

Summary

The food and energy crisis has created a potentially radical impetus for society change, arguably lending to a discussion of the importance of a community-based approach to resource management. Active participation of individuals can potentially empower residents to be more ecologically sensitive in their everyday lives mirroring the need of council and governmental bodies to adopt a more integrated approach to food and energy production. Co-housing developments offer a theoretical outline of the significance of community-based living that needs to be instilled in town planning. The emphasis maintained throughout is that we need localisation rather than globalisation, or at least a redefinition of the latter according to sustainable principles.

“Faced with the current food and energy crisis, how can society improve its well-being?”

Food and energy as resources are becoming increasingly more erratic and unpredictable. Apocalyptic statements serve no regard here but the state of dwindling fossil fuels and rising food prices in both the developed and more urgently, the developing world are real, palpable proof of the need for a new vision. The critical time frame in which there is consensus that ‘something must be done’ requires an adoption of new ways of living. Whilst it would be naïve to suggest that capitalism, which so readily drives global consumption, could be overhauled in any momentous way, there are a number of ways in which attitudes towards the exploitation of resources could be reconceived. Arguably, the change required has to come from a ‘bottom-up’ approach, requiring exploration of the degeneration of community-based living and the individual pursuit of profit, inherent in capitalist economies that have so resolutely defined cultures of the modern industrialised world. The concept of ‘co-housing developments’ could be used not as a prescriptive, universalised panacea to food and energy shortages, but as a paradigm for the creation of environmentally friendly and small-scale practical solutions that can encourage the individual, as part of a collective, to be a powerful agent in the creation of a sustainable society. Furthermore, the example of community action can lead to a discussion of the effect this can have as a form of propaganda or resistance as larger scale agencies and councils adopt a cooperative mindset that pressurizes obligation in the international community.

Domestic self-sufficiency, of both food and energy supplies provide perhaps the greatest tool through which communities can compensate for increasingly volatile global markets. Oil production has increased rapidly in the past century from about 0.1 billion barrels in 1900 to around 4.2 in 1950 and to approximately 27.0 in 2000 (BP, 2007), yet any kind of assessment of historical or present availability is tenuous. Quotas set by OPEC make current oil supplies difficult to estimate as oil-exporting countries elevate actual quantities left in the ground in order to justify increased extraction. Agricultural production is also progressively being viewed as an equally finite process, as land degradation and land availability limits the expansive capability for potential growth to meet demand. Further, the agricultural industry is heavily dependent on fossil fuel availability: the mechanized processes of modern growing, harvesting and transportation are reliant on supplies being both plentiful and efficiently distributed. Since energy generation and food production are largely corporately controlled, the ‘power of the consumer’ becomes highlighted as an opportunity to create fast solutions in spite of the relatively slow processes of global decision making. The power of the consumer has become invoked in all aspects of ‘grassroots’ schemes that establish a link between community and sustainability: perhaps most overtly in the recognised ideal of the anti-consumerist, self-sufficient liver of the ‘good life’.

The development of co-housing initiatives as a form of intentional community whereby shared aspirations of residents co-establish the design, construction and living of 'alternative', simpler and greener lifestyles centres on people literally "walking their environmentalist talk" (Meltzer 2005). Distinct from 'communes', a term with connotations of radical bohemian lifestyles far removed from ordinary living, co-housing projects worldwide attempt to offer a more autonomous and rational approach. Architectural form, for example, is considered of primary importance to the creation of a community space within a pre-existing neighbourhood or housing complex. A co-housing development generally encourages individuals to have private homes and employment outside of the community, with common participation during shared meals or other leisurely times. Graham Meltzer in "Sustainable Community: Learning from the Co-housing model", describes the Berkeley co-housing project in the USA as an important example of infill urban renewal whereby several 'brown field' or derelict sites within the city centre were reconstructed into an intimate shared space of lawns and gardens, juxtaposed against fourteen private homes and a shared house. Shared meals allows for bulk storage of food, reducing packaging waste and encouraging a less materialistic approach to cooking. Furthermore, the team effort promotes interpersonal relationships contrasting to the relative anonymity of a typical urban environment. The group developed an urban site in order to showcase the power of revitalisation, both socially and through environmental principles such as minimisation of vehicle usage. Residents have contoured the site to optimise grey water recycling, installed energy saving fixtures and fittings such as solar water heating and compost all food waste. Further, they are developing permaculture plans in which gardens will be landscaped to adopt a self-sufficient integration of holistic, cyclical methods of food production, waste use and reduction. This parallels the interesting development of a Landshare Project in the UK whereby individuals without land can acquire land for cultivation from those with spare land. Domestic supply is seemingly essential in co-housing ideologies: the implementation of many of these designs have resulted from painstaking planning meetings and workshops encouraging outside participation from other co-housing groups as a kind of social and environmental networking.

Overall, it is important to see that the adoption of these kinds of technologies in various localised homes or neighbourhoods are not just static ideals for a concerned few. They represent a series of interactions between like-minded residents that are endeavoured to achieve much of what mainstream politics fails, since communal rather than personal wealth is the pervasive ideal. If district officials, bureaucratic institutions and political bodies begin to see micro-generation, district-scale renewable energy generation and local food production as key to a sustainable future, then the co-housing developments already in place can provide a knowledge framework to catalyse the networking and integration required to make these challenging concepts feasible. Certainly, the implications of the adoption of simpler lifestyles amongst affluent middle classes of Western settlements could potentially establish a new equality in global resource consumption. As society adopts innovative technologies that intensify and concentrate yields and extractions, the degree to which these are implemented sustainably will thus depend on relationships to renewed historical and cultural knowledge, with the community structure providing the primary core to successful, integrated resource management.