

# CREATING HARMONY

Conflict Resolution  
in Community



*edited by*  
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# CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AN ECO-VILLAGE

*by Declan and Margrit Kennedy*

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In 1995 she undertook research on Large-Scale Ecological Settlements in Europe for the European Academy of Urban Environment. More recently her emphasis has been on ecological design for the workplace, especially industrial production units. Her work on ecological architecture and interest-free money systems has resulted in numerous lectures throughout the world which have been translated into a variety of languages.

Professor Declan Kennedy (Dipl. Ing.) is an Irish architect, urban planner, permaculture designer and ecologist. He is a founder member of the Permaculture Institute of Europe. He has been teaching and practising urban design, landscape and agricultural planning coupled with holistic implementation strategies since 1972, currently in special intensive seminars held in many countries – and formerly as Professor of Urban Design and Infrastructure at the Architectural Department of the Technical University of Berlin. He was Country Co-ordinator for Germany for the Global Action Plan for the Earth (GAP) Household Ecoteam Programme. Since its foundation in Denmark in 1994, he has been Chairman of the board of the Global Eco-village Network (GEN) and now runs their European secretariat and its association GEN-Europe, from the ecological community Lebensgarten Steyerberg, Lower Saxony, Germany where he lives.

Margrit and Declan run a planning office in Hanover and Steyerberg. Their research work on ecological settlements in Europe was published in English in *Designing Ecological Settlements*, Dietrich Reimer Verlag, Berlin, 1997, and later published in German. They have been part of a group of ecological architects and planners known as Gaia International since its inception.

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### **WHY HAVE WE MOVED INTO A COMMUNITY?**

Because we wanted to implement a permaculture model and we realised that this was almost impossible to do alone on a meaningful scale. For instance, we could imagine producing vegetables, but not selling them on the market. By living in a community, this necessity could be taken care of by other community members who needed the produce. But we also wanted a very special combination of community characteristics. Our search for a place went on for exactly three years (1982-85), and we found two distinct types of communities:

The first type was the eco-technological community, like Stanley, Tasmania; Langenbruck, Switzerland; Svanholm, Denmark; or Springe-Eldagsen, Germany. They did a very good job in terms of developing new ecological techniques, such as highly productive, low-work, food production systems, ecological stoves, solar cars and solar collectors, organic food for the local market, zero-energy houses, controlled ventilation, root-zone sewage treatment systems – all in the middle of the 1980s. However, in our view, these groups underestimated the whole question of social relationships, assuming that when all members had the same ideal, i.e. ecology, this aspect would take care of itself. But usually it did not – and, in some of these communities, unresolved conflicts can build in such a way that the more sensitive type of member simply had to leave.

The second type was the spiritual community, like Findhorn, Scotland; Wetzhausen, Germany; some Sanyassin communities in Australia or anthroposophic communities in Germany and Sweden. They usually developed good human interrelationships and practised ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ as well as producing fantastic vegetables. But, either we found them too limited in their following of one guru and in their implementation of one particular path, or we found them lacking in innovative ecology.

### **LEBENSGARTEN STEYERBERG**

We realised, therefore, that we had to be part of creating a new community which would combine social/spiritual aspirations as well as the ecological aspects. The community of Lebensgarten Steyerberg was started when a businessman from Berlin bought a dilapidated housing estate which had been originally planned and built in 1939 as housing quarters for a munitions factory. After the war, it had been used as a barracks by the British army – and then it stood empty for almost eight years. In the Northern German climate, this means everything freezes up in winter. For instance, pipes and heating radiators burst and tiled floors blistered. During this time it had also been vandalised – inner doors and ceilings had been broken and the basements were often full of stagnant water.

On December 17th 1984, together with six other people, we decided to initiate a spiritual and ecological community. It was named ‘Lebensgarten’ (the garden of life) Steyerberg. But it was not until the following spring that people began to move in – very slowly at first, as the new occupants had to wait for connections to services: water, electricity and natural gas (from nearby gas fields).

The housing area had 65 units that could be converted to terraced houses and various administrative buildings – all dilapidated, but with redbrick outside walls and tiled roofs in reasonable shape. We moved there in October 1985 and were the seventh group to move in. As only seven houses had lights, the settlement was quite spooky at night in the winter of 1985/86 – not to mention the negative vibrations left by the former Nazi and later British army presence which had reigned for more than 40 years on the site. Within three years of our purchase, all the houses had been either bought or rented by people interested in participating in this experiment. There are now over 100 adults and approximately 50 children as members of this community – of different ages, social and professional backgrounds and with different religions and objectives.

The first action that was taken was to move into the settlement, despite its ruined state, and start the renewal of the buildings one by one, with minimal resources except enthusiasm and commitment. Both physical and spiritual renewal was necessary because more than 30 years of war meant that these walls radiated violence and inhuman realities. The steps chosen by consensus were rebuilding, insulating and renovating as well as meditation, conflict resolution and healing.

Many ecosystems around us have been destroyed, even in the decade and a half of our existence in Lower Saxony, and many others are on the brink of collapse, particularly the 16 square kilometres of the original munitions factory, some few kilometres north of our community. Here the original underground production vaults are being used as temporary storage for radioactive waste from hospitals until a permanent depot can be found. But the location of the final depot is one of the political issues high on the agenda both in Lower Saxony and in Germany as a whole, and no decision is expected in the near future.

Pollution in the water table is another problem. 10 years ago the water that we bored for on the permaculture plot was so good that the City of Hanover contemplated having a contract for piping it 70 kilometres to the city. Now it is contaminated with nitrates and nitrites. We assume that these contaminants are derived from the slow seepage into the ground of the widely used chemical fertilisers that are needed to get two to three crops per year from this mainly sandy soil.

During the past 13 years, Lebensgarten Steyerberg has made it a priority to challenge this escalating trend of environmental damage. We are working hard to demonstrate and display concrete examples of cultural, permacultural, economic and spiritual ways of life that do not tax the earth, i.e. passive and active solar energy savings, benign spiritual practices, sustainable gardening and alternative education. We have not got there yet, but the focus of our undertaking is a return to basics. This is not a step backwards, but a step forwards – towards our roots, encompassing the various aspects of simple, mindful and sustainable living to a way of life most people around us consider ‘natural’. Sustainable living incorporating natural laws is not in fact inferior, but superior. As work progressed, we planned:

- To work out a concept of new forms of socially and ecologically oriented life as well as the feasibility of transposing these to society at large – this through information, education and example encompassing e.g. the media of exhibitions, specially tailored seminars and experiential tours, etc.
- To prepare the space for these presentations by renovating the parts of the existing buildings that have not yet been refurbished.

Over the last 13 years considerable efforts have been made to use the almost derelict community centre for the association and for educational purposes. The renovation of the whole building complex (including the landscaping with reed bed sewage treatment and tertiary ponds) ought to be finished by the year 2000 in order to accommodate the additional stream of visitors, expected from the nearby EXPO 2000 in Hanover. Lebensgarten is now recognised as one of the major fringe projects of this World Fair.

A number of work activities have been set up by members of the Community, and about one quarter have found jobs in the local area. The educational facilities are used to pass on accumulated knowledge in fields such as ecology, healing, healthy building, mediation and personal development (involving approximately 100 seminars and 3,000 guests a year).

The charitable association was founded in 1986, and currently has 100 members and an annual turnover of approximately DM 900,000. There is a great feeling of neighbourliness, regular meetings are held to solve community problems, circle dancing takes place every morning and there is a variety of different working groups.

### **OUR LINKS WITH GEN – THE GLOBAL ECO-VILLAGE NETWORK**

Over the past ten years, many members of Lebensgarten Steyerberg have had the opportunity to travel to countries all over the world. We have witnessed the degradation of our natural systems, and the rapidly accelerating impact of modern human living on the environment. The planet is already well overstretched and in our present system of over-using natural resources will have difficulty in supporting the next five billion people expected over the coming centuries. Reflecting on economic and ecological realities, we believe that unless we change our direction, our behaviour and our ethics, there is little hope that we and these extra people can survive. It is, therefore, not only a wish but a necessity to re-evolve the relationship between Humans, Nature and Technology – which happens to be the theme of EXPO 2000, the World Fair in Hanover.

In the context of this relationship, the Statutes of our Association, Lebensgarten Steyerberg e.V., also fit in with the ideals of the Global Eco-Village Network (GEN). The aims of the association are defined as follows:

- a) Use and preparation of natural ways of nutrition and holistic healing methods.

- b) Development and dissemination of ecological models in which plants, animals and people live together in a mutually supporting way even in limited space.
- c) Development, experimentation and dissemination of biological building materials and their use by local craftsmen and through artistic design, as well as the development of techniques and production methods which support an environmental approach to raw materials and energy.
- d) Use and performance of music, theatre and other forms of the fine arts that support integrative healing methods, training in self-realisation through mediation and training in methods of conflict resolution.

Through its educational programme, the association intends to contribute a human design for everyday life, and to assist in reducing the illnesses of the body, mind and the soul brought about by civilisation. The educational approach aims not only at the human mind but also tries to develop a personal relationship on a heart to heart level.

A rich social and cultural life has developed during these 13 years, leading to the following activities, most of which create business and employment, but also have a significant community component in them:

- a) *Community facilities*: Children's group, youth rooms, adventure play area, studios, music rooms, meditation rooms, a café, bio-retail outlet, wholefood kitchen.
- b) *Ecological facilities*: Lean-to greenhouses, solar electric and solar hot water collectors, solar car with solar filling station, passive solar roof for energy gain, co-generation heating plant, car-sharing group, and a permanent exhibition on the subject of energy and environment.
- c) *Job-creating facilities*: Shop for biological building materials, book-store, school for medical para-professionals, environmental consultancy to industry, ecological architectural and planning office, eco-village institute, school for mediation, eco-publishing, computer consultancy, workshops for precious stones, jewellery and goldsmithing, natural medicine practices.
- d) *Public relations*: Co-founders of the Waldorf School in Minden (40 km. away) and the Permaculture Institutes of Europe and of Germany, consultancy and co-founders of new ecological settlements and of international peace work groups, participation in the EU passive-solar programme Building 2000, several reports in the press, radio and television, networking with other ecological communities worldwide as well as active membership of the Global Eco-Village Network, whose secretariat for Europe Declan Kennedy has been running from Lebensgarten for the past 3 years.

The following amenities have been mostly self-financed or partly supported by private foundations and friendly business firms: a solar roof, a co-generation heating plant, community education, a community living room, a solar-heated

lean-to greenhouse, the renovation of our seminar building: Heilhaus, our solar filling station, the wholefood kitchen, a Zen meditation hall, connection to the Internet and email, a permanent exhibition: Energy and Environment, a light-meditation room, participation in Peace Trees, Croatia and permaculture design courses in new countries of the former eastern block.

### **HOW DID THINGS WORK OUT BETWEEN MEMBERS AT LEBENSGARTEN?**

Well, there's no denying it was exciting, beautiful and difficult, particularly during the first five years when we experienced severe conflicts among ourselves. None of us were educated to deal with the multi-faceted relationships in a community. We all had come from nuclear family backgrounds. We all had different dreams and visions and we all wanted to implement our vision, and wanted the others to help us.

The first step was to realise that we all had to let go of our dreams... so that we could accomplish them usually in a somewhat modified form, later on. We (Margrit and Declan) dreamt about establishing an ecological technology centre, something like the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales. That never materialised because most of the members were more interested in their own self-development than being partners in a business and sharing the 'capitalist's risks'.

The second experience was that we all had quite similar problems in accepting others – and, as it invariably turned out, the problems were mainly with those who reflected some unknown shadow side of ourselves.

Once we understood this and looked upon that shadow side in ourselves, lifting it up into the light of our consciousness, the problem within us – and with the other person who reflected the problem – began to disappear, sometimes instantly.

In a larger community – by 1999 Lebensgarten comprised roughly 100 adults and 50 children – many opportunities for this learning process have occurred, and members will have to develop the ability to transform their shadow sides very quickly. Otherwise, individual conflicts will destroy the functioning of the group as a whole.

Fortunately, and this is an important point, it feels really good to learn to progressively accept oneself and others, and to look at conflict in a different way: "Hey! There is something to learn again – be creative and enjoy it!"

Therefore, in the 'pressure cooker for personal development', as the two of us sometimes called the Lebensgarten, we began to be able to communicate with people at a continuously deeper level of understanding. We noticed that learning was beginning to get easier, faster and was happening with more and more fun, instead of pain. That, we feel, is real progress. Our growing sense of love and accomplishment is also reflected in the outside world. Things are not only beginning to look better on the inside, but also our immediate environment is improving from an ecological point of view.

Ecology was certainly not a second consideration in our case, but for a time the human aspects were paramount. Today, however, we can look back and see that they are a lot easier to resolve. Thus, Lebensgarten has also accomplished quite a bit in terms of recycling of its old pre-World War II buildings. We have put them to good use as dwellings and for our seminar programme which includes lessons in conflict resolution in the community and passes on our experience to others from outside.

### **HOW DID THE EXPERIENCE AFFECT OUR PROFESSIONAL LIVES?**

In order to answer this question, we would have to explain one other common experience: that we all learned to do what we can do best, and to do it as well as we can. By acting in a way which may seem selfish to some outsiders, we found our contribution to the community grew, as did our giving to ourselves and also to society as a whole.

Margrit, after wanting initially to implement our permaculture model, found out that she really wanted to write a book about money – or a sustainable money system as a basis of a sustainable world economy. After having rejected this idea for five years because she is not an economist, she wrote the first draft of the book in four days. Many other small miracles happened while fulfilling this task, but the most amazing one is how this message is self-perpetuating. The book has now been translated into eighteen languages. The Spanish edition was published in Buenos Aires, Christmas, 1998.

Declan continued his permaculture work and found others to help him. Lots of conflicts during the process often made it feel like sowing and weeding on a human relationship level, and within himself too. His 'real' task was, however, networking and going out into other countries in Europe – spreading the message and the use of permaculture principles in rural and urban settings. He went to countries which had experienced peace for many years like Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Ireland, the USA, Brazil and Italy, but also countries which were in a state of conflict: Poland before the political changes, Croatia during the war, Slovenia just after the separation from Yugoslavia, places where things had to be built up from nothing. Later, he did Eco-village Design Training in the USA, Australia, Italy, Slovenia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Almost everywhere the courses and the training were often as much about mediation as permaculture or eco-village design – as he found that conflict is also a learning process in the development of eco-villages elsewhere.

Then came projects in East Germany. After the re-unification, this region was the target for those out to make a quick DMark. Some 'West-Germans' however, tried to implement a complex ecological settlement adjacent to an old town where their ancestors had lived. Declan became the official ecological advisor, but again his main task was to animate and mediate between different planning consultants and also between them and the residents of the old town.

This trust in doing what we enjoy most and where our hearts are, has developed within the community. Not only did we experience this within

ourselves individually, but also with others around us in the community which made our lessons much more penetrating and real. Although we see ourselves as professional planners in almost all our projects, often this ability to mediate between people who have not learnt to communicate with each other, or to listen to each other, has become almost as important as our professional knowledge. Both over 55 years of age, we went back to the classroom and did a year's training in mediation so that we would have the right tools with which to work.

What is mostly forgotten is that it is just as important to find a solution at the feeling level as it is to be able to create a rational, satisfying concept. From there, the next step follows – to have fun and to enjoy the path to synthesis, that is, creating situations which integrate rationality, feeling and intuition.

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