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Marcus Andreas and Felix Wagner

“For Whom? For the Future!”

Ecovillage Sieben Linden as a Model and Research Project

Foreword by Marcus Andreas

When the council of the ecovillage Sieben Linden agreed to collaborate with me for my dissertation research in 2008, I was delighted. Yet one question emerged from the process: why was it so unexpectedly difficult to win Sieben Linden’s participation in academic research, when it, in fact, described itself as a “model and research project”? For example, at the very beginning I was informed that interviews were undesired and my participation in internal events would be highly problematic. Shouldn’t a model sustainability project welcome scientific accompaniment—even actively seek it out?

The idea of a “model project” addresses the important possibility of transferring insights and practices to society at-large (see Würfel in this issue). Identifying and analyzing this potential seems like a very worthwhile research task. Thus, the first question driving this paper is, *in what sense does Sieben Linden understand itself as a “model and research project”?*

Despite their desire to be transparent, the reservations of the ecovillagers stem from their reluctance to become “monkeys at the zoo,” explained one Sieben Linden resident, Christoph Strünke. Thus, this paper also explores a second, methodological question: *what kind of research avoids the “zoo” effect?*

The Evolution of the Model and Research Project

The original idea to create a German ecovillage is rooted in the anti-nuclear protest of Gorleben in 1980, as well as in the 1983 political program of the Green Party (the so-called *Sindelfinger Beschlüsse*¹). But the specific project that would later become

This essay was originally written in German and has been translated for *RCC Perspectives* by Brenda Black.

1 Die Grünen, *Gegen Arbeitslosigkeit und Sozialabbau: Sinnvoll arbeiten—solidarisch leben* (Bonn: Die Grünen, 1983), 24.

the ecovillage of Sieben Linden originated in Heidelberg in 1989 and attracted interest from throughout West Germany. Jörg Sommer, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Heidelberg, was particularly prominent in the initiative. At first he spoke of it as a political alternative to the model of capitalism:

For other groups, self-sufficiency is a possibility for withdrawing from society; we, on the other hand, are pursuing the goal of developing an alternative to the existing industrial and consumer society and therefore **to have effects that carry over into society.**² (*emphasis in original*)

In this context, “eco” stood for economy rather than ecology, alluding to the idea that a new culture would arise out of a changed economy.³ However, by 1992 the model idea had expanded to include social and ecological dimensions, uniting ecology with economy:

The model character of the planned village consists of the comprehensive attempt to integrate all spheres of life (home life, work, provision, free time) as part of an ecological circular economy.⁴

By 1993 Sommer had left the initiative, and the group had moved to a former farm estate in Groß Chüden, a small village in Saxony-Anhalt in the former East Germany, to look independently for land on which to settle. The focus of the group had shifted by then, as they aimed to make the model effective for “rural areas”⁵ and for “sustainable development in the region.”⁶ The ecovillage hoped to ultimately catalyze the creation of a

2 Jörg Sommer, “Ökodorfprojekt ‘Selbstversorgung als Selbstbestimmung,’” in *Zur Vorbereitung der Ost-West-Begegnung Selbstorganisierte Lebensgemeinschaften (Kommunen, Ökodörfer, spirituelle Gemeinschaften und andere alternative Lebensformen): 14.–17. Juni in Kleinmachnow bei Berlin*, eds. Vorbereitungsgruppe (Elisabeth Voß et al.), (Steyerberg: Informationsdienst Ökodorf e.V., 1990), 120–21.

3 According to Dieter Halbach, a former associate of Sommer’s and an ecovillage veteran. Dieter Halbach, interview by Marcus Andreas, 2011.

4 Freundeskreis ökologisches Dorf e.V., *Konzeption einer ökologischen Siedlung—sozialökologisches Modellprojekt zur Entwicklung von Siedlungs- und Wirtschaftsweisen im ländlichen Raum* (Heidelberg: Freundeskreis ökologisches Dorf e.V., 1992), 7.

5 Freundeskreis ökologisches Dorf e.V., *Konzeption einer ökologischen Siedlung*, 8.

6 Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G., [no title available] (Groß Chüden: Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G., 1995), [no page numbers available].

“model region for sustainable regional development.”⁷ They also began considering the possibility of small-scale tourism, as well as forming ties with the scientific community.⁸

In 1996 the project team was awarded funding through a competition held by the Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU) called the TAT-Orte competition, which was intended to assist rural townships in former East Germany and to spread awareness of sustainability issues.⁹ In their statement about the decision, the competition’s jury emphasized their hope that other members of society would also benefit from this project: “The exceptional degree of engagement . . . which stimulates the region and other environmental education initiatives deserves to be acknowledged. In light of its exemplary nature and its transferability, the proposal is officially awarded and honored.”¹⁰ In addition, the project received 100,000 DM from the DBU to finance a research project about “integrated, inhabitant-oriented town planning”¹¹—an important step towards professionalizing this private citizen project. With this recognition and the motivational “drive”¹² behind them, the ecovillage project successfully ended their search for land in 1997 in the small village of Poppau.

Fifteen years later in 2002, Sieben Linden is a thriving ecovillage. At the time of this project, Sieben Linden presented itself as a model and research project “that is testing out sustainable living at a manageable scale.”¹³ As previously said, the model aspect has been part of the concept for the ecovillage since it was first conceived. Sieben Linden as a “research project,” however, is a more recent development.

7 Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G., *Siedlungs- und Regionalkonzept Ökodorf 2000: Eine Information der Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G.* (Groß Chüden: Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G., 1996), [no page numbers available].

8 Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft Ökodorf e.G., *Siedlungs- und Regionalkonzept Ökodorf 2000*. For example, project studies by the TU Hamburg-Harburg and the GH Kassel, 1996; cf. Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., *Forschung über Sieben Linden und Gemeinschaft*, accessed June 29, 2012, <http://www.siebenlinden.de/htmcontent9987.html>.

9 A second TAT-Orte award was won in 2000, after the settlement had already been implemented.

10 Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (DBU) and Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik (DifU), *TAT-Orte: Gemeinden im ökologischen Wettbewerb: 1996* (Berlin: DifU, 1996), 151.

11 Dieter Halbach, Interview transcript by Marcus Andreas, 2011, 12.

12 Eva Stützel and Julia Kommerell, “Der Weg nach Sieben Linden,” in *Sieben Linden: Lebensentwurf und Realität: Visionen, Alltag, Gemeinschaft, Ökologie, Ökonomie und Spiritualität; Eine Textsammlung*, ed. Freundeskreis Ökodorf Sieben Linden e.V. (Poppau: Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., 2007), 10–11.

13 Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., *Über uns*, accessed October 24, 2008, <http://www.siebenlinden.de/htmcontent2000.html>.

Understanding the “Model and Research Project”

For this project, we were interested in what it meant to the people of Sieben Linden today to be a “model and research project.” To find out, we initiated a three-part series of events. In an attempt to avoid the “monkey in the zoo” effect, we placed great value on transparency and inclusive participation throughout the research process.

The goal of the first event, which took place in March 2009, was to determine how Sieben Linden understood the pair of terms “model and research project.” With the assistance of two Sieben Linden residents, Strünke as our academic advisor, and Kosha Anja Joubert, the president of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), we tailored the workshop to the ecovillage context as much as possible—e.g., we chose to conduct it during an evening in the common room. The event evidently caught people’s interest, as a total of 16 people attended—more participants than expected.¹⁴

Three questions guided the evening’s discussion (fig. 1):

- **From what?** (What is being modeled or researched?)
- **For whom/what?** (For whom or for what purpose do the model and the research serve?)
- **How?** (How should the model function, and how is the research conducted?)

Figure 1:
The questions were written along a red thread, which reflects the German metaphor “ein roter Faden” (a red thread), meaning a unifying principle of an activity.



To begin, the participants were asked to write down their answers separately on note cards; their answers were then presented to the group and the cards laid out on the floor to serve as visual reference points for the conversation. This was followed by a lively discussion, in which the moderators largely refrained from active involvement. The group discussion

¹⁴ For context, at that time about 120 people lived in the ecovillage, among them about 90 adults. Those in attendance were mainly “old hands,” with eight years as the mean length of residence.

format—a method which is used far too infrequently¹⁵—seemed appropriate for this first step. In contrast to an interview, individual statements can be elaborated upon, rejected, or validated in the course of a conversation.

Two results were immediately obvious. First, it became evident there were a variety of opinions about whether Sieben Linden was a model and research project at all, or at least one of the two, as these responses demonstrate:

Participant 1: I don't feel that we are a research project at all.

Participant 2: What, you don't see us as a research project?

Participant 3: I don't either!

Second, the participants frequently emphasized that there is a tension between the twin goals of trying to be both a research project and a model. Some of the participants saw these two aspects as mutually strengthening each other, but many others saw them as hindrances, such as this participant.

We aren't so free here to really do research, because we have to think about the region and so forth, since we also serve as a model. I have the feeling that the fact we're a model hinders us from being a research project.¹⁶

Before turning to the research component, which was the focus of the second event, we will first look at Sieben Linden as a “model.”

Sieben Linden as a Model

As the discussion participants suggested, being a model would mean offering reproducible solutions to the challenge of sustainable lifestyles. The task of the ecovillage is to develop these solutions and live them, to “walk the talk.” However, since the ecovillage is not representative of all social contexts, the group recognized their insufficiency in extending these ideas to wider society.

¹⁵ Philipp Mayring, *Einführung in die qualitative Sozialforschung* (Weinheim, Basel: Beltz, 2002), 77f.

¹⁶ For example, ecovillagers take care not to bathe naked in the pond during Sunday tours, out of sensitivity to visitors' potentially differing perspectives. Cf. Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., *Führung Sieben Linden* (Internal document, 2009), 14.

If I use the word “model,” then it means that I want to create a certain degree of transferability, and the conditions for this are quite bad—that is, . . . the starting point is that we are an unbelievably elite group here [laughter] with unbelievably elite requirements. I don’t think that’s a bad thing at all; I like living here. No, it’s only that it makes the possibilities of transfer relatively small.

The ecovillagers did not address *to* whom exactly they are trying to transfer ideas and practices, but instead expressed it as, “For whom? For the future!” Nevertheless, participants mentioned media representatives and scientists as possible go-betweens for bringing the ideas of the ecovillage to society at-large, and they gave numerous examples of concrete elements that could be transmitted to guests, the region, and peers (e.g., the use of compost toilets). Furthermore, participants also understood Sieben Linden as a “model for new patterns of life,” which has a mostly vague effect on the outside world—a “paradigmatic, rather than concrete, transferability,” as one participant stated. Another participant said that the ecovillage is like a rock quarry from which one can take fragments and, therefore, should be seen more as an “integrated source of inspiration” than as a model.

We synthesized these various perspectives into a diagram, which reveals the spectrum of overlapping ways of viewing the ecovillage as a model (fig. 2). *Particular* refers to the individual elements that can be extracted easily from Sieben Linden, while *paradigmatic* refers to the ecovillage as an indivisible whole. *Concrete* describes elements that can be clearly identified, and *diffuse* refers to aspects that are difficult to identify precisely.

In addition, we chose a concept from the discussion as a reference for each of the four areas.

- In the particular dimension, the ecovillage offers concrete models, such as the popular straw bale construction or the (nearly equally popular) compost toilets. Its comparison to a *stone quarry* suggests that these can be taken out of their context relatively arbitrarily and employed elsewhere.
- The particular often overlaps with the diffuse; an example of this is the residents’ culture of communication, which uses concrete elements, such as discussion rules, but on the whole functions more as a *source of inspiration* to others.

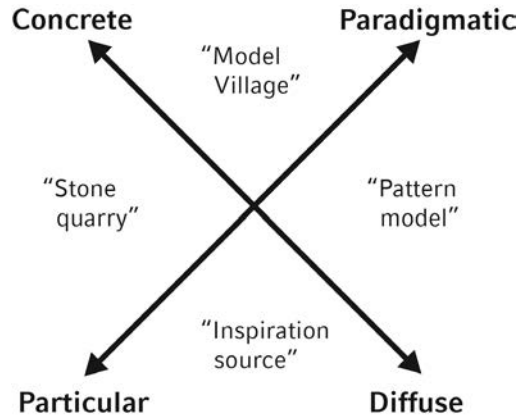


Figure 2:
Diagram of
perspectives on
being a model
project.

- In speaking of the ecovillage as a paradigm, or as a concrete *model village*, it alludes to how it could theoretically be built just as easily at another location. The residents have mostly come to reject this notion of easy duplication,¹⁷ however, even though such intentions were previously popular in the wider context of GEN.
- The diffuse manifestation of the paradigmatic approach is described as a *model for patterns of life*. That is, Sieben Linden is a place where ideas can be tested for their feasibility in everyday life.

Although the matrix presents various ways that Sieben Linden might function as a model and research project, the participants attested that, even for them, it was not always easy to tell what exactly was being “researched” and of what it was a model. Intentions and results cannot always be correlated to one another, as one participant expressed using the analogy of space exploration: the goal was to reach the moon, but, as a side effect, people got Teflon pans.

In discussing what it means to be a “model and research project”—ideas that are so important for creating self-identity—the terms’ meanings began to dissolve. Some participants could identify with the concepts, others only with one of the two, and still others with neither. Also, they perceived a tension between these two aspects; although, in spite of this, it became clear they believed the ecovillage has something to offer: its model character.

¹⁷ See the forthcoming dissertation by M. Andreas.

Yes, well, I don't like either the term model or research project. That is, I also have the feeling that we aren't really either one of them, because we aren't a model in the sense that I would wish many other such ecovillages to arise—it's complete humbug to build new villages when there are villages standing empty everywhere, for example. And, even so, I feel like we are justified in what we are doing here, as an inspirational project, as a project that [functions] through its all-round character.

Regarding the term “research project,” opinions differed greatly. For example, participants, and in particular those with an academic background, frequently stated that Sieben Linden is no such thing. As one of these participants said, “I have a kind of scientist's soul in me . . . and it can't make anything of this term ‘research project’ in this context.”

Some participants suggested that only when research is understood as a living experiment can the ecovillage legitimize itself as a research project.¹⁸ Therefore, as a second step in this study, a workshop was organized that was more explicitly dedicated to exploring the research aspect.

Sieben Linden as a Research Project

The goal of the second event, which took place in August of 2009, was to look more closely at the “research aspect” through collaborative group work. The guiding questions here were

- how and what does Sieben Linden research;
- what is discovered through this, and how are the results arrived at; and
- how might research look in the future?

This time there were nine participants, fewer than during the group discussion. Reasons for this might have been the scheduled day (Saturday afternoon) or the length (it was planned to last four hours). Also, two of the participants suggested the academic tone of the poster for the event may have deterred people.¹⁹

¹⁸ Along these lines, Joubert introduced to the discussion the idea of the ecovillage as a “living and learning center,” which is relevant for the sustainability discourse precisely through its entanglement of theory and practice.

¹⁹ It was, however, apparently sufficient to convince both of them to attend.

The participants were divided into three groups to reflect upon research and results in Sieben Linden, particularly in the realm of sustainable development. A graphic from the Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) course structured the content of the discussion, offering an overview of aspects of sustainability that are (or should be) achieved in ecovillages (fig. 3). The EDE graphic builds on the classic threefold division of sustainability—social, ecological, economic—but adds an additional dimension: worldview.²⁰ Due to the small number of participants, we decided to discuss only the three “classic” areas of sustainability.²¹ Participants were asked to pinpoint which items from this graphic were present within Sieben Linden, and whether they turned out to be successful.

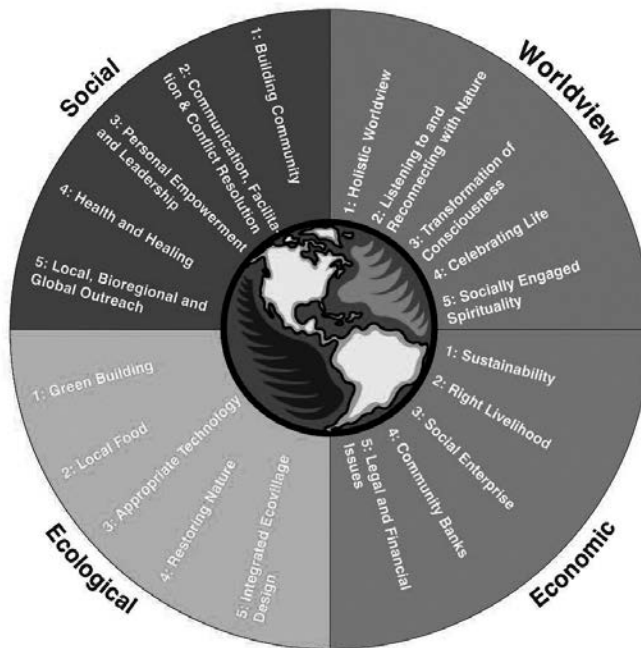


Figure 3:
A visual conceptualization of the elements of sustainable development by Ecovillage Design Education.

²⁰ The “worldview” area is often also referred to as the cultural one in Sieben Linden. Cf. Freundeskreis Ökodorf e.V., *Führung Sieben Linden* (Internal document, 2009), 4. For remarks in that respect, see Wagner in this issue.

²¹ Since we wanted at least three participants in each group, we did not have enough participants to divide into four groups.

The participants then discussed how “research” had been and continued to be conducted in Sieben Linden. In line with the findings of the previous group discussion, we presented the term “research” not in the scientific sense, but in the sense of experimenting with new things, continuing to develop things that worked, and discarding those that didn’t.

In the *social* dimension, it became clear that Sieben Linden has a rich spectrum of developments and endeavors. Over the years various helpful methods and structures for interpersonal processes have been *established*, such as the Zegg-Forum (a form of ritualized open communication),²² nonviolent communication,²³ singing, meditating, rituals, and much more. While the participants described the living situation of children and people with special needs as not structured enough on the whole, they stressed that the community still offered a very constructive social environment for these groups. Overall, the social fabric was described as very supportive.

In most cases, Sieben Linden evaluates its social methods and fabric by answering the question “what feels good.”²⁴ However, there are also more clearly formulated ways to test innovations, such as the introduction of a council system, which replaced the previous decision-making method of consensus in the general assembly. The internal research process was vividly described as “operating on a living patient”—that is, consequences are experienced directly and immediately. The fact that, frequently, too many new things were tried out at once, making it nearly impossible to determine the effects of individual factors, was perceived as a difficulty. Participants also claimed that the perspectives of outsiders, such as guests and the media, is another way they evaluate their community.

In the *ecological* dimension, the participants admitted that, for most of the aspects, the statement “yes, we do that, but we could do more” was applicable. As positive examples, they stressed ecological construction methods (e.g., straw bale buildings) and closed water systems (e.g., compost toilets). The residents of Sieben Linden generally have a high ecological awareness, even if the strictness of their rules had relaxed over time (for

22 For a more detailed description, see http://www.zegg-forum.org/index_en.phtml.

23 Their method is based on the ideas of Marshall Rosenberg; see <http://www.cnvc.org/>.

24 An alternative translation might be, “What feels right/correct”; however, emphasis lies on the verb. For a discussion of the different kind of rationality which is addressed here, see the forthcoming dissertation by author M. Andreas.

example, their increased willingness to travel by airplane). Furthermore, they expressed the wish to have a current evaluation of the Sieben Linden's ecological footprint.

In the dimension of *economy*, participants evaluated their experimentation with commonly owning land and buildings (instead of individually, as is otherwise customary) very positively. Their approach towards money and loans is based on solidary principles, such as issuing interest-free loans, an exchange and gift system, and a small wage gap (measured according to social criteria). Participants rated their generally stable local economy highly (i.e., “ideally keeping money within one's own village,” as one participant put it), but they also saw room for improvement in more clearly embedding individuals into the community's economy. Regarding external research, participants expressed the wish to acquire more facts about their internal economy, such as the flow of money into and out of Sieben Linden, in order to gain insight into the resilience of local economies.

Overall, it was clear that instances of structured research originating within Sieben Linden occurred rarely. The research mostly entailed trying things out and waiting to see what would establish itself over the long term, without any attempt at documentation, except for a brochure called “Lifestyle and Reality.”²⁵ Beyond this, there was agreement that more structured documentation was necessary.

Regarding external research, participants first of all recognized they all did not know of the already existing academic studies. They expressed the expectation that scientists and researchers should explicitly present completed studies at Sieben Linden. Participants expressed the desire that scientific studies not keep looking at the same topics (generally, sociological observations of “how a community works”), but rather expand upon already existing research. In addition, they came to the conclusion that they wanted to become more active in this matter and suggested topics for scientific study that would provide residents with more useful information. As a result of this discussion, the participants and organizers worked together to draft a plan for a follow-up event that would focus more closely on the topic of research in and about Sieben Linden.

Making the Ecovillage-Research Connection

Over the course of the research process, the relationship between the researchers and ecovillagers was transformed. In a demonstration of their mutual respect for one

25 Brochure: Sieben Linden, *Lebentwurf und Realität*, 2007.

another, the academics working in Sieben Linden were invited by the Freundeskreis Ökendorf e.V. (Society of Friends of Ecovillages) to present the state of their research at an event called Day for Science and Research²⁶ in April 2010. A strikingly large number of residents were present at the event, which took place in the village pub.²⁷ In addition to presentations of individual papers, including the authors' dissertations, participants discussed topics the ecovillage would like the researchers to explore, such as their economy and ecological footprint. The ecovillagers also agreed to consider researchers working in Sieben Linden "visiting partners" and, thus, charge them a lower price for accommodation and food than they do normal visitors.

Since this event, Sieben Linden has presented existing and requested research about their community on their website, and they list Research in Community (RIC) and the University of Münster as additional contacts for such matters.²⁸ The goals of these measures were to coordinate research requests, to define points of departure for interested students and scholars alike, to provide information about the state of existing research in order to avoid repetitions and redundancy, and, overall, to facilitate a smooth research process. The Day for Science and Research participants agreed that in order to have a fruitful collaboration, all parties involved should be clear and transparent about their ambitions and expectations. Taken together, these arrangements should help to avoid the "zoo" effect and provide an effective basis for further research.

Conclusion

Since conducting our research, the pair of terms "model" and "research project" have gradually, but not entirely disappeared from Sieben Linden's website and flyers; in more recent publications of and about the ecovillage, they can no longer be found. Responsible for this change was the Kleingruppe Öffentlichkeitsarbeit (KG Öff, or "Working Group Public Relations"), and their representative, Julia Kommerell. They explained the decision as follows:

26 In German: "Tag der Wissenschaft."

27 There were more attendees than otherwise expected, according to Sandra Campe, personal communication, 2010.

28 Freundeskreis Ökendorf e.V., *Forschung über Sieben Linden und Gemeinschaft*, accessed 29 June 2012, <http://www.siebenlinden.de/htmcontent9987.html>.

An evaluation of our public outreach work in 2010 examined various statements from our publicity materials for accuracy and consistency. . . . As described above, “model” and “research project” are connected with the expectation of systematic and, to a certain degree, scientific documentation and transferability. Since Sieben Linden does not fulfill this stringent requirement, or at least cannot demonstrate it, the decision was made to no longer use the term in promotional materials.

Even so, internally there remains a certain awareness that specific aspects of ecovillage life are transferable and that, as an inspirational place for living and learning, the village as a whole has a research character, above all for the residents themselves. For a cooperative and sustainable way of life must be relearned in part and investigated using experimental settings that serve as models.²⁹

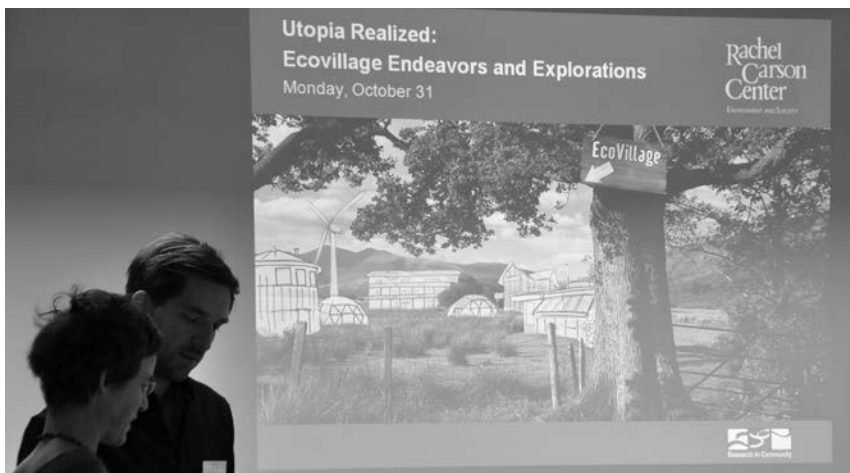


Figure 1: Julia Kommerell and Marcus Andreas in discussion during the workshop “Realizing Utopia: Ecovillage Endeavors and Explorations” held in October 2011.

Regardless, this inter- and, to some degree, trans-disciplinary research project led to a meeting as equals between researchers and ecovillagers. Even if the original “model and research” terminology has been discarded, ecovillages remain interesting models for the “idea of applicability,” as one resident formulated it. The “project” part of Sieben Lindens’ self-description has remained, however, as it is a goal-driven undertaking with a still-open endpoint.

29 This explanation was written by Kommerell specifically for this essay.

Acknowledgements

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