

DENMARK: COHOUSING AND ECO-VILLAGE RESEARCH VISIT, JUNE 2004

INTRODUCTION

This summarises findings from a 3-day visit to two cohousing-based eco-villages: Munksogaard (MSG) and Andelssamfundet i Hjortshøj (AiH). I chose these two because they both have many features relevant to RRC's aims, especially:

- Largeish, planned developments of 200-400 people
- Aiming to be eco-villages, not just cohousing projects: eg, on-site market garden, car pool, etc
- Similar locations to RRC aims: largeish sites, on the edge of a town or large village, adjoining open countryside

There are also major differences from RRC: they don't have a visitor centre/education/outreach function, and the extent of social enterprises or other on-site working is low.

SUMMARY

These two projects provide both validation and useful guidance for various aspects of RRC's plans. The major points emerging are:

- The importance of strong, active support from the local government
- The benefits of clusters/sub-groups, and of phased development
- Pros and cons for a single 'community centre', or small common houses for each cluster
- As for Stroud, getting a good building contractor at a sensible price has proved a major problem
- Valuable, practical pointers on a wide range of issues, including organisation, how to mix different tenures, project start-up, building specs etc.

MAIN FINDINGS

I. Local Authority Support

Both projects stressed how crucial this had been. It helped that they were taking a concept well accepted in Denmark, cohousing, and then stretching it into a larger overall development. The AiH site is part of 100 hectares owned by the City of Aarhus. The city supported the vision of an eco-village, growing to 500 people, with a substantial social housing element.

MSG were strongly encouraged by the town of Roskilde to acquire a Greenfield site on the edge of the town, to be the start of a 'green zone', ie a whole new neighbourhood with an emphasis on cohousing and sustainable living. MSG were also helped by having a celebrity singer as part of their prospective residents group.

2. Phased or one-step development

The phased approach looks preferable. Both projects currently have about 250 residents, and 110 units, but have got there by very different routes. AiH started with a long-term aim of 500 residents, but with a loose overall site plan, keeping each phase independent. The first phase was 10 privately-owned houses of individual design. This took 5 years to complete (1991-96), but it looks good and the individual choices it offered has helped attract and keep some dynamic, skilled individuals who are important in leading the whole project.

The second phase is 20 units of uniform design, built as social housing for rent by a housing association, in 1995-96. This timing reflects the need for the housing association to feel confidence that the project was already well underway before they would commit to it. Since then, three more phases or clusters have been completed. Their site plan uses the public road along two sides of the site to keep large, up-front infrastructure investment fairly low.

Munksogaard took a different approach: a master plan for 100 units in 5 clusters, with uniform designs and a mix of tenure types. They say this approach caused several years' delay, and the loss of many early potential residents, and they would now advise the AiH approach. The main delays were caused by the housing associations, which as in the UK, are very conservative.

3. Community buildings/common houses

The main community buildings at both projects are the common houses. Most of these were about 150m², they are usually 10% of the floor area of the private units they serve. Most were, to my taste, Spartan and unappealing: very basic, in both structure and furnishings. The main space was a dining area, which could be used for meetings or small groups. The other facilities were a kitchen, a laundry room, and sometimes a small area with easy chairs, a guest room, and a playroom. The common house also has notice-boards which are a main communication channel for the cluster.

In both projects, these common houses are not intensely used: normally for three evening meals per week, and occasional meetings or clubs.

A few common houses were particularly small or Spartan, where they had chosen to cut costs by this means. A few were larger, more appealing aesthetically, and were more used: these were all common houses for privately-owned clusters. The difference seems to arise from a higher budget and more user involvement, in construction as well as design.

At AiH, the level of community-wide activities was much higher than at MSG. One reason for this is that AiH has a largeish hall, 200m². This is used for seasonal celebrations, parties, and regular groups eg dancing, yoga, etc. It also earns some external income from rental for non-residential conferences and seminars.

The feedback from the projects generally was that they are quite happy with a small separate common house for each cluster, but my main guide at MSG said he would now prefer shared a common house facilities to reduce the separateness of the clusters. I would prefer to have a larger main community centre, as at Findhorn. This could be set up to include a smaller room where separate clusters could eat or meet. To complement this, I'd suggest a smallish residents lounge in each cluster: this would provide an information and social hub from a much smaller space.

4. Clusters/subgroups

Both of these projects, like many co-housing projects, use and advocate clusters or subgroups of 10-20 units, typically 20-50 people. There are some interesting pros and cons about how to define clusters.

At MSG, this is partly done by age. One cluster is for 'young people': you have to be under 31 to move in, but there's no limit on how long you stay. Another is for old people, open to anyone over 50. Another cluster is focused on families. This has some benefits, and residents are fairly happy with it, but the contact and mutual support between clusters and age groups is minimal. This could be reduced by having community facilities which mix the groups more.

Both AiH and MSG have separate tenure (ie private ownership and rented social housing) in separate clusters. This makes it easier to involve housing associations, since it is easier to define what they own.

5. Mixed tenure

This is still rare in Denmark, so both these projects have been pioneers. AiH now has three tenure types: private ownership, affordable rent, and shared equity. The main conclusions about mixed tenure are:

- Overall it has worked well
- There are some ongoing tensions. The private owners have more capital, more long-term commitment, and are more willing and able to invest in improved facilities, eg buying land for a market garden
- Quite a lot of social housing occupants are one-parent families, who are less willing and able to give time to community duties and social activities
- It requires a really progressive housing association which is willing to pioneer new approaches, take some risks, and probably pay a higher capital cost per unit than usual

6. Organisation structures

These vary between the two projects.

AiH: has used the benefits of a supportive site owner. The City of Arhus owns the whole 100 ha site, and has been willing to sell small lots, usually 0.5 to 0.9ha, to each cluster when it is ready and to rent the land for the market garden. At

AiH, the clusters own their land. The community-wide organisation is currently a club, which owns no assets, but they are planning to change this to a company structure which can buy, eg the market garden site.

MSG: an umbrella company was set up to buy the land, and own and run the shared eco-energy system. The shares and borrowings are set in proportion to unit floor areas. This structure has proved very difficult to set up and operate, since housing associations are uneasy and unused to working alongside private owners like this and have very different motivations.

MSG would now advocate separate ownership companies for the different tenure types. In the UK, it may be best to have the overall site company privately owned and financed, since housing associations are rarely willing to pay much for their site land.

7. Project Start-up

Seed Capital: As far as I could gather, there was no seed funding in either project. Potential residents put in a lot of unpaid time, and some of them had professional skills. Also crucial is that co-housing was already well-established in Denmark, so the main paid professional advisors were willing to work on a deferred payment basis.

Organisation: Typically an overall project and each cluster will start with a few individuals with high levels of commitment, time and skills, who will gather a potential residents group who share their vision and values for it. These groups have considerable turnover of prospective members, and a numbered waiting list is used who gets a chance to replace the leavers (eg if one household drops out, the top four households on the list would be invited to discussions with the residents group).

The residents group will appoint a smaller team, eg 3-5, to steer the process and handle key negotiations. Task teams will be set up for various sub-topics. All these teams report back to the whole residents groups, who approve all the major decisions. Since some people will miss some meetings, minutes are used not only for information, but to announce impending major proposals/decisions, so people can comment in absentia. Most groups decide by consensus, but votes are sometimes necessary as a fallback.

Professional advisers: I had a useful briefing from an Englishman who is a member of Group 5 at AiH, who have just moved into their cluster. He said that their key advisers were the architect and the lawyer, who attended all major meetings. Both were well-experienced in co-housing. They did not use an independent facilitator.

The architect's role included advice on building costs, alternative design approaches, and helping residents articulate what they want. The lawyer's role included advising on, and drafting, agreements between residents, and helping negotiate/draft contracts with other bodies, eg the site owner, the housing association.

8. Community organisation

Meetings: At both projects, there is a monthly community-wide meeting; this also includes updates and proposals from the interest groups (see below). Each cluster group has an internal meeting every 2-4 weeks.

Gift-time: All fit adults are expected to give some time to unpaid work for the cluster and the whole community, eg garden or building maintenance.

At MSG, the input is 40 hours per year, and the first Saturday in each month is a group workday. Attending meetings, cooking and clearing up for shared meals are on top of these hours.

At AiH, the input varies between clusters. Private ownership groups usually put in more time: eg, one requires one adult per household to work one weekend per month, and two weeks in the summer; this high input is because this group are building their own common house.

Interest groups: In both projects, there are a range of activities carried on by associations, where membership is optional. These include car-sharing groups, market gardening, keeping chickens, and groups for yoga, dancing, etc.

9. Market Garden

This was an important part of the vision for both groups, but the fulfilment is rather different.

AiH has the benefit of being able to rent part of the overall 100ha site quite cheaply. About 10 hectares are jointly rented by a farmer and market gardener, who work the land on a 3-part rotation. Thus the market garden relocates every two years on to land fertilised by the farm livestock.

The AiH market garden is run as a social enterprise by a very competent and proactive man. His 3.5 hectares produce organic vegetables for much of the community, and he also sells from a stand in the local village, helping create good rapport with neighbouring residents.

Michel estimates that 1 hectare would provide most of the salad and veg needs for 50 adults. The labour input is half his time all year, plus one other for 9 months, and one for 3 months, plus the CSA input (see below).

AiH's market garden is a successful example of CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), which is a good model for RRC to consider. For an annual payment of 1200 krone, about £120, plus 15 hours unpaid labour, an adult receives a supply of produce through the year. Children are charged on a sliding scale based on age.

This represents a remarkably good deal for the customer, and it is subsidised by the margin on external sales. The unpaid time has to be put in when Michel requests it, but he aims to make it a group social activity, eg two hours of weeding or compost-making in early evening.

AT MSG, an allotment area of about half an acre is assigned for each cluster, but the use made of this is quite patchy. Only the older people's clusters use theirs fully!

10. Construction Contractors

As for Stroud in the UK, this has proved a major problem in Denmark. Contractors are very reluctant to bid on eco-building and community projects, and hence will only quote at very inflated prices.

For smaller contracts, eg 1 or 2 houses, they have used small local contractors.

11. Technical Specifications

There are a lot of elements in both projects' specifications which we may want to consider. One of the most interesting is their use of unfired clay bricks; these provide good thermal mass for passive solar designs, can use clay from on-site, are easy to make on site (with a mobile production machine), and are easier to build with than rammed earth.

Other features, on which I have some details, include:

- Rainwater harvesting
- Central facilities using wood chips to produce hot water for heating and washing for 30-100 homes
- Composting toilets with a ceramic loo, a 3-chamber collector, and urine separation (this is used as plant fertiliser)
- Natural finishes, internal and external, some produced on site

12. Website

You can see more about these projects at these sites:

AiH: www.andelssanfundet.dk

MSG: www.munksoegaard.dk