

The good life 2.0

Davie Philip introduces The Village, a project that is a model for a sustainable future through building resilient communities

We urgently need to take an evolutionary leap in the way we do things and to design systems from the bottom up in ways that fit this planet's carrying capacity and we need to do this together, as communities. Web 2.0 is the term that has come to signify the new upgraded internet, which is community based, interactive and user-driven. As the current crisis is too overwhelming for individuals to face alone, I want to propose a 'Good Life 2.0' - a response to the challenges of our times based on an upgrade for the 21st century of the ideas of the 1970's self-sufficiency movement and the values of community plus everything we have learned in the thirty years that have passed.

Do you remember The Good Life, the popular 1970s television sit-com based on the notion of getting out of the rat race and being self-sufficient in suburbia. This was launched just after the first oil shock and amid one of the UK's worst economic downturns. It was based on the writings of John Seymour, the father of self-sufficiency. His books give a comprehensive introduction to the 'Good Life', covering everything from growing your own crops, animal husbandry, wine making, bee keeping, building, renewable energy, and much more. John gained considerable experience living a self-sufficient life, first in Suffolk, then Pembrokeshire, and then Ireland where he established the School of Self-Sufficiency in Co. Wexford. He also travelled around the world and wrote and made films exposing the unsustainability of the global industrial food system. Sadly on the 14th of September 2004 John Seymour died aged 90.

Over the last five years of his life I had an opportunity to spend time with John. We campaigned together to stop the planting of genetically engineered sugar beet, which culminated with seven of us in a New Ross court-house. But that's another story.

Surprisingly John once told me that he was actually wrong about self-sufficiency. On a visit to his small-holding in Wexford, John shared with me his conclusion that it would be too difficult to sustain the noble effort of living off-grid and providing for all your own needs on your own land. Self sufficiency wasn't enough. His new thinking was co-sufficiency, self-reliant local communities that could provide the social relationships essential for facing an uncertain future. Seymour predicted that we would need strong connected communities that could work together to meet their needs and make the transition to a post-industrial economy not dependent on fossil fuel.

If Tom and Margo of The Good Life were striving to be self-sufficient now, they would probably have started a community garden or joined their local Transition group and be engaged in the building of food and energy security with their neighbours. That's The Good Life 2.0, a community approach to building local resilience because, as Richard Heinberg writes in his book 'Powerdown', 'personal survival depends on community survival'.

Making the Transition

The Transition Towns process has been rapidly spreading throughout the world, with thousands of towns now adopting the model. I often say that the Transition process was born in Ireland, a statement that has some truth to it. Rob Hopkins who is recognised as the founder of the Transition movement lived in Ireland for 12 years. In that time he was involved in many sustainability initiatives and developed an eco village project. Rob taught a two year Permaculture course in Kinsale Community College in West Cork. It was here that the seeds for the Transition movement were sown.

In 2004 David Holmgren, Richard Heinberg and a host of others, including Ireland's now Minister for Energy, Eamon Ryan, spent two days in West Cork planning how we would best manage our transition to a low energy future. This event led to the formation of a new group in Kinsale driven by some of the students and local activists. This became known as Kinsale Transition Town which had some initial successes. But it wasn't until Rob and his family relocated from West Cork to Devon that the Transition process really emerged. In the UK Rob furthered the idea of community planning for oil peak at Exeter University and in Totnes he began working with locals on what would become Transition Town Totnes, the Transition model the Transition Network and Transition culture emerged.

In a few short years Transition initiatives, as they are now more commonly known, as cities, islands, and villages as well as towns sign up, has massively grown. Thousands have now adopted the process, and have set out to radically reduce their carbon emissions while at the same time building their ability to thrive in a future that is very uncertain. The Transition process offers pathways, new ways of thinking and a set of tools that could help us respond to the shocks that we inevitably face.

A Common Purpose

As well as initiatives to reduce our fossil fuel use, the Transition model helps communities develop the capability to provide most of its essential needs from a number of local sources so that in the event of a system failure, they will be able to look after themselves. 'Transition' communities are characterised by their positivity and creativity, the process is deliberately designed to be non-threatening and engaging. Its ability to bring all sorts of people and groups together is its strength. Through a loose twelve step process the initiatives set out to build the capacity of the community to develop an Energy Descent Action Plan and this is the process at the core of Transition thinking.

'The concept of energy descent, and of the Transition approach, is a simple one: that the future with less oil could be preferable to the present, but only if sufficient creativity and imagination are applied early enough in the design of this transition.' Rob Hopkins, 'The Transition Handbook' Initiatives include the starting of community gardens and allotments, creating community supported agriculture systems, localising energy production, starting car clubs, rethinking healthcare, and future-proofing their houses and public buildings. Some have even introduced local currencies to keep money circulating in their local area. All of these initiatives build community and offer the potential of an extraordinary transformation in our economic and social systems.

From Vulnerability to Resilience: The New Eco Village

'The great challenge of our time is to build and nurture sustainable communities - communities that are designed in such a way that their ways of life, businesses, economies, physical structures and technologies do not interfere with nature's inherent ability to sustain life . . .' Fritjof Capra.

For ten years I have been involved with a disparate group of people in a sustainable community project on a 67 acre estate adjacent to the town of Cloughjordan in North Tipperary. We are attempting to build an eco village which we simply call, The Village. This is a unique and innovative project that is striving to create a fresh blueprint for modern sustainable living including 130 homes, renewable energy for heating, land for growing food and trees, an enterprise centre and community buildings. It is a lot more than an eco-housing estate.

The Village merges directly into the heart of Cloughjordan. The town's broad main street has a tree-lined square at its mid-point and an attractive mix of houses and diverse businesses along its length. Around the town is a rolling landscape of rich agricultural land and fine cycling country. A nearby beech wood offers pleasant walks, while Lough Derg and the Shannon are within 12 miles, and the Slieve Bloom and Silvermines mountains are within cycling distance.

There is already a very strong sense of community a year before the first residents will actually move into their new eco homes. Over forty families have moved into rented accommodation or have bought homes in the existing town of Cloughjordan and are establishing themselves in the local community.

A diverse group of people have joined the project. People from all walks of life, young and old, families and single people, are working together to create a beautiful and enriching place to live. With playgrounds, pathways and acres of woodlands and farmland to explore, the Village will be a wonderful place for children. They can enjoy the best of rural life within walking distance of friends, sports facilities and schools. In a survey of the 65 households who have bought sites in The Village, 80% said that a sense of Community is what attracted them to the project.

All the homes being built within the eco village are to high ecological standards, combining energy efficient design with locally sourced natural building materials. There is a wide variety of house styles planned throughout the project, with examples of timber frame, lime-hemp and cob built homes. The sites have good south-facing aspect so that residents can benefit from free passive solar heating. Each home will contain its own rainwater harvesting system and will benefit from heating that runs off hot water supplied by a community heating system.

Homes will be surrounded by an edible landscape of fruit and nut trees, vegetables and herbs. A tree nursery has been established to nurture hundreds of trees for planting along the pathways and in the community gardens that are dispersed throughout the residential area. Larger community and personal allotments have been established to provide more space for growing food. The remaining eco village land is dedicated to farming and woodland. Some of the land is being used by the new Cloughjordan Community Farm scheme established in partnership with the eco village. With cows, sheep, pigs and crop production, the farm will improve the quality and quantity of food available locally, and help reduce the environmental cost of food miles.

Renewable energy will provide 100 per cent of the eco village's heating and hot water needs. Hot water is to be generated at a community energy centre by two woodchip boilers and an array of solar panels, the biggest in Ireland. It will then be piped to individual houses and apartments through an insulated underground pipe.

Cloughjordan train station and a pioneering car-sharing project in the town offer residents the possibility of reducing their energy consumption for transport.

The eco village is committed to creating a vibrant, resilient and sustainable local economy. Already new enterprises have been established including a cosy coffee/book shop and a thriving bike shop on Main Street. Existing shops and

businesses are benefiting from new customers who have moved to the area. The eco village includes 15 live/work units that combine apartment living with ground-floor office, retail or therapy space. In addition over half a million euro in funding has been secured for an eco-enterprise centre to provide incubation space for new green business. The infrastructure for high quality cable broadband throughout the eco village is also in place.

The Village will provide an excellent focal point for ecological and sustainable education. It offers a unique opportunity for people to come and learn by immersing themselves in the community. Hands-on courses, workshops and fieldtrips are already popular. Community and enterprise workers have spent time in Cloughjordan and there are plans to run courses for school students. Residential courses are being planned and partnerships with third level colleges such as Tipperary Institute have been established. Cloughjordan is already a Transition Town and plans are progressing to build a state-of-the-art Transition centre that focuses on training for leadership, livelihoods and local resilience.

There is an old African proverb, quoted by Al Gore in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, “If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

- www.transitiontowns.org
- www.transitionculture.org
- www.thevillage.ie
- www.cultivate.ie
- transitiontownsireland.ning.com

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