

Research Summary

Communities of Resistance: Intentional Communities in North America

What is this research about?

Intentional communities are a long-established social movement of collectives of people coming together to create residential communities for social purposes.

This research project sought to answer three questions: (1) How can intentional communities be established in a capitalist system, where private real estate developers dominate the creation of new residential communities? (2) What are the factors that effect an intentional communities' commitment to social equity and environmental sustainability? (3) How can intentional communities succeed long-term? This includes examining multiple factors that contribute to the success of intentional communities, including financial stability, sustained commitment to their mission, and community cohesion.

What did the researchers do?

A comprehensive survey was sent out to 1303 North American intentional communities identified at the time of the survey. 304 responses were received, representing 214 communities and 15,090 residents. The survey asked questions regarding finances, shared spaces, structure, involvement, difficulties, ideology, and the commitment to environmental sustainability and social equity.

What did the researchers find?

The research found that common difficulties encountered during the establishment of an intentional community include financial difficulties, finding suitable affordable property, slow government approval and interpersonal conflict. The longer a community exists, the more stable it becomes. Real estate speculation is the most significant barrier

to the creation of intentional communities, and ultimately is detrimental to society as it hinders the creation of holistic residential communities.

The majority of intentional communities are committed to environmental sustainability and social justice, to varying degrees depending on location, community values and abilities of the residents. Residents of intentional communities participate in various progressive social movements and causes, while being able to lead a lifestyle more in line with their values of environmental sustainability and social/economic justice.

The benefits of living in an intentional community are boundless. They include increased quality of life, social and health benefits, shared services, collective resources, energy efficiency and reduced consumption. Residents enjoy enriched social lives, including a sense of belonging, greater emotional support, less stress, opportunities for personal growth and the inclusion of socially vulnerable populations. Most communities also had economic benefits, including skill-sharing, reduced cost of living, and opportunities for self-employment. Intentional communities also act as hubs for progressive activism and volunteerism that gives back to the wider community.

What you need to know

Intentional communities are an important and growing social movement that will shape our future of residential communities. Intentional communities should be funded and supported by government, as they provide multiple benefits to their residents, the wider community and society.

Research Summary

Communities of Resistance: Intentional Communities in North America

How you can use this research?

Real estate investment and speculation is increasing the difficulty to create intentional communities in or near larger cities. Housing activism is critical to challenging this reality and reestablishing citizens *Right to the City*. Housing activists must organize and lobby for housing rights, supports, policy change and access to government funding and land. The labour movement has played a historic role in supporting co-operative housing and ties to the labour movement should be strengthened and maintained.

New larger intentional community projects should be created through joint ventures involving community groups, non-profit organizations and labour unions. Intentional communities, where possible, should have higher densities. Higher density communities are essential in order to have a critical mass of residents that can maintain the community across generations, but also, to reduce collective costs and provide more social, educational and economic opportunities. Rural intentional communities that are aging and losing their young people should focus on increasing the density of their community and creating economic opportunities through shared workspaces. Citywide collective house networks should be established to help strengthen the ability of collective houses to find new residents and survive long-term.

Community cohesion is critical to the long-term success of intentional communities. It starts with having a clear set of values and obligations that are communicated effectively to new and potential members. Screening should be used to determine if potential residents have the knowledge and a belief in cooperative living and progressive values.

Education is essential to cultivate a deep understanding and appreciation of intentional communities and their values and benefits. Residents need to be able to answer for themselves questions such as why participate in an intentional community, or why fight for intentional communities? Communities also need to prevent interpersonal conflict from occurring. This can be achieved through the use of trained facilitators at meetings, creating opportunities for dialogue, and having clear processes and structure. To prevent conflicts with the outside community, intentional communities should engage in carefully educating their neighbours about the concept and their community. In order to make intentional communities more diverse and inclusive, efforts should be made to reach out to diverse communities through educational activities. Internally, residents should complete anti-oppression training and be educated on diversity. Most intentional communities are committed to social and environmental justice, however, these commitments can be strengthened. Intentional communities should be more explicit in their commitment by cultivating communities of practice and through the use of the term *living co-op*.

About the Researchers

Michael Kenny is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at York University. Michael serves as Executive Director of Regenesis, a university/college focused environmental organization.

ecomike@yorku.ca ; m@regenes.is

Keywords

Abbeyfield Homes, Affordable Housing, Catholic Worker Houses, Cobousing, Collective Houses, Communes, Co-op Housing, Ecovillages, Intentional Communities, Living Co-Op, Residential Communities, Sustainability