Making a place of their own
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7 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

7.1 Introduction
Intentional communities turned out to be a complex and diverse phenomenon. They occur in different societal and spatial contexts, and their life course is influenced by both external and internal changes. The goal of this thesis was to unravel the phenomenon, through studying how intentional communities are (re)constructed. Intentional communities can be identified by a deliberate attempt to realise a common, alternative way of life outside mainstream society (Poldervaart 2001). This definition encompasses a broad scope of intentional communities that attempt to withdraw from mainstream society to various degrees. It is important to note that while intentional communities are the result of certain dissatisfactions with mainstream society, they are not completely detached from it. Self-definition of intentional communities always takes place in relation to mainstream society, which constitutes the key topic throughout the chapter. The three research questions that were posed in the first chapter are answered in turn in sections 7.2-7.4. In 7.5, the relevance of research on Others is discussed, and the thesis concludes with implications and furnishes recommendations for further research.

7.2 The development of intentional communities
This section answers the first research question - Which processes have influenced the development of the phenomenon of rural intentional communities in the Western world from 1960 onwards? - which was discussed in section 1.4. Intentional communities in rural areas are situated on the literal and figurative margins of an urban-based society. They have a long tradition, and comprise both secular and religious communities. From the 1960s onwards, two trends in society have influenced the development of intentional communities. The first trend is the increasing acceptance of different lifestyles. This is reinforced through the rise in postmodern characteristics of society, the most important of which are fragmentation and diversification. In general, intentional communities are tolerated as an alternative to life in mainstream society, rather than being rejected as ‘deviant’. The second trend is the occurrence of counterurbanisation, which is a population deconcentration from (sub)urban to rural areas. The development of intentional communities in rural areas can be seen as a specific component of the broader counterurbanisation process (see, for example, Mitchell 2004). The creation of rural intentional communities is fuelled by a sense of dissatisfaction with city life, and idealisation of the countryside. The urban represents mainstream society, and is constructed as ‘horror’: individualist, impersonal, polluted, busy, dangerous, hectic and stressed. The escape to the rural embodies the realisation of an alternative lifestyle opposed to mainstream urban life. To aid further study, the wide range of intentional communities that grew as a consequence of the above circumstances was structured to a large extent through a typology, which is the subject of the next section.
7.3 Four types of intentional communities

The second central research question of this study was: Which categories of intentional communities can be distinguished in the Western world? As intentional communities are a complex and dynamic phenomenon, a structural approach was adopted to gain more insight into their functioning. Through clustering similar communities based on extensive survey data on intentional communities in the Western world, a typology was created (see chapters 2 and 3). The typology consists of four types of communities: (1) religious, (2) ecological, (3) communal, and (4) practical communities. It provides a framework within which (new) communities can be classified. To illustrate the applicability of the typology, the various communities that have been identified in the Western world throughout history are subjected to this typology in Table 7.1. Table 7.1 gives a summary of section 1.4 (pp. 14-17) and section 3.2 (pp. 43-47), and is explained in the following.

Table 7.1: Intentional communities in history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sectarian &amp; Christian communities</td>
<td>Until second century AD</td>
<td>Roman Empire</td>
<td>Communal &amp; Religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Monastic communities</td>
<td>From first century onwards</td>
<td>Europe, gradually spreading to the rest of the world</td>
<td>Religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Heretical communities</td>
<td>12th and 13th centuries</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Religious/Communal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Protestant communities</td>
<td>16th–18th centuries</td>
<td>Europe, North America</td>
<td>Religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Socialist communities</td>
<td>Early 19th century</td>
<td>Europe, North America</td>
<td>Communal/Ecological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Anarchistic communities</td>
<td>Late 19th century</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communal/Ecological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>(Hippy) communes</td>
<td>1960s and 1970s</td>
<td>Europe, North America and Oceania</td>
<td>Communal/Ecological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Cohousing communities &amp; eco-villages</td>
<td>From 1990s onwards</td>
<td>Europe, North America and Oceania</td>
<td>Practical &amp; Ecological</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on Zablocki (1980)

Members of religious communities focus on serving ‘God’, to become united with Him in the afterlife. A collective identity is created and strengthened through the commitment of the members to a common religious ideology. Religious communities are the most withdrawn type of community, as they are inward-oriented. Various religious communities have existed throughout history, as shown in Table 7.1. Ecological communities can be characterised by a focus on living in harmony with the environment. This stems from a concern about the ongoing exploitation of nature by humans. Ecological communities are sometimes concerned with changing mainstream society to incorporate their norms and values, and involved in social movements (see, for example, Pepper 1991). The features of
ecological communities have for instance been found in hippy communes and eco-villages (Table 7.1). Communal communities focus on maintaining good interpersonal relations, as a counter to the individualism they observe in mainstream society. These communities are created for the purpose of communal living. Most secular communities have characteristics of communal groups (see Table 7.1). Practical communities have rather individualist traits, as their purpose is to enable their members to live comfortable family lives in a communal setting. The community is subordinate to the individual members. Practical communities, exemplified by cohousing groups in Table 7.1, are the least withdrawn of the four types.

Although they have distinguishing features, each of the four types can be characterised by a degree of internal diversity as well. As intentional communities are dynamic, they can develop from one type into another over time, which was illustrated with the case of Whiteway Colony in chapter 6. It should be noted that while the typology identified in this study is a simplification of reality at a certain point in time, the typology provided a useful framework for selecting and studying the life course of a small number of intentional communities.

7.4 Intentional communities’ life courses

To be able to answer the third research question Which underlying mechanisms can help explain the life courses of different types of intentional communities in Northwest Europe?, a multiple case study was carried out. For each type of intentional communities, a ‘typical’ and a long-standing case were selected. In addition, one ‘typical’ ecological community which had not been built yet was chosen. The identification of the ‘typical’ cases was based on their average scores on the defining variables for each type (see Table 3.1 on p.44). With regard to long-standing cases, the communities with the earliest foundation years were selected. From both the surveyed literature and the case study, it transpired that the common ideology, organisational structure, and position in society were the most important mechanisms explaining the communities’ life courses. These factors are discussed in turn for each type of community.

Religious communities

The studied religious communities were Carmel DCJ and Goloka Dhama. A common core element in both studied religious communities was the shared ideology. Both the nuns and the devotees designated their lives to serve their ‘God’ as faithfully as possible. A fundamental belief was that they would become united with ‘God’ in the afterlife. As places of transition, religious communities are liminal places. The community is seen as an opportunity to share spiritual experiences with like-minded people. Sharing such experiences is facilitated by the existence of a world-wide network of communities, which was the case for both Carmel DCJ and Goloka Dhama. The continuity of an individual community is subordinate to that of the ideology in itself.

The organisational structure of the studied religious communities basically served to facilitate the spiritual transition of their members, which was realised through strict daily routines, and hierarchical structures. Their submission to the strict rules and practices perpetuates the communities’ continuity. Carmel DCJ in particular functioned as a total institution, where members had restricted personal space and freedom. As an integral part of the Catholic tradition, Carmel DCJ was embedded in mainstream culture. The monastery contributed to society through its apostolate and prayer life. With the secularisation of society, the community has become increasingly out of place. By comparison, as a Hare
Krishna community, Goloka Dhama is a ‘foreign’ influence in Northwest Europe. The devotees were aware of this, and were committed to maintaining a sense of neighbourliness with their surroundings, to anchor their community within the local context. To conclude, religious communities serve to facilitate their members’ transition to a higher plane of existence. As such, the life course and continuity of an individual community are not relevant, especially when the community is part of a wider movement. However, humankind’s need to become united with ‘God’ ensures a continuous demand for religious communities. Thus, as a phenomenon, religious communities are likely to continue to exist on the fringes of mainstream society.

**Ecological and communal communities**

The ecological and communal communities that were studied are Toustrup Mark, Chickenshackle Housing Co-operative, Tweed Valley Eco-Village, Eden and the Hobbitstee. The ideals of ecological and communal groups consisted of various combinations of three components. The first is a concern with protecting the environment. This was realised, for instance, through reducing consumption, buying and producing organic products, and using renewable energy sources. Second, communal living is a goal in itself, as a counterbalance to the perceived individualist mainstream society. The members intended to create a sense of togetherness and belonging amongst themselves. The third component is affinity with the left side of the political spectrum, for example as expressed by pacifism and egalitarianism. Some of the politically engaged ecological and communal groups wanted to convey their ideals to the mainstream. When the ideals of these communities are accepted into the mainstream, they would become indistinct from mainstream society.

The organisational structures of ecological and communal communities were characterised by equality in relationships. Decisions were often made through consensus, which gives all members the chance to participate in the debate on communal issues. Furthermore, the land of all the communities was owned by the communities as institutions. This was motivated by the idea to provide affordable housing, and to enable people with fewer financial means to live on relatively large pieces of land in rural areas. However, some members abused such ideals, and engaged in free rider behaviour. Through using and exploiting a community, free riders may undermine its continuity. The ideals of ecological and communal groups were relatively close to and popular in the mainstream, and attracted both committed members and free riders. If the communities could develop effective mechanisms to keep out free riders, their popularity in mainstream society would allow them to thrive.

**Practical communities**

The practical case communities were Whiteway Colony and Trudeslund. Practical communities were the least withdrawn from the mainstream, both physically and ideologically. They rejected the individualism of Western societies, which is why they turned to communal living. Communal living served to enable comfortable family lives, and was not a goal in itself. A key issue in the organisational structure of practical communities was the division between public and private space. When the original anarchistic focus turned out to be malfunctioning, Whiteway increased private space, and struck a balance between public and private. During the time of this research, Trudeslund’s members were on the verge of a conflict involving the extension of the houses of some members, which would threaten the public community space, as well as the sense of privacy of other members. Members of practical communities wanted to live communally
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with as few constraints on their private spaces as possible. Practical communities can be characterised as neighbourly places, where a collective identity is maintained through common identification with and responsibility for the community spaces and heritage. Their continuity is uncertain, as they might assimilate into society because of their similarity to ‘regular’ neighbourhoods.

Securing continuity
The continuity of intentional communities depends on both their internal organisation, and their position in society. With regard to internal organisation, a distinction between religious and other types of communities can be made. Religious communities are relatively stable. Their members are strongly tied to the communities, because of their submission to ‘costly rituals’ (see Sosis 2000). This increases their stability and continuity. In most ecological, communal and practical communities, the commitment required of the members is not as all-encompassing as in religious communities. As a result, free riders can gain access to communities relatively easily, and adversely affect their functioning. This may explain the generally more short-lived nature of ecological, communal and practical communities when compared with religious communities.

With respect to securing their continuity in relation to society, idealistic and pragmatic communities can be distinguished as two extremes. Idealistic communities are often activist, and strive to achieve social change. Through propagating their ideals, they attempt to realise their continued existence. More pragmatic communities do not intend to convince others of their ideals, but rather seek a niche in which they can exist. To achieve this, they are willing to make concessions in their ideology, and change to resonate more in line with mainstream society. Although some of the ecological and communal groups that were studied in the context of this thesis were striving for social change, most communities adopted a more pragmatic approach in their relation with the mainstream. Thus, the studied communities provide alternative lifestyles on the fringes of society.

7.5 The use of research on Others
In cultural geography, the traditional image of the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, sound-minded, middle-class, middle-aged man has been abandoned as the norm. Minority groups are increasingly recognised, resulting in a number of different acknowledged life worlds and identities. Although the prevailing discourses of those in power still dominate those of Others, these dominant discourses are also contested, for example by New Age Travellers (Halfacree 1996), and the women of the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp, who protested against a US airbase for cruise missiles and nuclear warheads in the early 1980s (Cresswell 1994). Intentional communities also oppose mainstream discourses to various extents, contesting for instance mass consumption, individual land ownership, and patriarchy. Such resistance is always invoked by (the perception of) specific developments in society, and therefore intentional communities can never be completely separated from society. Rather, they suspend or invert what is ‘normal’ in the mainstream. Therefore, they function as liminal places and heterotopias.

Liminality can be defined as a state of being “betwixt and between” (Shields 1990, p.48). The foundation of intentional communities is often characterised by markers of liminality, such as uncertainty, ambiguity, and conflict, and intentional communities maintain the four characteristics of liminality that were introduced in chapter 1: (1) location on the literal fringes of mainstream society, (2) contestation of capitalist economic norms, (3) inversion
of traditional sexual roles, and (4) adherence to different, not dominant, ideologies (see Kamau 2002). These characteristics were found to various extents in the four types of communities. First, ecological and communal groups are most typically located in rural areas, away from mainstream urban society. Chickenshack was for instance located in a remote area in North Wales (chapter 5). Second, dominant capitalist norms were explicitly rejected by some ecological and communal groups, for example in Toustrup Mark, where the houses were collectively owned and maintained (chapter 5). Religious communities renounced materialism and consumerism associated with capitalism. Third, celibacy was practised in Carmel DCJ and by Goloka Dhama’s priests (chapter 4). Finally, with regard to their ideologies, the communities stood out from the mainstream through adhering to various religious, communal, environmental and political ideologies.

Heterotopias are places in which certain mainstream norms are inverted. The concept has been applied to various places, such as gated communities (Hook & Vrdoljak 2002), pilgrimage centres (St John 2005), and world heritage sites (McCoy Owens 2002). Through their contestation and inversion of the dominant norms, intentional communities also function as heterotopias. The most important features of heterotopias which are also found in intentional communities are (1) their changing roles in society, (2) their simultaneously open and closed nature, and (3) their function to create alternative spaces. First, the role of intentional communities in society is subject to changes. An example is the Hobbitstee in the Netherlands, which developed from a politically active hippy commune, attempting to gain commitment in society to their leftist ideals, to a more inward-oriented communal group in which people focus on their own personal growth (chapter 5). The second feature emerged from the variation in rites that individuals have to undergo before becoming a member of a community. In Trudeslund (chapter 6), new members simply bought a house, whereas in Carmel DCJ (chapter 4), new members literally went through various stages of a noviciate before taking their eternal vows after seven years. Third, intentional communities deliberately establish alternative places: they intend to be different from what is ‘normal’. The members of Chickenshack created an alternative housing system, in order to overcome financial barriers to living in a rural environment (see chapter 5).

After relating intentional communities to concepts of Otherness, the discussion now turns to intentional communities in relation to other alternative developments in society. Examples are artist communities (de Bodt 2004; Jacobs & Warner 1980; Reden 1998; van der Dollen 1996; van Hoven & Meijering 2005), travellers/nomads (Halfacree 1996; MacTavish & Salamon 2005), and transnational migrants (Meijering & van Hoven 2003; Willis & Yeoh 2002). Intentional communities are situated within the context of anti-urbanism. Anti-urbanism can be characterised by an interest in ecology, protecting the environment, and organic products (see also section 1.1). It is a trend in which ecological and communal communities and others such as back-to-the-landers (Jacob 1996; Jacob 1997) and people interested in simple living (Elgin 1981; Shi 1985) can be positioned. Through combining their mutual interests different anti-urbanists can strengthen their position and secure their places on the fringes of society. For example, ecological and communal communities could develop information exchanges and mutual activities involving alternative developments. Such contacts existed for instance between Chickenshack and the nearby Centre for Alternative Technology (Centre for Alternative Technology 2006). There are numerous other developments which provide links with ecological and communal groups, such as the propositions on suburban architecture by Dolores Hayden (1984), Rural Studio, an architectural project for the disadvantaged in rural Alabama (Oppenheimer Dean & Hursley...
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2002), and the Aprovecho Research Center in Oregon, which develops tools and other products that are made from recycled and/or cheap materials for developing countries (Vuijst 2006). The discussion on ecological and communal groups as anti-urbanists served as an illustration of how intentional communities can link with like-minded people in order to establish a broader foundation for their ideas.

It can be derived from the above that intentional communities are but one example of a wide range of alternative movements. Alternative lifestyles can make society more ‘colourful’ through their provision of more and different insights, which would ideally co-exist on equal levels. When looking specifically at members of intentional communities, they are attached to their communities, and committed to developing and managing these. Such members are driven by specific ideals, which seem to tie them to a place and which instil in them a sense of responsibility to maintain it, and to ‘make their own places’. In addition, the members are often directly involved in the functioning of a community, which is empowering. This appears to fuel people’s commitment to a community, and to contribute to feelings of being at home and ‘in place’. Such a development is striking in a society where increasing estrangement can be observed, for example from the uniformity brought about by globalisation. In this context, it is worth pursuing what it is exactly that binds people to a place, and invokes a sense of responsibility for its future. This research on intentional communities provides interesting starting points to unravel the structures underlying such place commitment.

7.6 Further research

Dissolved communities
This thesis has discussed how intentional communities secure their continuity. The life course approach that was chosen fitted this study, because the aim was to look at the development of the communities. A life course approach implies that a community is successful when it continues, and fails when it disintegrates. However, when a community dissolves, it does not completely cease to exist, but partly continues through its former members. Furthermore, communities that dissolve into the mainstream after their values have become accepted must be regarded as successful, too, as they have achieved their goals. Thus, the disintegration of a community can be associated with ideas such as reincarnation, life after death and full circle, rather than with death. It will be useful to observe how the ideas of communities continue after they dissolved into society, through studying their former members. An obstacle might be that these people are difficult to trace, as was experienced in this study with the establishment of the database.

Geographical distribution
This study focused on the Western world in general, and Northwest Europe in particular. Upon assessing the existing literature, it became clear that intentional communities in North America have been the most extensively studied (see, for example, Connell 2003; Oved 1988; Pitzer 1997c; Zablocki 1980). More recently, Europe has become a focus of study as well, by researchers such as Poldervaart et al. (2001), Sargisson (2001), van Dam (2005), and van Rijssel (1999). Although Oceania has been relatively understudied, there has been some research, for instance by Cock (1979), Metcalf (1995), and Sargisson (2003). An interesting result of this study is that the highest concentration of intentional communities
was found in Oceania. However, this was not further explored due to lack of data. Further research would be useful in order to identify explanatory factors.

This study made a first attempt at comparing rural intentional communities in Northwest Europe and North America. This comparison could be expanded to include the developing world. Although some intentional communities outside the Western world have been studied, such as kibbutzim (Katz 1995; Sosis 2000), and Japanese religious communities (Kerner 1979), further research is needed. It will provide interesting material both in itself, and for comparative analysis with intentional communities in the Western world. In addition to adding the developing world to the study area, intentional communities in urban areas could be a topic for further research as well. A specific kind of urban community that can be relevant in the context of the aging population of Western societies is intentional communities for the elderly. In these societies, the tradition of taking care of elderly (grand)parents has been mostly abandoned. Communal life could replace the function of the extended family, and encourage empowerment of the elderly. Some initiatives in this direction exist, and cohousing communities for elderly people have been established, for instance in the Netherlands (see, for example, Verwey-Jonker Instituut 1998). The functioning of these communities, aimed at housing a specific age group, could be compared with that of other intentional communities, which are bound by a certain ideology.

Levels of scale
Based on this study, it can be concluded that the continuity of intentional communities is influenced by developments at three different scales: mainstream society, the community itself, and the individual members. Society provides the context in which intentional communities develop. Changes in society may result in changes in the community. For example, greater tolerance may render the original motivations for founding the community superfluous. The second level, the community, is shaped by its people, practices, meanings, and spaces and structures (see section 1.5 and Liepins (2000b)). Individual members are the foundation of the community, and they (re)construct it together. Although this study combined all three scales, the focus was on the community level through combining the results from interviews with individual members.

In relation with the levels of scale, three specific recommendations for future research can be made. The first is to study (global) networks of communities. Examples of such networks are Eurotopia (Hagmaier et al. 2000) and the Communities Directory (Downey & Morgan 2000), which were used to establish the database in this study. Furthermore, both studied religious communities were part of a wider network of like-minded communities, and their functioning in this network was briefly discussed (see chapter 4). Further research can serve to ascertain how individual intentional communities define themselves and relate to each other in networks in more depth.

A second direction of research which deserves further study is the relation between the size of a community and commitment of the members to it. Various scholars have introduced ideas about breaking down large groups into smaller ones to improve their functioning. For instance, Alexander (1965a; 1965b) applied the idea to cities and neighbourhoods in planning, and the economist Schumacher (1973) to companies. Evolutionary psychologists Aiello and Dunbar (1993) concluded that the maximum size of a well-functioning group of humans is around 150. This group size varies among primates, and is related to brain capacity (Dunbar 1992). Gladwell (2000) claimed that in a group of about 150 humans, everybody knows who everybody is, and what their position in the group is. This ensures
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that the group can be regulated through peer pressure, which should prevent free rider behaviour and the formation of subgroups within the group. In the context of this study, this was partly confirmed. Eden was the only community with more than 150 members. Only a small number of its 1,500 inhabitants were part of an active core group, while the rest were hardly or not involved. However, in other communities, such as Toustrup Mark, Whiteway, and Trudeslund, free rider behaviour and subgroups occurred as well, in spite of their membership of fewer than 150. Apparently, free rider behaviour and fragmentation depend not only on group size. Thus, further in-depth studies to determine the effect of group size on the functioning of intentional communities, as well as to identify other relevant factors, seem worthwhile. This may be realised through combined efforts with related fields such as evolutionary psychology.

Third, ethnographic studies of individual communities could be useful, in order to obtain more in-depth knowledge of why people are committed to make intentional communities work. Such studies could provide a reflection on the motivations and functioning of humans and communities. Furthermore, they would deepen our understanding of concepts such as place attachment, local democracies, and ownership, which are all linked with the construction of a wide range of meaningful places. In addition, the concept of place commitment, and particularly its underlying structures and mechanisms, deserves further and in-depth study. Intentional communities turned out to be examples of places to which people display strong commitment. Through making a place of their own, intentional communities (re)present original alternatives to mainstream society.