

THE IN-TIME(S)

Inspired by the future,
rooted in the past, acting in
the present

Extracts based on the book "Inventing for the Sustainable Planet" - the inner and outer journey to sustainability.
<http://porena.blogspot.com> staff@avbp.net

RAPID SET UP OF INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES

By Max Wahlter

The village of Washbourne, near Retford.

The IC community (IC stands for Intentional Community) on the outskirts of the village of Washbourne, near Retford, is throwing a party. They are celebrating their move into a ground-breaking housing project, part of the municipality's transition to sustainable living. And they are happy. "Finally, I have found somewhere I can live with a good conscience about my effect on the earth, in wonderful surroundings and with great neighbours. I never thought it would be possible," says villager Grant Beakham.

Councilor John Wales comes up to explain the background: "The council realised back in 2008 that we should be promoting the development of social capital - like supportive neighbourhoods and cooperatives - as the financial system headed towards breakdown. A lot of people were in danger of losing their jobs as local factories started closing. At the same time there started to be a lack of goods in the stores. We realized people wanted a more resilient, local, sustainable economy, but they needed help in getting it all started.

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ABOUT THE IN-TIME(S)

We are living at the peak of human achievement, but also at the peak of our resources. Sustainable development means handing over to future generations the possibility to create for themselves a standard of living at least equivalent to that we enjoy. This requires fundamentally re-thinking how we use resources, indeed all of the social arrangements we take for granted. And we need to start now. Ideation, imagining, even fantasizing are tools we can all use in this re-thinking process. The technique used to provide the basis of these extracts, Imagestreaming, opens up endless possibilities to explore and invent our ideal future.

We decided to work with surrounding villages on a ruralisation plan, where we would establish communities. They would function as cooperatives and get their food and other services locally. Each cooperative would include workshops and offices, and we helped the cooperatives start local businesses. We bought land and got our planning department to identify about seven sites where these new developments could be sited. We also engaged a network of contractors and set up a coordination office."

HOW THEY WENT ABOUT IT

Grant explains how he got involved: "I saw the local paper was advertising the information meetings to explain what was on offer. I went along, loved the idea and signed up. Me and my wife have been talking about something like this for ages." What was on offer was the chance to join the scheme, where about 350 households were to be organized in seven different places around the town.

Grant's wife, Mary joins us to explain the money side of things: "I was worried we couldn't afford to buy a share in the cooperative. However, I realized that the council had engaged three banks and that

for them it was good business to get behind us, and there were a few good alternative loan schemes that were right for us. I especially liked how everyone in the scheme, through a special loan guarantee fund, could support each other.”

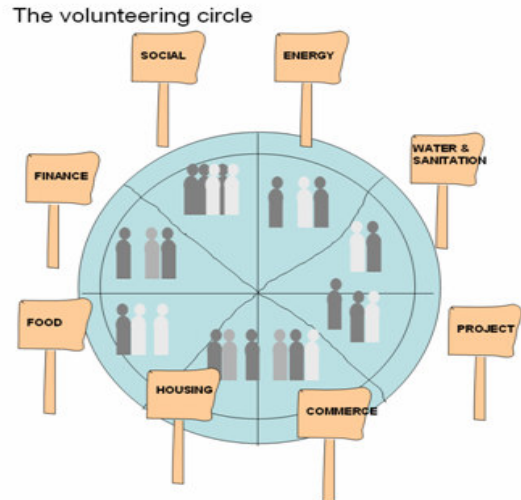
Some people had expressed fears the whole thing left too little room for individualism and the projects were too regimented. Grant didn't feel it was too organized and rigid for him. “Actually, it was a bit too loosely organized for my taste, looking back on it. Once we had decided which of the new areas we wanted to live in we had to form working groups to pretty much decide on everything.” He smiles: “Although the council had done much of the basic work needed.”

FACILITATORS SMOOTHED THE WAY

We are joined by Jeff Bradley, the manger of the Ecounit Group, a project management and facilitation company contracted by the council to lead the groups through the process. Says Jeff, “Our role was to provide a sound enough structure for the cooperatives to get formed and working, but flexible enough for each to find their own solutions and variants. The members of the cooperative were fully involved from the time they signed up.”

Grant explains his experience of the first sign up. “We made our choice of community – they had seven at the time – based on presentations and visits to the proposed sites. Then we chose a board, and they registered the cooperative. The Ecounit group were very helpful as they

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helped us with all the paperwork and facilitated the formation of the board, clarifying roles, etc.”

“I don't think we would have ever got started if the municipality had not mapped out the sites for us, and if the Ecounit group had not laid out the process for us. They had ways of making it all very simple for us. For example, they drew a huge circle in the ground at the meeting place, with about eight different segments. Each segment represented a work area, like building, water and plumbing, finance etc. It also had the rough number of people needed in each segment. We just walked over to the circle and stood in the segment of our first choice. Some segments were overcrowded; I slipped over into the finance segment, my second choice.

WE ALL JOINED WORKGROUPS

The work of the groups had been defined earlier by the Ecounit group. Says Jeff, “We took best practice, identified what needed to be done, when, and how many people would be needed.”

The first task given to the groups was about quantifying and qualifying. If they were to be 50 families, what buildings would be needed, how much water, how much electricity? The next step was to look at qualifying these services: What sort of standard do members want?

“I would advise anyone who feels the need for a more pleasurable, close to nature, secure way of living to start to form a community like ours.”

The second task was to study the land set aside for the community and to come up with a maximum of three alternatives for each area. Again, Ecounit Group had put together files of information about best practice so the groups did not have to start from scratch. The building group came up with three main housing alternatives: one was fairly traditional cottages, the other was grass covered eco-houses and the third was a series of two-story apartment blocks.

EACH GROUP PRODUCED THREE ALTERNATIVES

Jeff explains the three-choice strategy: “To get agreement in the group, and to keep the decisions coming fast, we needed to offer a flexible structure that enabled speedy decisions. Each group presented the members with the options, and the consequences of each. The task of the members was to agree on one or reject all and send the team back to come up with three more.”

In fact, the whole process was facilitated by Ecounit group members who were present at most large meetings. The idea was to help the members come to agreement using the consensus method, easing them gently into it. Many communities fail because they do not manage to introduce an efficient decision making framework. After a while, the facilitators could take a back seat as the groups developed their collective decision-making skills.

The members chose a traditional cottage design, and the task went to an architect to

come up with detailed drawings and models for the members to think about.

When asked about dissenters, Grant’s wife, Mary, says there was a lot of discussion but it was all healthy. And anyway, members always had the opportunity to leave. They were aware of this and after a while they started to get really good at coming to decisions together.

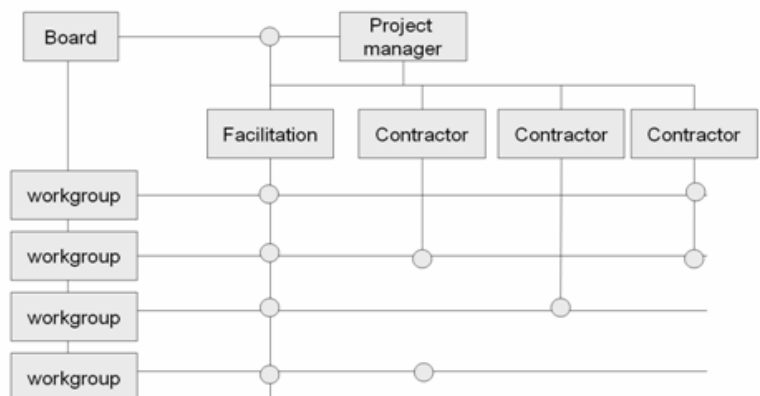
“Its funny now, looking back on it,” she says, “but we did have some heated discussions about things which seem so small looking back on it.”

Once all choices were made and reconciled and the architects and other suppliers came with detailed sketches and plans, the members were asked to give feedback and suggestions for changes. This resulted in a list of changes and a price tag on each.

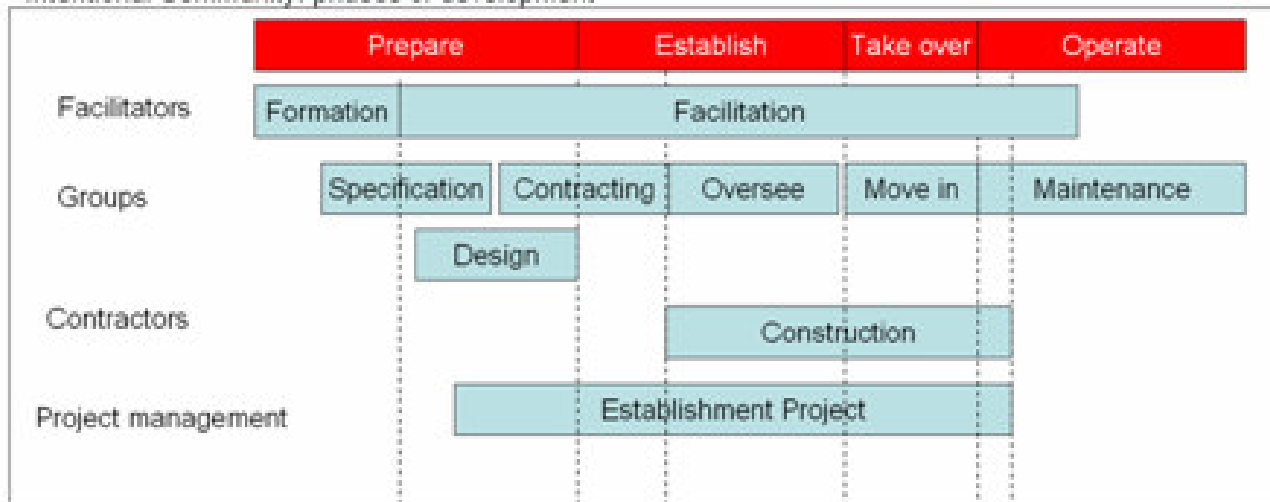
Mary laughs: “I’m glad we had good facilitators to help us through that! People wanted a lot of changes but they were not prepared to pay for them!”

At this point the work was only beginning for the groups. They now had to engage contractors and oversee the work. Each group was responsible for ensuring the standard required by the members was achieved.

Project organisation



Intentional Community: phases of development



“Fortunately,” says Grant, “the council and the Ecounit group had lined up a wide range of suppliers and craftsmen.” Jeff from the Ecounit group explains the decision to appoint a full-time project manager: “This is a big project, which has social as well as technical dimensions. The project manager was able to keep activities at all levels coordinated and together. The project manager provided the link between the contractors and the cooperative and he ensured the work of the cooperative was aligned with the timetable of the establishment work.”

Says Jeff, “For example, this association formed a local small business association – and they invested in a business centre. We had to ensure they knew how large they wanted the premises before we started building.”

The project was managed in phases. As the building work started, a project room was set up in the local village and the board took time to be there regularly to oversee activities from the side of the association.

While the building was going on, groups were working on handover from the building project to full time operation. They were working out what needed to be done to look after the community after handover. This covered everything from regular maintenance on the ventilation to social

activities, and of course, making a budget for everything, just before moving in a large meeting was held where each group reported preparedness for moving in and for the regular activities.

Grant comments: “I thought it would be difficult, but the instructions from the facilitator group helped. We started by identifying what needed to be done weekly, monthly, and yearly. We then set up a system to carry it out”. Mary adds, “We even set up a twice yearly review of the system itself, to check we are doing the right things in the right way.”

Asked to comment on how they feel about the future, Grant and Mary are completely positive: “The motto in our community is – together we live better on less – and we have already started to experience that. We’ve made new friends and started new free time activities, and we just love the way the children always have something to do!”

Says Grant: “I would advise anyone who feels the need for a more pleasurable, close to nature, secure way of living to start to form a community like ours.”

“Together we live better on less”