More Than Microcosms:
The Transformative Impact of Intentional Communities

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Context

Humanity is in crisis. Our global community is facing a lot of big, difficult problems: Loneliness. Climate change. Sexism. Violence--to name just a few. And we know that there aren't easy solutions or we wouldn't be where we are today.

The interconnected set of systems humanity has created, stretching from local to global, affect not only every aspect of our external lives but our consciousness as well. The problems we face create a feedback loop between global institutions, the communities we live in, and our personal experience that perpetuate these systems, which we've come to call systems of harm--harm for people and the planet. How can we disrupt this loop?

As microcosms of (and alternatives to) mainstream society, intentional communities can help us understand ways to shift out of this harm. As responses to this crisis they are in some ways, by their very nature, vehicles to disrupt systems of harm. But intentional communities and the people who start and live in them are also products of society. We all carry trauma from the systems of harm we've been raised in and continue to live in, and we bring this into the creation of intentional communities and our lives in them. In other words, intentional communities can, and do, also perpetuate systems of harm.

But what makes something an intentional community, and how is it relevant? To what extent does an intentional community counteract or reinforce systems of harm? Who needs to be involved and considered in the process of changing these systems?

In essence, how can intentional communities do better?

5 R Criteria

Every intentional community is different, but we believe there is something that makes them distinct as a form of human relationship and organization. The Foundation for Intentional Community uses two definitions:
- A group of people who live together or share common facilities and regularly associate on the basis of explicit common values.
- The social and economic relationships of a group of people who share space, resources, and values.

But it is the experience of intentional community that changes people, so what are the necessary ingredients for that experience?

Intentional communities are groups of people who *share* the 5 R's:
- **Residence:** People living in the same house, or in different houses on the same piece of property, with some kind of process for determining who can be a resident.
- **Rationale:** A collectively understood intention or purpose of the community.
- **Responsibilities:** A governance or organizational structure, including decision-making processes and membership agreements.
- **Resources:** Some amount of economic or material exchange or mutual support. In other words, the exchanges that occur while living in residence, such as communal meals.
- **Respect:** Autonomous individuals in voluntary association without intentional coercion or violence to themselves, each other, or the land they inhabit.

Relevance of Intentional Communities

Relationships
The relationships between people, and between people and the land are based on an experience of belonging and interdependence.
- People - Trust, intimacy, vulnerability, satisfaction, feedback, conflict resolution, belonging
- Land - Being in relationship with land/place rather than owning it

Meaning
A shared purpose or intention brings an awareness to choices and actions, individually and collectively that help direct culture and satisfy the need for meaning.
- Alternative to mainstream (they are different) - relevant even in their irrelevancy

- Shifting consciousness - practice and experience
- What you do matters, you matter to others, getting to see the impact of what you do, learning skills, learning life lessons with others, having a sense of personal purpose as well as shared purpose, being able to experience and touch something greater than yourself
- Intentionality as illuminating our choice in every moment

Governance

People collectively organize to manage their own affairs, share power, responsibilities, and decision-making.

- Cooperative, equal access to resources and decision-making, deep democracy, people impacted are the ones making decisions, collectively determining the conditions of your lives, space for experimentation, intentionality
- Accountability and transparency
- Training grounds

Ecological Sustainability

Experiments in how humans can share resources within built habitats that are sustainably integrated into the natural world.

- Learning how to create human habitats that are sustainably integrated into the natural world and don't inhibit the ability of the natural world to regenerate and support all forms of life
- Resources - Shifting from control to access

Healing & Reconciliation

They are attempts to acknowledge the problems of the world, address the harm they have caused and continue to cause, and create harmony for moving forward.

- Recognizing the legacy and contemporary realities of trauma caused by systems of harm and learning how to live in ways that reconcile our differences and heal that trauma
- Space to be different/be yourself
- People trying to survive in this world, getting together to make it easier and better
- Freeing up energy/resources/time by sharing resources
- Support for service and activism, space for organizing, educational programs, personal growth work

Designing for Disruption

Design possibilities for the 5 R's:
- **Residence:**
  - Maximize opportunities for experiential learning
  - Welcome visitors
  - Welcoming signage, public spaces, and events
  - Create housing and residency options that accommodate different personal, family, cultural, and financial needs (affordability)
  - Accessible location, for transportation and job opportunities

- - Beautiful, healthy living spaces, built in environmentally friendly and integrated ways
    - Physically accessible facilities
    - Become a more complete microcosm, how can you make the space more comfortable for more people?
- **Rationale:**
    - Have a clear intention that everyone supports and that helps bring awareness to everyday choices and actions for the community and individuals
    - Include healing and reconciliation in mission statement
    - Orientation and integration for new members
    - Recognize the larger context in which the community exists, acknowledge the problems to which it is responding, and articulative the narrative or vision of the world it is helping create
    - Create an inspiring context: Have a mission beyond creating a nice place to live for members, and avoid falling into the maintenance rut
    - Foster a deep sense of belonging
    - Recognize the ongoing balancing act and integration of individual and collective needs
- **Responsibilities:**
    - Design and implement systems and practices for accountability and organizational self-evaluation
    - Track impacts and outcomes
    - Transparency in governance and finances
    - Equity in expectations and participation - from each according to their abilities, to each according to their need
    - Valuing all labor equally and valuing labor not normally valued by dominant culture
    - Established practices and protocols for nonviolent conflict resolution, including regular social hygiene practices to address tensions before they blow up
    - Engage with local government - embrace civic responsibility
    - Learn what is useful from of mainstream institutions, e.g. effectiveness
- **Resources:**
    - "Book of Mistakes" - Documenting and sharing challenges and failures. This is how we learn!
    - Grow food, even a small amount
    - Share food
    - Participating in local systems (don't be an island)
    - Make sure living in the community makes it possible for people to spend less time making money and more in service, activism, creative pursuits, and personal growth
    - Leverage space and resources to support vulnerable populations, directly and organizations that support them
    - Leverage space and resources to support local organizing and organizations

- ○ Help forming groups get off (on) the ground
  - ○ More sharing and reduction in resource consumption and waste generation
  - ○ Income-sharing
- **Respect:**
  - ○ Being interested in what respect means to others rather than how you would define it.
  - ○ A culture of listening and empathy
  - ○ Explicit community culture of and support systems for healing trauma and personal growth
  - ○ Actively build relationships with people from marginalized communities:
    - ■ Go to them, with humility, listening, learning
    - ■ Find out from them how you can be of service and advocate for them around the issues that matter to them
    - ■ Learn from them how to make your space more accessible
  - ○ Ongoing community and personal processes for identifying barriers to inclusivity and accessibility
  - ○ Stay on the edge of your comfort zone, or stay within a range where you're not too comfortable and not learning, but not so uncomfortable that you're overwhelmed and not learning
  - ○ Creating space and making space available
  - ○ Awareness of place - area studies
  - ○ Caucus group work
  - ○ Relationship to land, understanding of local ecology, bioregion, watershed
  - ○ Addressing power abuse, ego trips, narcissists, both within your communities and help hold other people and communities accountable, e.g. the one guy who owns the land, cults

Community Check-up - Health Indicators

Sky and Avi are both dedicated to continuing this work, and have been exploring the idea of a practical tool that communities could use along with the 5 R criteria to disrupt systems of harm, such as a community check-up.

A community check-up entails developing health indicators for intentional communities that would help us determine what we need to track and focus on, in order to cultivate holistic health. This could include questions such as:
- How connected is the community to local economic, social, and political systems?
- How transparent are the governance and finances, especially to new members?
- How strong is the former-member or alumni network?
- How well do short-term and long-term members get along and share ideas?
- How inclusive and accessible is the community to a diversity of people?
- How much free time do community members have to pursue their passions and interests?

Contact Info

Interested in working with us and/or learning more? Please keep in touch!

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Sources

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