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CONSCIOUS LIVING: A LOOK AT TWO LOW-IMPACT INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES

by

CARMEN PRICE

Under the Direction of Nancy Floyd

Conscious Living is a series of visual solutions to a current and escalating problem in increasingly populated modern societies between its citizens and the environment they inhabit. Documented in the photographs are two dissimilar intentional communities that both strive to operate harmoniously with the surrounding ecology.

Originally intending to address the misconception that low impact living is uncomfortable or unsatisfying, this research and my firsthand experience has led to conclusions that are more complex and less didactic. Although the images focus on these two communities, ultimately the intention is to provide the viewer with new perspectives on these niche groups, as well as options to implement low impact alternatives to their lifestyle.

INDEX WORDS: Sustainable, Intentional, Low-impact, Community, Environment, Alternative, Off-grid, Co-op

CONSCIOUS LIVING: A LOOK AT TWO LOW IMPACT INTENTIONAL
COMMUNITIES

by

CARMEN PRICE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters

of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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2010

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COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

When in doubt, think about the circus. People never run off to join the circus to *give up* something. They run off to the circus to *get* something.

-Daniel Quinn

For approximately the last two years my focus has been in documenting communities, mostly located in the Southeast, that are working towards an eco-friendly and sustainable lifestyle. My investigations were driven by the film *Flow: for the Love of Water*, which pinpointed how severe the pollution in the planet's water supply has become.

The film illustrated how polluted waters are directly symptomatic of capitalism, and I project that the problem will continue to escalate because it is fueled by monetary greed through control of natural resources. What I had discovered in the movie angered me and equally frightened me. Currently, it is the poor and weak who are losing their inherent right to free and clean water. However, the more frightening reality is that we are teetering on the edge of having no fresh, untainted water at all. Instead of the survival of our species, the corporate mindset sees only opportunity for conquest in an untamed resource.

My original motivation in doing this research was to spread the news about alternative communities to a wider audience, while, at the same time to familiarize

others with the eco-friendly and cost-efficient techniques utilized on an everyday basis in these communities. My mission was inspired by Mel Chin and artists who've worked in collaboration with *The Canary Project*. They use art as a means of addressing the current environmental problem finding viable solutions, and through the artwork spreading the information to as many as possible.

However, as my research evolved, more and more questions arose about the viability of these communities, and ultimately if it was even possible to create an intentional community that was 100 percent self sustaining, surviving for long periods of time without crumbling under such dynamics such as growth spurts in population or difficult interpersonal relationships.

With these questions in mind, I chose to focus specifically on two intentional communities that, though they differed in many facets, were both concerned with being minimally harmful to the land they live on and the surrounding ecology.

During my visits to photograph these communities I was still not convinced that these (or any) intentional communities could be lasting, viable, dynamic and self-sustaining. Hence, my personal mission to convert my viewers into wanting to live in an eco-village or adopting a similar lifestyle ended, and my intention of addressing some of the misconceptions about the communal lifestyle moved to the forefront. I am also interested in proposing to viewers solutions for low impact techniques to their lifestyle.

PRECEDENCE

A commune is often thought of in relationship to the 1960s American counterculture revolution. However, communal societies can be traced back through most of recorded history. Over two thousand years ago the Essenes were a communal group who followed the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth after his death. They are responsible for writing the Dead Sea Scrolls and through them, we have some insight into their communal lifestyle, which is akin to the regime of a nun or monk; favoring asceticism to attain spiritual piety.¹

In the 1730s, New World colonists, including utopian reformists and separatist religious sects, left their homeland to embark upon a new way of life. The vast, mostly unpopulated expanses of land ensured they could settle into groups imbued with their principals, while completely isolated from influence or opposition.² These colonists, among many others, left behind a society that was broken to them. Rather than accepting their discontentment, they chose to start something new and improved.

The Farm, a current example of communal living and one of the most renowned of all intentional communities, appeared during the American Cultural Revolution. It was established in 1970 in Southern Tennessee and is still active today. It began when hundreds of students caravanned across the country, together seeking, “identity, mission, (and) tribe.”³ Their time together bonded them as a community, leading them to pool their resources and buy property to live on. Any one who became a member took vow of poverty, and all of their assets went to a

common treasury. Money was distributed from the treasury to the entire community based on their needs. Removing the wealth-based social hierarchy allowed members to be accepted as equals and so the overall focus rested on the common good of the whole. The Farm is not only an intentional community, but additionally it exemplifies how communal and tribal life function.

Daniel Quinn, a philosopher and writer who favors tribalism, gives an appropriate definition,

A tribe is a coalition of people working together as equals to make a living. The tribal life isn't about spears and caves or about hunting and gathering. Hunting and gathering is a lifestyle, an occupation, a way of making a living...a tribe isn't a particular occupation; it's a social organization that facilitates making a living...the tribe is what provides them with what they need, and if the tribe is gone, they're out of luck...everyone's interest lies in the success of the whole. What's good for the tribe is good for everyone.⁴

The term intentional can apply to virtually any group of individuals that decide to live together and follow a set of rules (generally outside their social norms) but labeling a group as *communal* or *tribal* specifies the overall motivation.

What I called communal before my research has narrowed significantly. My original interest in photographing these communities came from my worries

regarding the planet's natural resources becoming irreparably damaged. Anything left untainted would surely be held onto tightly by the hands of greedy merchants who weigh their wallets against the lives of the haves and have-nots. Any possibility that these implications could be realized, imparts on me a need to empower the average citizen, in the same way as those who established The Farm.

REAL LIFE SUPERMEN

Mel Chin is one of my biggest inspirations as an artist. Rather than creating pieces to display and be sold in a gallery, Chin is concerned with creating artistic inventions for the betterment of humanity. Almost all his projects are creative collaborations with scientists that benefit society, especially inner city neighborhoods, while raising social awareness of ecological problems.⁵

Chin is motivated by the idea that art has the ability to promote change, an idea that goes back to the writings of Roland Barthes. Barthes felt that artists have a responsibility to respond to social issues and be an integrated part of the whole, rather than an elitist group.⁵

Chin is an artistic philanthropist. His work isn't just a response, but a solution to cultural and environmental problems. The projects he has pursued could easily fall into categories other than art, like science or architecture. However, labeling them as art has proved beneficial because art is free from government regulations and authority. Without these limitations Chin is able to explore and experiment with unconventional remedies that would otherwise not have been considered. His subsequent discoveries benefit society and raise social awareness about the issues addressed. *Conscious Living* has similar hopes of spreading awareness to an audience that can use what they see and read about to benefit their own lives.

Mel Chin's latest project, *Pay Dirt*, began when he was asked to visit the disaster site in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. At first he felt helpless to the

devastated situation, but after distance and contemplation realized that he could use his creativity to aid and rehabilitate the area. He noticed that the EPA had made an official report that the lead contamination in New Orleans was not any worse after the hurricane. This came as a shock to him, as the lead levels in the soil were twice the amount considered at a 'safe' level for human beings. This meant that around thirty percent of the children, about 84,000 residences in the area, were suffering from lead poisoning. Lead poisoning can be attributed to learning disabilities and aggression in humans, while the most affected by the toxins are children.⁶

After meeting with scientists they found a conclusive way to remediate the soil using a six inch sand cap combined with Apaptite II. The additive combines with the lead to create a stable molecule that cannot be digested into humans. The remediation is estimated to cost 300 million dollars.⁷

Chin has implemented a project called *Fundreds* in order to 'make' the 300 million dollars required. The project has children across the nation drawing on Fundreds; replicas of the U.S. dollar bill. Chin has created a vault from a residence in New Orleans to house the Fundreds until 300 million of them are completed (Fig. 1). Once the goal has been reached Chin has a retrofitted truck, which runs completely on vegetable oil from school cafeterias. The truck will collect all the Fundreds from around the country and deliver them to congress in hopes that they will be exchanged for real money to fund the project.

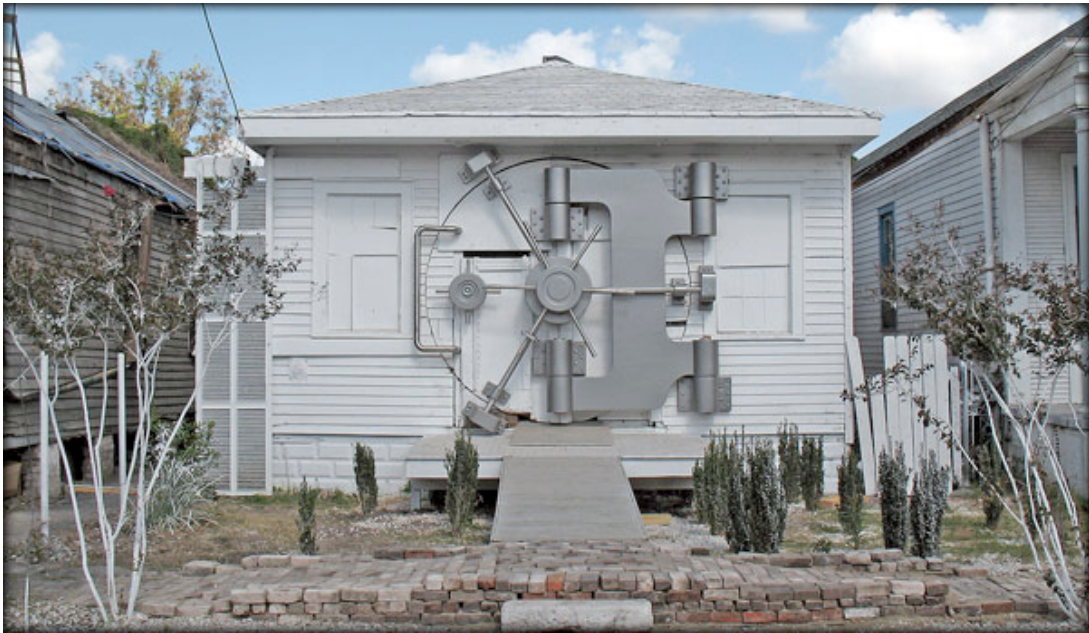


Figure 1

Mel Chin, Safe House for Fundreds, *Paydirt*

Chin uses his creative powers to address problems within society, particularly focusing on environmental issues. *Conscious Living* is a series of visual solutions to a current and increasing problem in modern, capitalist societies between its citizens and the environment they inhabit. The images show intentional communities that formed on the principal that they strive to operate in balance with the surrounding ecology. The images are composed using formal aesthetics so the viewer's visual pleasure leads them into the informative qualities of the work. The photographs address the misconception that living in an intentional community is an unsatisfying way to live or that the individuals living there are society exiles.

Like Chin's projects, my work is centered around finding innovative solutions to preserve or rehabilitate the environment while simultaneously bringing greater social awareness to the issues. Chin has taken it further by implementing his ideas into an eco-artistic reality and accomplishing more than just a piece of art that aims to only give visual pleasure to its audience.

Joel Sternfeld is another artist who has inspired me, particularly his recent work, *Sweet Earth; Experimental Utopias in America*. For this project Sternfeld documented sixty American utopian societies that, in reality, are intentional communities. His motivations are similar to mine in that his photographic survey is meant to address the general population's misunderstanding towards those who live in these types of communities and why they choose to do so.⁸

Interestingly, Sternfeld and I have both visited some of the same communities and have listed some of the same books in our bibliographies. Also, we both have supplemented our images with text (my text accompanying images during exhibition) for the purpose of dispelling misconstrued ideas or stereotypes about intentional communities.

Where our intentions separate completely is that Sternfeld's motivation for photographing these types of communities is to show a survey of the United States.

Sternfeld is aware of intentional communities' roots leading back to when the colonists landed and formed religious or other specific communities that followed

their own social mores and rules. While most of these died out, a resurgence was seen in the 1960s during the counter culture revolution, where many Americans felt alienated by social norms and sought others with similar ideals to live with 'outside' society.

Sternfeld's book, *Sweet Earth*, constitutes a survey of these types of communities in the United States and showcases brings individual places that by themselves appear remote and out of place. Together however, the pattern of interest in living in intentional communities by a diverse population of Americans emerges and gives these societies some normalcy to the viewer/reader.⁹



Figure 2 Sternfeld, Dacha/Staff Building, from *Sweet Earth*

MODEL I

The two communities to be discussed are not formally named out of respect for Model II. A more detailed explanation is located at the beginning the chapter on Model II.

Model I is located on 320 acres of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. It is an intentional community that began in 1994 with seventeen members. There are approximately five remaining original members living on the property permanently; while some have left for good, others return seasonally.

With the exception of the internet their energy usage is completely self-reliant. The community uses a combination of hydroelectric and solar power as the main sources of energy, but other principals are utilized as well (i.e. passive solar heat) (Fig 3). For example, the large co-op house that I stayed in while visiting operates on solar power. However, this often proved problematic because they were frequently low on energy due to some improper upkeep of the solar cells by previous residents. Passive solar energy, which is easy and practical, is another way they conserved energy usage. An example of how the community put passive solar energy to use is by building their homes so the sun heated the indoors through the windows in the winter and faced away from the windows during sunset in summertime to keep the indoors cooler.

Insulation is another practical tool that can be cost efficient and eco-friendly. They often used cellulose, better known as recycled newspaper, for insulation in many of the homes' walls. It is an effective insulator and relatively inexpensive. Unlike commercial insulating material, it isn't hazardous and is biodegradable.



Figure 3 Micro Hydroelectric System

In contrast to The Farm, Model I community requires members to bring their own source of income, and they are not required to surrender their assets to the collective. Those who purchase property are required to pay annual dues and property taxes. Governing is consensus based, meaning every member must attend

council meetings, and anyone has the sole right to stop any action from occurring if they feel strongly it should not occur.

After spending time in this community I realized that I had misunderstood somewhat why the individuals had formed their own separatist society. It felt discriminatory to have a swarm of red tape stick to anyone who wanted to join as a member. For example, you must live with them for a year to apply for membership (getting membership means you can purchase property), there are annual dues to be paid, there is a minimum lifetime amount of volunteer hours you must complete for the community, and you had to have enough savings to begin with to purchase land *if* accepted. Being accepted in a consensus based group can be problematic if you plan on doing anything with your land that even one member doesn't agree is in the best interest of the whole. I attended one of the council meetings, which met every other week, and it gave me some insight into how the process functioned on contested issues (Fig 4). Although the parties in disagreement were visibly aggravated for some time, the mediator and other members were able to eventually come to a compromise. They promote non violent mediation as their preferred means of resolving disagreements. As the community grows in size however, being one hundred percent consensus based may become problematic enough to encourage them to adopt a new policy where some kind of majority would be awarded final decision-making power.

Returning to the subject of tribalism, one of the members, over a discussion during dinner at my sponsored co-op home (Fig. 5) stated that vegetarians should live with vegetarians and omnivores should live with omnivores. I immediately

processed this idea as just another way to segregate people; images of the civil rights movement were flying threw my head as he spoke. Then months and months later, in a sudden moment of clarity, I understood. This man wasn't necessarily prejudice, he believed that segregating people into living arrangements with others who were most alike was ideal and minimized conflict. The problem with this is it is idealistic and ends up excluding those who could benefit from a group or community. Author/Philosopher Daniel Quinn talks about belonging to a tribe that is always in service for the greater good of the whole, however Quinn suggests a new kind of tribe where members are free to join as long as they can contribute to the success of the whole. Furthermore he states,

Ordinary communities make it their policy to exclude certain kinds of people and include all the rest...unless you belong to some abhorred race, religion, social class, or ethnic group, you're welcome to move in. Communes proceed in the opposite way. Their policy is to include certain kinds of people and exclude all the rest...unless you subscribe to the group's special values (social, political, or religious), you're not welcome to move in. The tribal rule of thumb is: *Can you extend the living to include yourself?*¹⁰

Basically Quinn is saying that a tribe is concerned with the success of the group, while communes are concerned with being around others that share ideals (like the man I spoke to over dinner). Demonstrating his point, I refer to the book

Finding Community, written by Diane Leafe Christian, a member and resident of the Model II Community. In chapter one, she answers “Why Community?” with the following seven reasons,

You’ll impact the planet with smaller ecological footprint, you’ll feel safer, you’ll most likely be healthier, you’ll save money [although I disagree here], you’ll grow as a person, you’ll experience connection and support with like-minded friends and colleagues, you’ll have more fun.”¹¹

None of these arguments follows Quinn’s tribal rule of thumb, which is that membership should be based on your ability to contribute to the community; at minimum the amount needed to sustain yourself but preferably more.

At the end of the day there are many amazing facets to Model I. They have innovative low impact architecture (Fig 6 and 7), are adamant about resolving any disputes (including interpersonal) through non-violent mediation, and are managing to create their own supply of energy for their operating needs. Farming and livestock provide for some of the community’s food consumption and spring water is utilized throughout. However, the mountainous terrain makes it extremely challenging to provide food for the entire community. Other positive attributes include having several businesses inside the community that are environmentally focused, using resources (like trees) from their own property to build their homes, and the overall remediation of the land by using permaculture techniques.

Of course nothing is perfect, and there are several problematic areas of the community I noted. Model I is an independent income community rather than income sharing. This allows for some social stratification, which can lead to inequality between the community members. It is apparent when visiting which members are more affluent, by the size of their home, whether it is a single family home or co-op, and the amount of the property attached to the residence. Also, though they welcome the addition of children, little resources are available for their education. A home school enrichment program is available for a fee, but it is limited to young children only.

The largest disadvantage I perceive existing in the community is their rule to remain income independent. The community is in a remote location, making local jobs outside the community scarce. Most of the members I spoke with were put in a position of having a job outside the community, which frequently was out of town.

As of now, they are not yet able to generate the amount of money needed to sustain themselves within their community, which they hope will change over time. Unfortunately for the time being, this means for many members or prospects, a daily routine of chores related to the maintenance of the community, (which is tiring in itself) plus a job elsewhere that provides enough income to cover their cost of living. This flaw appears to be self-defeating in relation to the community's goal of autonomy.

It is fair to say that when I went searching for intentional communities that were focused on self-sustainment, what I was really was searching for was a tribe. A

tribe, as defined by Quinn, is comprised of members who are all socially equal and work together towards a common goal that perpetuates their ability to survive.



Figure 4

Council Hall



Figure 5

Medicine Wheel House



Figure 6

Earthship, Private Residence



Figure 7

Public Bathhouse

MODEL II

I should explain that I have chosen not to identify the communities in my research mainly because of Model II does not want to attract unwanted attention. Most people learn of its existence by word of mouth. Their interest in remaining somewhat anonymous is partially because they do not want to attract those who are not embracing of the hostel's practices and house rules (i.e. inconsiderate individuals who just want to party and can disrupt the peacefulness that practically saturates the air itself). Also, visitors are limited because the community's human waste processing is limited.

Model II is a functioning eco-hostel founded in 1974 by a man named Tom who practiced poverty law and served as a public defender. He had a great passion for traveling but having a wife and three children led him to travel vicariously through others, "talking with adventuresome travelers can be the next best thing to doing it your self."¹²

The years following the hostel's inception were spent building the geodesic domes (Fig 8) and housing for visitors. Although Tom wanted the hostel to make a statement for the environment, he admits that they made many concessions to being a completely self sustaining facility. Over the years more improvements have been accomplished (i.e. the cob oven) and no doubt more are to come.

Tom hopes that,

In spite of our compromises, that the people who visit the hostel will have an opportunity to observe and learn something from mother nature...I want to always be aware of the need to conserve and preserve its beauty for future generations to enjoy.¹³

Model II community uses grid power, specifically electricity and propane. Even so, they have human composting toilets, large gardens for herb and food supply, approximately fifteen chickens, and a cob oven run that burns corn as fuel (Fig 9). There is no heat/air conditioning (which can be extremely challenging during August or January) and all the water comes from natural springs. Unused food is also composted and later used as fertilizer. Although Model I had plenty of land, over 300 acres, most of it was useless for agriculture. Model II has enough for food growth, but suburban sprawl has slowly been creeping in on their surrounding land. Tom recently purchased additional acreage to alleviate the problem temporarily, but he will have to find a way to buy a significant amount more if he intends to keep the community away from street lamps and traffic noise.

Model I community is set up more 'professionally' in that they have specific guidelines to follow in regards to how the community functions on a daily basis and who can become members. Model II is rough around the edges, eco-lite with a dash of adventure. The laissez-faire attitude may be attributed to their ability to walk away at any time with no financial consequences. Model I community is income independent and in some ways reminds me of suburbia. There are definite social norms to be followed in each community, but in general, Model I was a community that had to get to know you

before you could get to know it. Even if Model II wanted to be elitist, their constantly rotating guests and volunteer staff make this next to impossible.

Although both Models do participate in hosting events to educate the public on environmental topics, I personally favor Model II's ability to inspire change in those that come into contact with it. I am reminded of Daniel Quinn's tribal ideal that would allow for anyone to join as long as they could benefit the tribe. Anyone can visit Model II and participate within the community as an equal, and because they offer a place to sleep for travelers there is a constant flux of new ideas and eager sharing between both guests and staff.



Figure 8 Newly Built Geodesic Dome



Figure 9 Cob Oven

FRACTURES

At the start of my research, I was on a mission to create change, utilizing my photographs of the communities as a vehicle for this. In my mind these images were irrefutable evidence of a better way of life. Thankfully, I now have some greatly appreciated hindsight.

Photographs are pieces of the past that we choose to bring forward with us to reflect on the present. I realize that my images in *Conscious Living* also follow this principal. Why did I choose these particular moments or places in time to freeze, cut out, and carry with me to the present? An article by Jason Oddy entitled, *Promised Lands*; Clare Richardson and David Spero points to a recent trend in photojournalism where

Disenchantment with contemporary ways of living and anxieties about impending environmental catastrophes...photographers have discovered a new brand of romanticism, turning their attention-and by extension ours-to various arcadias, in particular those that would lead us back toward a promised land.¹⁴

Without being conscious of it, I have become one among many artists, who seek utopia's existence within intentional communities. Searching for utopia is a familiar pastime to America beginning with the European colonists. Now I too am searching for paradise on Earth, so I can steal fragments of it with my camera to serve as trophies when I returned to mainstream society. Upon reflection, each image in the series is trying to hold onto the utopian characteristics I experienced in person. The very fact that the images are photographs instead of a drawing or painting makes it even more believable to myself and my audience these places exist in reality. Now of course the communities

exist, but the nostalgia and longing are projections from the photographer. I chose images that are easily romanticized rather than strictly displaying eco friendly techniques used in the communities. My previous yearning to join a community similar to those in my project may give the viewer a comparable yearning and desire for an idealistic, communal existence. I have chosen to hide the communities' flaws in the photographs, perhaps so my memory will align with the fragment I brought to the present with me in photographic form, allowing the truth of the memory to become lost in time.

WHERE YOU COME IN

The Middle Path is to avoid attachment to two extremes. If I had written this a year ago I would now be inciting you to drop everything and live your life the way the people in these communities do. If you refused I would imagine how irresponsible or shortsighted you were. I understand now how impractical, dogmatic, and idealist overnight change would be. It is also senseless, as Quinn explains in *Beyond Civilization*

I admire the Gypsies, but not everyone in the world should live the way they do-and (oddly enough) if they did, their way of life would fail...this isn't sociological thinking, this is ecological thinking...Diversity, not uniformity, is what works. Our problem is not that people are living a *bad way* but rather that they're all living the *same* way. The earth can accommodate many people living in a voraciously wasteful and palliative way, it just can't accommodate *all* of us living that way.¹⁵

At the end of this journey I come to a place where changing the world means changing ourselves first. Once we have passed that test we look for others to convince that our side is greener. The only way to lose is to do nothing or to repeat an idea that has failed.

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