegetables it needed (Baumgartner 1992). The original ideals are formulated as Life Reform, Soil Reform and Economic Reform which are depicted by the trees in the logo of the community (Segert & Zierke 2001) (see Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5: Eden's logo



Life Reform consists of commitment to life in connection with and awareness of nature, for example practised through healthy nutrition and homeopathy (Baumgartner 1993). It developed as a result of concerns about deteriorating public health due to ongoing industrialisation. Soil Reform originated from the opposition against land speculation and land ownership, which were perceived to enrich the rich and exploit the poor. Through opposing these two practices, Eden succeeded in keeping the communal soil affordable (see also section 5.4). Economic Reform came about because of the wish to function as a non-profit organisation, to be self-sufficient and to run non-exploiting businesses (Kaienburg 2004), and the community has a non-profit status (*Gemeinnutzigkeit*). It was realised through a fruit-processing factory, for example, which was in production until shortly after German reunification when it was declared bankrupt (see Figure 5.6).

Currently, the co-operative (*Genossenschaft*) houses around 1,500 inhabitants, on 461 plots of land and covering an area of 120 hectares (see the ground plan in Figure 5.7). The homesteads are inhabited by families of various age categories. Eden functions as a village, with amongst others a small supermarket, a GP, dentist, loam building company, gardening advisor, kindergarten, private school, library, music school, theatre club, and diving club (Eden 2006), most of which were established relatively soon after the foundation of the community.

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*Figure 5.6: The factory buildings in the centre of Eden*



*Figure 5.7: Eden's grounds*

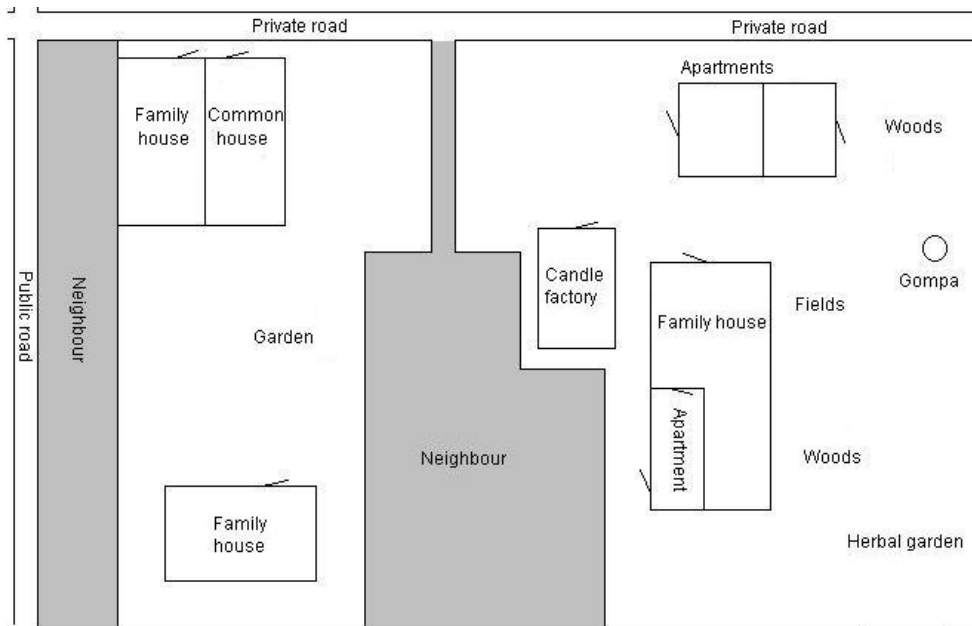


Figure 5.8: The farmhouse at the Hobbitstee\*



\* Next to the candle factory

Figure 5.9: Layout of the Hobbitstee



The founding members of the Hobbitstee regard its origin to be in the late 1960s, when they moved into a ramshackle farmhouse near Wapserveen (see Figure 5.8). The Hobbitstee also developed as a rejection of facets of city life, as the founders wanted to move away from Amsterdam and other cities. They were part of the Dutch 'provo' movement which



consisted of young people who intended to provoke the city authorities through challenging the existing balance of power which they perceived as unfair (Mamadouh 1992). In March 2005, the community consisted of seven adult members and three children. The members' ages varied between 26 and 56, and consisted of both singles and families. In Figure 5.9, the spatial layout of the community is presented. Some income is derived from the candle factory, guesthouse, camping, and organisation of various courses such as Nordic walking, and vegetarian cooking.

### 5.3 Organic places

The ideology of ecological and communal groups forms the basis of the commitment of the members to the community. In this section, this internal commitment is examined, through a discussion of why people have chosen to live in the communities, how the binding ideals are formulated, and how a sense of community is maintained. These factors influence the stability of the communities' life courses as was demonstrated in chapter 4.

#### *Rurality*

All communities are located in rural areas, and most respondents moved there after living in an urban environment. When asked why they had joined their community, there is a remarkable unity of response among members of all five communities. Many respondents indicated rurality as a relevant factor in their decision-making process:

Urban groups didn't appeal to me. I already feel oppressed when I see those buildings. [...] I detest [cities]. This is the countryside, and they had an organic garden, which was my ideal too, I wanted to learn more about that. (The Hobbitstee, male member, 40s: 6)

This respondent explicitly juxtaposed the negative urban against the positive rural, which supports the assumption that idealisation of the rural through the rural idyll has remained attractive, in particular for urban-rural migrants (see, for example, Bunce 2003; Swaffield & Fairweather 1998; van Dam *et al.* 2002). Many members identified the attractiveness of their community as a rural place which provided a safe environment for young children to grow up in:

I like it that the kids are able to run around [freely]. If you live in town, every time your kids want to go somewhere, they have to be [accompanied]. You can't let them loose on the street, because the cars are driving like crazy, and many other limitations. And here, they can just go. (Toustrup Mark, female member, 30s: 5)

In the context of the choice to join a rural community, rurality appears as a recurring theme, and it seems to be an underlying stabilising and unifying factor in the community life courses. However, constructions of rurality and urbanity are fragmented, and therefore more complicated than the earlier two mentioned opposing conceptions of idealised rural space against reviled cities. This also applies to the respondents' constructions. A more detailed account of the Hobbitstee and conflicts in ruralities as constructed by community members and people from the surroundings can be found in Meijering *et al.* (forthcoming).

#### *Shared ideals*

The main reason why people are committed to religious communities appeared to be dedication to the common ideology. From the data on ecological communities and communal groups, the same can be concluded. However, the ideologies of the latter two

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types of communities are more diverse, and include a combination of environmental, communal, and political ideals. The dedication to the environment constitutes the major part of the ideologies of the communities in this chapter. The shared environmental ideologies consist of combinations of organic agriculture or gardening, permaculture<sup>6</sup>, self-sufficiency in nutrition, and generating and using energy from renewable sources. Communal ideals are the second binding factor of ecological and communal groups. They are concerned with living together in harmony. One respondent from Tweed Valley described this as follows:

To be able to grow with other families. Besides the frustrations, it will mostly provide security, a sense of belonging, and a feeling that you're cared about, and [that you care about] other people. Distancing oneself from the meaningless, Western, capitalist way of life through creating a home with a sense of place and belonging. (Tweed Valley, female member, 40s: 6)

Political ideologies, the third ideal, are often located on the left side of the political spectrum. For example, early members of the Hobbitstee and Toustrup Mark felt connected to the broader hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which was for instance committed to pacifism, and equality between poor and rich. Chickenshack and Tweed Valley underline this last point through their goal of providing affordable housing for everybody.

The most characteristic aspect about the ideologies of ecological and communal groups is that they are often not restricted to political, environmental or communal ideals, but rather are combinations of all three. Through their 'deviant' ideologies, the communities can be recognised as liminal places, since commitment to such ideologies was introduced as a liminal characteristic of intentional communities in section 1.5.2.

### *Adopting different practices*

The underlying ideological foundations of ecological and communal groups are relatively stable and unchanging. However, how they are practised varies over time and between groups. For instance, the members of the Hobbitstee describe their aspiration of living together as motivated by "love and respect for, and harmony with, oneself, each other, the environment and the outside world." Ideological aspirations were identified as pacifism, communism, self-sufficiency, environmentalism, and spirituality. These ideological constructions were not recorded, or formally drawn up. They served as general guidelines, within which the members created rather vague, and diverse personal ideological (re)constructions:

Everybody's looking for the meaning of life, and has found that in [his/her] own ideals. I think that is the most important. [I am more interested in the environment.] [...] Somebody else can be very spiritually oriented, but I am not like that. That is very refreshing, because [...] through talking about your own opinions, you become more critical of them. (The Hobbitstee, male member, 30s: 22&24)

The flexibility in practising ideological ideas as described by this respondent was not only characteristic of the Hobbitstee, but also of all communities that were studied. It is

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<sup>6</sup> Permaculture is a contraction of permanent and agriculture. It can be defined as "the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way." (Mollison 1988, p.ix)

important in facilitating the survival of a community. Related to this flexibility is the reality of the ideological practices in everyday community life, which creates a sense of togetherness. Examples of practices are work days and various social activities such as communal dinners, parties, meditation, music, sports, drama, and gardening.

In their practice of ecological, communal, and political ideals, environmental and communal groups strive to become 'organic places'. 'Organic' both refers to a commitment to protect the environment as already described, and to transform the communities into holistic places where all aspects of life can take place. Members of the communities search for possibilities to combine working and living in the community, to increase the functioning of their communities as small, independent societies. According to the respondents, this should result in a stronger sense of commitment to the place. This is further discussed in section 5.5.

## **5.4 Community structures**

This section discusses how the organisational structure of ecological and communal communities contributes to their stability and fragility. First, the division between and use of common and private spaces is discussed. Subsequently, the collective land ownership is considered, as it forms the basic structure for the continuity of all five communities. Third, the decision-making process and members' commitment to that process are discussed. The first three topics provide the framework for everyday life. Fourth, the gendered structure of Toustrup Mark is discussed as a specific example, since it surfaced as a relevant topic in the context of the community's continuity.

### *Common and private space*

A characteristic of all five communities is that no individual plot of land is privately owned. However, this does not mean that the individual members and families have no private space. The layout of the communities shows that the members have private apartments or houses in all communities that have been built. All communities also have a common space (see Figures 5.2, 5.4, 5.7 and 5.9). The extent to which daily life takes place in the common house and private houses varies from community to community. In Toustrup Mark, the common building is located centrally in the community, and easily accessible from most apartments. The dining room and kitchen are used every weekday for the communal dinners, which are the main focus of social activity of the community. The kindergarten and workshop rooms are also situated in the common building, and one has to pass through those rooms for access to the big court or the small court (Figure 5.2). As the common building functions as the main meeting place of Toustrup, as common activities are also held there. The common indoor space of the Chickenshack and the Hobbitstee is less frequently used. In Chickenshack, the common house consists of a kitchen and two sitting rooms. It is an informal meeting place, and it is where meetings, which take place on an irregular basis, are held (see Figure 5.4). In the Hobbitstee, the common space also contains a kitchen and living room, which are used for weekly meetings, bi-weekly social evenings, and as a meeting and eating place during the monthly community work days (see Figure 5.9). Because of its large membership, Eden can maintain a small village centre, where most communal activities take place (see Figure 5.7 and section 5.2). Some of the activities are held in the buildings of the former fruit-processing factory (Figure 5.6), which have thus been given a new use.

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The outdoor spaces are common land in the Hobbitstee and Chickenshack, which means that the members have no private gardens. In Toustrup, this used to be the case when the community was established. However, over time, individual families have begun to claim their own private gardens behind their houses. Eden has always consisted of private plots of land. The fact that the plots are often surrounded by high hedges enhances the impression that the families value their privacy (see Figure 5.10). According to the respondents, the hedges are a tradition which originates from the early years of the community, when many members used to practise Freikorperkultur (FKK) (naturism). In addition, they serve to protect the gardens from the dust that comes from the unpaved roads. Thus, although the land is collectively owned, it is privately used in Toustrup Mark and Eden.

*Figure 5.10: A homestead on the Hauptstraße in Eden*



### *Land ownership*

The focus of the following is on the structure underlying the spatial division. It concerns the influences of the organisation of land ownership on the life course of Eden. The reason for choosing Eden is that it has been able to maintain its structure of land ownership in various periods of pressure. Soil Reform is one of Eden's central ideals, and based on opposition to capitalist land ownership and land speculation. From its inception, the central idea was to provide affordable land and housing for everybody. On plots of 2,800 square metres, families could build a homestead, and grow their own fruit and vegetables. They lease the land, but own their houses. The tenancy is facilitated through hereditary lease contracts, issued by the community (Baumgartner 1992). A respondent commented on the centrality of the ownership structure:

This joint ownership of the soil should be unifying, [as established in] the statutes, everybody should contribute to its continuity. (Eden, female member, 40s: 23)

Although the plots have gradually been subdivided into units with a minimum surface area of 1,350 square metres, Eden has been able to maintain its land structure in almost its original form. It survived in the German Empire, Weimar Republic, Third Reich, German Democratic Republic (GDR), and current Federal Republic of Germany. Especially in the

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GDR, Eden's existence was threatened, as the government ironically perceived the community as a capitalist group. The state enforced some changes in ownership, which took the shape of expropriation of a number of plots belonging to residents who had fled to West Germany. Upon confiscating the plots and declaring itself as the legal owner, the state appointed new tenants. After German unification, these tenants were allowed to buy the land, as part of an originally West German law. As a result, 81 of the 461 plots of land are currently privately owned, and formally not part of the co-operative (Eden 2006). Eden is attempting to regain these plots, but this has proved to be difficult to realise legally. Eden's general layout has remained intact, which is closely linked with the strict rules in the co-operative's statutes about the number of fruit trees and cultivation of vegetables that are required on each plot (see Box 5.1).

### *Box 5.1: Rules for growing kitchen gardens in Eden*

#### **Planting orders**

The planting orders serve to maintain the typical appearance of Eden, the healthy nutrition of its members, as well as the long-term production of Edener fruit and vegetables. Fruit trees and currant bushes project the image of the community. Other trees and bushes have to be placed predominantly in the front gardens. In the event of new cultivation, for example taking over a plot, the following rules should be observed:

Planting a hedge to form a border around the plot.

Planting at least eight fruit trees per 1,000 square metres, of which at least one has a long trunk.

The homesteads have to be distinctively recognised as kitchen gardens through the cultivation of fruit and vegetables.

#### **Pflanzgebote**

Die Pflanzgebote dienen dem Erhalt des typischen Erscheinungsbildes von Eden, der gesunden Ernährung der Siedler und zugleich der langfristigen Sicherung einer Erzeugung von Edener Obst und Gemüse. Obstbäume und Beerensträucher bestimmen das Siedlungsbild. Andere Bäume und Sträucher haben ihren Platz vorwiegend im Vorgarten (Baukanal). Mit der Neubebauung bzw. Übernahme von Grundstücken sollen folgende Pflanzungen vorgenommen werden:

Pflanzung einer Hecke als Grundstücksbegrenzung.

Pflanzung von mindestens 8 Obstbäumen je 1.000 qm Grundstücksfläche, darunter mindestens 1 Hochstamm.

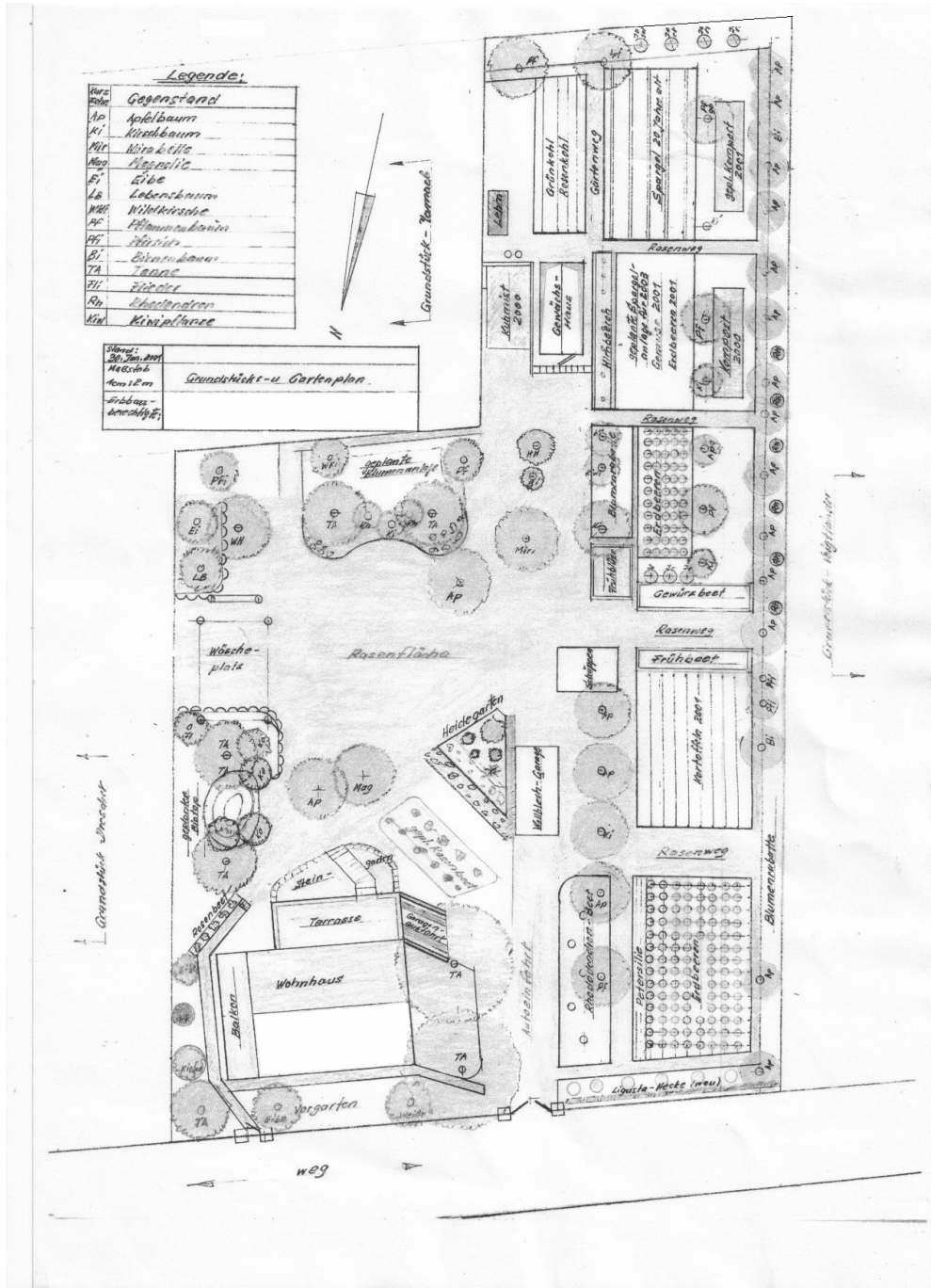
Die Heimstätte muss deutlich erkennbar als Nutzgarten (Obst- und Gemüseanbau) gestaltet werden.

Source: (Eden 1999)

In addition, the inhabitants of a plot have to submit a garden plan, which has to be approved by the community board. Figure 5.11 is an illustration of a garden plan. As rules about cultivation are enforced, Eden's non-profit status (*Gemeinnützigkeit*) is confirmed, and the land is taxed as agricultural, rather than residential, which is financially attractive. Therefore, Eden can lease the land to its tenants at a very reasonable price of about €500 a year. However, Eden's designated agricultural land use is increasingly being contested by the tax officials, and the community has been fined for not fulfilling the criteria. In response, Eden has established an internal committee that carries out garden inspections, and encourages its residents to commit to the standards specified in the statutes. Since some members refuse to comply, the idea has been raised to increase the lease price of their land. However, at the time of this study, such a measure had not been effected yet.

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Figure 5.11: Garden plan for one of Eden's plots of land



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Some members are perceived to be mainly interested in living on an affordable, extensive piece of land. Amongst committed Edeners, there was a fear that the community would become dominated by people whose motivation to live in the community is inspired by such personal gains:

More and more people who are joining are only interested in the large plot of land, and want it to become private property one day, although nobody is willing to admit that. (Eden, male member, 60s: 31)

However, privatisation would be difficult to realise. In order to dissolve the collective land ownership, Eden's statutes require that all Eden's 380 members - one for each plot - should be present at a special meeting, and ninety percent of them should vote in favour. Furthermore, in the event of dissolution, the land would be retroactively taxed ten years. Thus, Eden's common land provides a firm anchor for the community's continuity.

The other communities function in similar ways with regard to land ownership. Individuals cannot lay claims to community land, which ensures that the land cannot be a source of financial benefit. Such an ownership structure provides a sense of clarity and stability, as it secures the physical basis of the community. The issue of ownership can only be addressed when a large majority of the members are convinced of the necessity of a change in direction. Thus, the continuity of a community is ensured as its interest prevails over that of the individual member.

### *Varying commitment*

Ideally, through consensus or democratic decision-making, members of the communities can all be involved in the organisation of their community. In theory, the studied communities are committed to this. An example:

In decision-making, we're trying to [achieve] consensus, trying to get to the point that we all agree with something. We try to understand WHY somebody wants to do something as well, because quite often the reason that you don't agree with someone is because you don't understand their motives. [...] It has got to make sense, it's very important that you give people enough space to say what they've got on their mind. (Chickenshack, male member, 40s: 23)

However, reality proves to be somewhat different. Not all members are equally committed to contribute to the community's goals. In itself, this is not a problem, as a balanced composition of a group includes members who only do the tasks that are required, and those who are willing to make extra effort. These two types of behaviour are called mandatory and discretionary behaviour, and are both necessary in maintaining a group (Tyler & Blader 2000). However, each of the five communities experienced problems, as some of the members displayed a lack of involvement. Such behaviour, when people do not fulfil their mandatory tasks, is called free rider or loafing behaviour. Free riders do not contribute to a balanced group structure, but rather exploit a community. According to Sosis (2000), free riders results from the lack of costly rituals that members have to submit to, especially when opposed to religious communities (see section 4.3). Usually, free riders will be subtly convinced to change their behaviour, for instance through social exclusion from the community:

Some people here, and they get very unpopular, think it is about taking as much as possible [from the community, while] giving as little as possible. [...] Some people just live here because it's cheap. [As long as they pay the rent,] we can't say to anybody you have to

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move out, but it's not nice to be here, it's not easy to stay if you aren't part of the community. (Toustrup Mark, female member, 30s: 13&18)

Informal mechanisms of exclusion, such as ignoring someone, serve to maintain a balanced membership composition in a community. With the increase in free riding behaviour, this becomes increasingly difficult. According to social impact theory, the propensity of people to exhibit loafing behaviour increases with group size. A reason for this is that the extent of social control lessens as groups become bigger (Pennington 2002). This was confirmed in the context of this study, as in Eden, the largest community, free rider behaviour occurred most frequently. In all groups, such deviant behaviour is generally rejected, and the majority attempt to persuade deviants to conform to the group norms (Brown 1988; Pennington 2002). Frustrations over behaviour of others can result in liminal phases, characterised by periods of conflict and potentially disruptive changes, after which a new equilibrium is established (Brown 1988). Through mechanisms of excluding free riders socially, the studied communities were able to maintain such a balance.

### *Gendered communities*

A specific gender dimension became evident with respect to the organisation structure of the communities, and more specifically the meetings during which decisions were made. In Toustrup Mark in particular, the meetings were perceived to be dominated by men. Several women said that they felt intimidated by the behaviour of some of the male community members, who shouted, scolded, and showed disdain for people who expressed opinions which differed from theirs. Some women indicated that they stopped attending the meetings after such experiences. An interesting development in this respect was the increasing size of the group of single men, who were perceived as a sub-group within the community. Their intimidating behaviour was mostly accepted by the other members, as the men also contributed to building projects in the community:

They voted [Mark] in because he's a smith and everybody thought, oh great, he's so good at working [in] projects. They vote in workers instead of people with values. [They don't acknowledge that someone can contribute] to this place with good human values. (Toustrup Mark, female member, 30s: 39)

This respondent stressed the need to recognise people for their personalities that fit the ideology, rather than their abilities. Another respondent commented on the lack of value accorded to people who contribute to the community in social terms:

[Freya's] doing a lot of work in getting the new ones in, making them feel at home. [...] I can see that it's very difficult for her sometimes, because you don't feel that appreciated, people can't see, oh you built that, you built that. It is not that visible what she's doing. And of course it often is that way with women. Some of the things they're good at you can't see in the same way as the things men are good at. [For example,] on every working Saturday [which is organised monthly to do community maintenance together], the women take care of the children, and maybe prepare the meal], or something they could do [while minding] their children. They got so tired that the men got all the feedback, and [were acknowledged] for what they did outside, whereas they didn't get recognition. (Toustrup Mark, female member, 30s: 19)

According to the respondent, feminine tasks, such as making people feel at home, or caring for children are not valued as highly because their results are less visible than building a wall or repairing a fence. The valuation of 'male' over 'female' activities is something which has been often observed in (rural) gender literature (see, for example, Brandt &



Haugen 1997; Domosh & Seager 2001). Because their contributions are not duly recognised, it is difficult for women to gain status in the community. How this influenced the community's life course transpired from comments from the last respondent, who cited examples of families whose decision to leave Toustrup Mark was initiated by the women. These women both experienced a lack of recognition, as well as too much involvement of their husbands in 'male' community activities rather than in family life. Thus, the gendered structure of Toustrup Mark was a destabilising factor in its life course.

## 5.5 On the fringes of society

Ecological and communal groups are strongly committed to contributing to 'a better world', and are active in providing alternative ways of living to mainstream society. The interest in such alternatives has increased, as the values of ecological and communal communities have become more accepted, through changes in both society and the communities themselves. The exemplary function of the communities is discussed first, followed by their increasing integration in the mainstream.

### *Examples in society*

All case communities were concerned with organising courses and other ways of information provision for outsiders. Their goal is to improve society to some extent through being an example for others. Through organising activities in the communities, they believe that other people can be reached. In Eden, outsiders can visit the Eden exhibition, in which Eden's history is presented. Furthermore, Edeners open their gardens from time to time, to demonstrate how organic gardening can be done. Outsiders can also participate in Eden's other activities, such as the theatre group, music school, activity groups and nature groups. At the Hobbitstee, too, the members make an effort to show their way of life through organising activities. Examples are season celebrations, full moon walks, and courses in Nordic walking, massage, vegetarian cooking, and conflict handling (Leefgemeenschap "De Hobbitstee" 2006).

Chickenshack's members had quite ambitious plans with respect to functioning as an example of 'green living'. They intend to organise permaculture courses, trainings in personal development, outdoor pursuits, outdoor weekends for disabled children, and a demonstration of the use of hemp as an environmentally friendly insulation material. The following quote demonstrates how they intend to be an example for society:

Best-case scenario: we get our act together, and we develop this café, [build it in a green way,] and the garden, and the field into something that is really a great demonstration. Customers would come and stay here, and pay for some teaching. [...] It means that this place would become, over the years, a perfect example of the greenest way of living in sort of nearly mainstream culture. (Chickenshack, male member, 40s: 26)

While Chickenshack, Eden and the Hobbitstee were discussed in greater detail, the other communities mentioned similar ambitions. With their attempts to create intellectually independent and alternative spaces, ecological and communal groups can be seen as part of social movements (Chatterton 2005; Pepper 2005; Schehr 1997), and thus displaying project identities (see section 1.7). They find ways to perpetuate their existence in providing an alternative way of living on the immediate fringe of mainstream society.

*Becoming more mainstream*

Over the years, the different lifestyles practised in communal and ecological communities have become more accepted and appreciated. Thus, their liminal status, which was acquired through deviant ideologies, decreased. A large group of people identify with originally counter-cultural values and practices, such as authenticity, activism, (global) ecology, women's rights, and self-actualisation (Ray & Anderson 2000). Such societal changes have contributed to a convergence of lifestyles of community members and society, as is argued in Meijering *et al.* (forthcoming). A respondent to this study pointed out:

They have courses in which you can participate, I think quite a lot of people go there. Nowadays, people are more environmental in general. (The Hobbitstee, female local resident, 40s: 6)

Besides a more tolerant, diverse society, which is open to ecological and communal ideas, the communities have also become more accepted through a certain degree of conformity by the community members. The main process of adaptation that was recognised by community members was that of individualisation:

Especially in the [70s and] 80s, people had much more in common. We were closer to each other. Now it's sort of [similar to the broader] society. [...] I think it's because we work more. [...] At that time, we still had the big Kindergarten, there were more people working there, and [also on the buildings], so [people did] more together at this place. [They] had more energy for doing crazy things: big parties and stuff you know. [N]owadays people use most of their energy for their own things: work, family, whatever. [...] You can see the same preferences in the society. People are getting more and more individualistic. (Toustrup Mark, male member, 50s: 23&45)

From progressive ruralists, ecological and communal groups increasingly gain traits of aspirational ruralists, represented by middle-class newcomers (see also section 1.6). For example, a respondent from Toustrup Mark saw the privatisation of the apartments as inevitable. With such a change, the community conforms to the capitalist, materialist values it rejected in its early years:

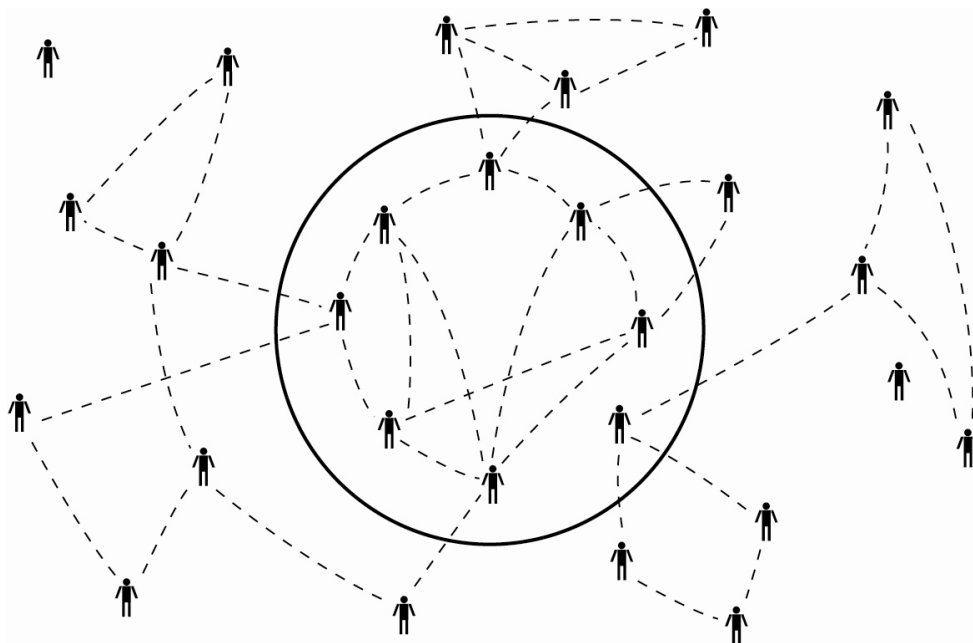
I think the next big discussion will be about privatising the apartments. [Now,] we use a lot of energy discussing things like, why don't you paint your windows? Why can't I get a new washing machine? We could stop that discussion [through making] it your own, and use all the energy for doing up the common places. In that way I think it is a good idea. [However, it would also mean] that capitalistic thinking [has made its way to] Toustrup Mark. But it will come. [...] The whole world around us is moving this way and it's hard to keep that out. I think Toustrup Mark's power is that it has followed [trends in society], and not stayed like it was in the 70s. It's normalised, which is why it's living and strong today. (Toustrup Mark, male member, 30s: 19&20)

Although this respondent valued Toustrup Mark's capacity to retain its identity in society through changing with it, he recognised that longer-term members in particular preferred to continue perceiving and maintaining Toustrup Mark as the different, and deviant place it once was. A similar trend was observed in Eden and the Hobbitstee, where a general division between the 'old' and 'young' generations could be observed. The older generation has experienced the community as a more collective place, and wants to maintain this, whereas the younger generation wants to live a family life in a communal setting, which is more similar to mainstream norms and values. Originally, the communities resembled heterotopias, through their inversion of societal norms such as individualism (see also

section 1.5.2). Such an inversion was not feasible on the long term, and the communities adopted more mainstream norms to secure the continuity of the communities.

The current position of ecological and communal groups in society is represented in Figure 5.12, which shows that the community members maintain relations with people both inside and outside the community. The level of interaction within the community is relatively high, with the exception of free riders, who are socially excluded. At the same time, the relations of the members outside the community are also quite intensive, which is related to the integration into the mainstream.

*Figure 5.12: The relations of members of ecological and communal groups both inside and outside their communities*



## 5.6 Conclusions and discussion

From the cases discussed in this chapter, it can be concluded that the main focus of ecological and communal communities is on sustaining the environment through living simple, communal lives in rural surroundings. All studied communities were located in rural or remote areas, which were used to practise organic ways of living, for instance through generating solar energy, raising animals and growing food, which confirmed the results from the survey conducted at the start of this research. A focus on both communal living and family life was also found in the cases. Maintaining a balance between the two proved to be a challenge in most communities, and can be related to varying expectations of and commitment to communal living. None of the case communities were completely isolated, and as other ecological and communal groups, they sustained social relations with family and friends outside the communities. In addition, all communities were involved in

## Ecological and communal groups: organic examples

society through the organisation of courses, for example in vegetarian cooking or organic gardening. They are guided by the desire to contribute to a 'better world' by functioning as examples for mainstream society.

Not all members were equally concerned with the goals of their community, and all case communities were familiar with social loafing or free rider behaviour. Such behaviour can be a threat to the continuity of a community. The influx of free riders was stemmed to some extent, as new members had to decline personal ownership of land, which served as a self-selective mechanism. Usually, when free rider behaviour occurred, it was effectively dealt with through social exclusion. This made free riders reconsider the suitability of the community as a place to live. Although this process was demanding for the committed community members, it mostly resulted in maintenance or re-establishment of a balanced membership composition.

Within the communities, open discussions about their binding ideologies were not shunned. However, the strength of the communities in this chapter in securing their continuity is their determination to maintain essential features of the communal identity. An example of such a feature is the common ownership of land, which proved to enhance the continuity of the communities. While maintaining such basic ideals, the ways and extent to which these were practised were flexible and subject to change, and influenced by trends in mainstream society. For instance, all communities were confronted with increasing individualisation. Communal activities such as parties and work days became less important over time, and were replaced with activities for individual families. Such developments were not always approved, but perceived as inevitable, and a sign of practical flexibility. Which elements are essential in a community's identity, and which ones can be changed should always be carefully considered. Furthermore, this can change over time, with shifts in membership and outside influences.

Interestingly, an important factor which contributes to the continuity of ecological and communal groups is the fact that they have increasingly become part of the mainstream society they originally rejected. From functioning like heterotopias, in which mainstream norms are inverted, they developed into more 'mainstream' places. Counter-cultural values such as protecting the environment, authenticity, communal living, and personal growth have become accepted. This is related to the tolerance towards different lifestyles, which can also be attributed to the rise of postmodernism (see section 1.4). Ecological and communal groups have secured their positions in society. They influence mainstream society and are simultaneously shaped by it. Paradoxically, the success of ecological and communal groups, which stems from their ability to exist in close relation with the mainstream, can be a source of conflict and decline as well. As the communities are increasingly valued in the mainstream, more people are interested in joining, and more free riders will also gain admission. Free rider behaviour disturbs the balance of membership in a community, and can be a threat to its continuity. Thus, ecological and communal groups may become victims of their own success.

