

## **Planning by intentional communities: an understudied form of activist planning**

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The purpose of the paper is to present a neglected form of activist planning, and to argue that the planning efforts of intentional community activists are of interest in light of the many cities worldwide which claim to promote diversity, often in attempts to attract 'the creative class'. In many countries, neo-liberalism has presently a strong position in local and national politics, in the organizing of the public sector, and in the design of urban planning-related policies. There is a need for alternative ideologies and for facilitating ways of living on the periphery of mainstream market society and consumption culture. Making room for dissenting voices in urban planning is but a small step in the right direction. Nevertheless, the contribution of this paper is to expand the common notion of activist planning, and to start exploring what happens when the plans of activist communities meet the authorities of mainstream society.

Activist planners can be professional or lay, and they can work inside or outside government. When based in civil society, they are most often affiliated with protest groups, urban social movements, neighbourhood associations, or NGOs. Activist planners can also be members of intentional communities, however. These are communities of activists who have chosen to live together in order to achieve a common purpose. Cooperation enables the activists to uphold a lifestyle reflecting their ideas of the good society, and underlining their difference from the mainstream. The activism of intentional communities is related to politics, religion, counter-culture, ecology, peace work, or experimental family relations. Some of the communities have an urban or rural area to their disposal and have to plan for its use, typically requiring a relationship and even some cooperation with the local government.

The planning efforts of the several hundred intentional communities throughout the world have scarcely been studied. Yet, many cities aim for diversity, which may

encompass the facilitation of blocks or neighbourhoods offering different ways to live, love, work, and socialize. How do the activist society and the municipality interact in planning matters? What is the typical municipal response to the plans of intentional communities? Are their plans clearly marked by the activists' ideals and ideology, or do the plans usually show pragmatic adjustment to municipal demands?

In addition to the wishes of neighbours and the regulations of the municipality, internal matters make an imprint on the plans of intentional communities. Activist ideals often generate dilemmas when applied to the day-to-day running of a community. The following is just a few examples: (1) Too fast goal achievement can be counterproductive, as there must be time to develop new goals that are useful for continued activist mobilization. (2) Too much solidarity with socially deprived groups when recruiting members to the community can undermine activism. (3) Once external enemies are defeated, internal disagreement may come to light, and the activism may drop off. (4) The desire for personal freedom can conflict with the common efforts required for activism and social experiments. The ideology and practice of the intentional community Svartlamon in Trondheim, Norway, contain a number of dilemmas. This political-cultural activist community of around 200 people and 30 buildings is studied in the paper. It is examined how internal conflicts and contradictions affect the planning of the area (32 000 m<sup>2</sup>) that is to the activists' disposal.

A few facts about the case area follow. The first squatters from a local anarchist-type youth milieu occupied deserted houses in Svartlamon in 1988. Most of the squatters gradually obtained legal contracts. Nevertheless, Svartlamon residents and municipal authorities were in continuing conflict for almost a decade. Even though some decisions that were threatening to the activists were made, and some housing contracts were eliminated, the residents struggling to preserve the area for housing instead of regulating it for industry, prevailed. In 1998, the Trondheim City Council voted to keep Svartlamon as a housing area. The industrial interests had to move out and were given compensation and business property elsewhere. In accordance with the development plan of 2001, Svartlamon became a pilot project for sustainable social housing, direct democracy and ecological city planning. The idea was to experiment

with combinations of low rents, residents' own efforts, rehabilitation by using recycled materials, and construction of some untraditional houses with a simple standard.

**Methodology:** The paper consists of two parts. The first provides general information about intentional communities with a population size, an area, and a purpose that make them of interest to urban planning. For example, rural farms, cloisters, and single-building collectives are left out. The information comes from directories of intentional communities, the web-pages of such communities, and the academic literature on the relevant communities. Most intentional communities are too small to require land use planning, and these are ignored here. The second part of the paper is a case study of Svartlamon. Several plans are written by the activists, partly in cooperation with municipal planners. The primary source is the detailed development plan for the area from 2001. Four master theses deal with the intentional community Svartlamon. Two of them are based on interviews with residents, supplemented with a few interviews of municipal employees. Results from the students' interviews are used in the paper. In addition, I interview key municipal planners and key personnel in the Svartlamon Residents Association. In 2009, the Association conducted a residents survey eliciting the activists' opinions on a long list of issues important to the intentional community. The survey was carried out with assistance from sociology students and is an important source of information.

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