

A Tale of Two Therapeutic Ecovillages

Why create an ecovillage? It entails a *huge* amount of work and, anyway, isn't the creation of new settlements the responsibility of the state and the private sector? Perhaps – but sometimes, an idea comes along that is so big and so inspired that it takes a new, self-built community to hold it. Such ideas tend to centre on the concept of service.

I had the privilege, in the summer of 2006, of visiting two European ecovillages profoundly rooted in this ethic. Both were created with the core aim of integrating into loving, functional communities those who had previously been excluded, kept on the margins of society in largely loveless institutions.



Sólheimar ecovillage in Iceland is the oldest member of the modern ecovillage family. It was created in 1931 with the mission of integrating children with special needs into a secure and loving community with carers and their families. Now, as a mature community of around 100 people, the original children of the community have grown up or died and the focus of the community is on integrating those with special needs, rather than children

specifically. In addition, Sólheimar has, in recent years, also begun to work with the long-term unemployed and with prisoners coming towards the end of their sentences, helping both make the transition back into mainstream society.

The Kitezh community in Russia was founded in 1992 to provide a home for orphans in foster families within a community setting. Kitezh members have erected most of the buildings that house a community of 11 families that include 35 children, most of whom are adopted. The community, in cooperation with supporters in the UK, has pioneered child-centred therapeutic methods and is currently working with federal and state-level



governments in Russia to have the Kitezh model instituted as a key element of official policy on care for orphans in the country. Work has already started on the building of a second community, close to Moscow, and the long-term aim is to have a nationwide network of communities based on the Kitezh model.

Both communities owe their existence to powerful, visionary founding figures. Sólheimar was founded by the formidable Sesselja H. Sigmundsdóttir, a woman who studied the care of children and the mentally challenged in Germany and Switzerland in the 1920s. She became fascinated by the vision and theories of Rudolf Steiner, and based her work primarily on his methodologies, emphasising the importance of organic horticulture, healthy food and artistic expression.



The state is today the largest source of income for the community – in the form of payments for the care services provided by Sólheimar. But it has not always been an easy partner for the community. In the early days, when theories of care for the disabled were less enlightened than today, the state insisted that special needs and non-special needs children be kept apart. Early black-and-white photos show a wall running down the middle of the community. More recently, the community's practice of seeking maximum integration of all its members into one large community-family has run into difficulties with official government policies that have ear-marked funding *specifically* for those with special needs.



The community fairly glistens under the purest blue sky in this thin, northern light as the estimable Gumunder, leader of the community shows a group of us around the place. Glaciers sparkle among the mountain tops off to the north. Everywhere we look, there are smiling faces as work teams go about their tasks. Beauty and elegance surround us.

To describe the Sólheimar as a pioneering initiative would be to hugely understate the truth. I lose count of the number of times that Gumunder, without a hint of boasting, informs us that the technology or technique we are watching was first introduced into Iceland here. It was the first to introduce organic farming and has Iceland's only organic egg farm. It has Iceland's only organic tree nursery (Sólheimar has already planted 17,500 trees on its estate and plans to plant a total of 450,000 saplings in all). It created Iceland's first artificial wetland-based sewage treatment plant and the first solid-liquid sewerage separation system. It also has the country's only sculpture park, with beautiful bronzes created by many of Iceland's finest sculptors. The magnificent Sesselja House is Iceland's only eco-centre and is the first contemporary building that is PVC free. Finally, Sólheimar is home to the world's only theatre group, launched in 1931, in which special needs and non-special needs people work together as equals.

This, needless to say, is quite an ecovillage tour! Here is a small, rural community that has turned itself into a major cultural and ecological resource for the entire country. Yet, it is no museum piece. All the while, the various businesses – the art workshop, the ceramics and weaving studios, the soap factory, the candle-making workshop, the wood workshop, the tree nursery and reforestation centre, the organic farm, the guest-house, the general store and crafts shop – are abuzz with activity. Visitors come from far and wide and the beautiful café and restaurant serve all day.



Kitezh, too, is a quite remarkable community. Unofficial figures suggest that there could be as many as 800,000 orphans in Russia. Almost all of these live in institutional orphanages where there is generally little love or personalised care on offer. TV journalist, Dmitry Morasov, had a burning desire to put this to rights. He, his wife and a small group of friends bought some land about 300 kilometres south of Moscow and began to build their own community, log by log. Stories of the early days, where the small pioneer group lived together in a small hut they



themselves had built (with an outside toilet!) while the thick winter snows built up around them bears testimony to the strength of the vision and of their commitment.

Today, the community is largely built and attention has moved on to building a second, sister community, called Orion, and to attempting to disseminate the model more widely throughout Russia. Work teams, made up of former Kitezh students

working and studying in Moscow together with their friends, head off most week-ends in summer to build the houses in Orion. This includes construction of a biological red-bed sewage treatment system.

A short visit to the Orion site reveals a riot of joyous activity. New houses and workshop spaces are rising like mushrooms from the ground. Masha Pichugina, who I remember as a shy young woman on the Findhorn Ecovillage Training programme just a few years ago, is now the strong leader at the helm of the Orion project. She is more than halfway through her psychology degree at a

university in Moscow, has recently adopted two orphans and, when she can find time from mothering and administration, is on the building site, hammer in hand.

Meanwhile, teachers and foster parents, Masha included, travel the length and breadth of the country addressing conferences, talking to university students and sharing what they have learned with all who would listen. This represents an ever-larger number of people as the profile of the community grows from year to year. Over the last 18 months, Kitez and Orion have appeared on numerous radio and television shows.



Meanwhile, Dmitry Morasov has received the Order of Honour (equivalent of the OBE in the UK) that was awarded by the Russian President. Two other community members each received an Order of Merit from the Kaluga Regional Government in recognition of their work.

Kitez has become a centre of excellence in therapeutic care for orphans and has developed strong relations with professional organisations internationally, especially in the United Kingdom. I sit in on an impromptu theatre show and a community meeting and marvel at how confident and skilful the children are in their communication – giving and receiving praise, expressing dissatisfaction and verbalising clear requests for what they want.



These are happy and healthy communities, much of whose distinctiveness, as far as I can see, derives from two common sources. First, those who created and who now choose to live in Sólheimar and Kitez/Orion have moved beyond the life of professional carers working conventional 35-hour weeks and have rather, committed themselves to a life of service that makes little or no distinction between working and non-working time. Second, in both

communities, a great emphasis is placed on creativity and the arts. There are theatre troupes, painting classes and a pervading ethic of style and beauty.

On reflection, this combination of service and the arts may be as close as we can get to in identifying those factors that truly make ecovillages work.