

THE BIG HOUSE PROJECT

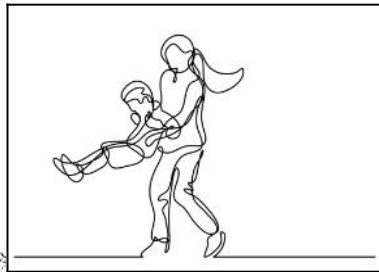


IMAGE: NORWOOD & SMITH (1995)

*Connectedness is a biological imperative.
We don't survive as human beings unless we can
co-regulate and connect with others.*

— Steven Porges Ph.D

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*You never change things
by fighting the existing reality.
To change something, build a new model
that makes the existing model obsolete.*

— Buckminster Fuller

Introduction

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This document outlines what is (for now) called The Big House Project. We invite expressions of interest from people for whom this project resonates, and with the energy to help make it a reality.

The proposal is to purchase a big old country house, hotel, or school that we can retrofit into a residential community project of about 12-20 people, and to be located in Northland NZ (but potentially could be elsewhere).

The project has roots in the global ecovillage movement, but our particular vision is to create a semi-experimental, next-generation, living community based on the premises of human connection, emotional development, conscious communication and engaged collaboration.

The rationale for this project stems from today's increasingly atomised society, many observe that we live in a time characterized by disconnectedness, and hyper-individualism. And yet we now know that isolation is actually an evolutionary danger signal. For instance in brain scans, loneliness



and rejection are felt in the same way and in the same place in the brain as physical pain. By learning from working quite closely together on this project, we aspire to help evolve a set of skills, a capacity that enables real connection and real change.

This project is about community in the deeper more social sense of the word. Our core driver is that human connection and conscious collaboration are urgent priorities for humanity. In coming together to work both on this project and on the participants' relationships, we can engage directly and actively with a process of societal transformation. When we consider the current period of social upheaval, we can see the timeliness and the significance of this initiative.

We see this project as a prototype, or as an incubator of social and inter-personal technology, and maybe a stepping stone to bigger things. Because it is a small community, not a fully fledged ecovillage, we believe that locating the project near to a city is desirable.

By way of clarification, while the project embodies lots of aspects of environmentally minded eco-living and more egalitarian economic development, this project is for those that specifically want to enhance their inter-relational capacity. Rather than those that are joining forces more because they can't access the property market on their own, or are driven primarily by ecological drivers. We understand the need to heal the planet, but we know from experience that we must first heal ourselves.

Reflecting this commitment to enter mindfully into community together, joining us to live in the big house will involve things like: participation in intensive personal and group development workshops, becoming fluent with NVC, the sharing of house work and meal preparation, dance and yoga, intensive collective permaculture garden development, and a commitment to sharing the process of restoring an amazing old house.



Our Statement of Purpose 2

PURPOSE AND VISION

WHY:

We believe that conscious, engaged connection has the power to create healthy people, and a healthy planet.

Creating paradise on earth

HOW:

- Acknowledge and address development trauma (personal development)
- Learn, practice, prototype and promote collaboration skills
- Support each other in our practice
- Adopt a set of alignment values

In order to heal the planet, we have to heal ourselves first.

Apply a spirit of courageous exploration.

Share what we learn

WHAT:

- Establish and maintain one (or more) innovative residential cooperative communities
- Running group and personal skills workshops
- Growing nutrient dense food regeneratively

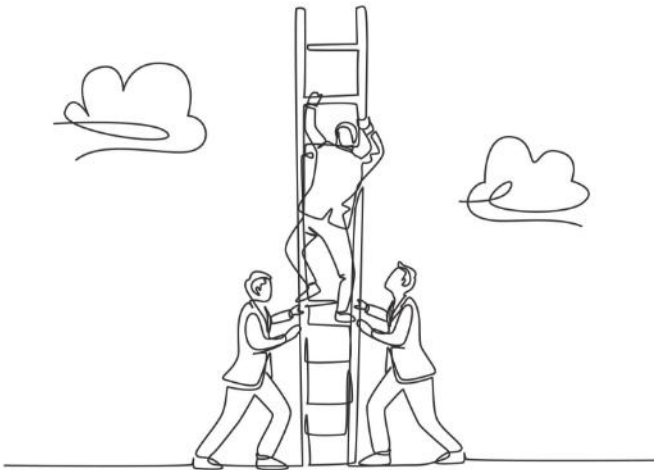
Retrofit a big house into a community and run seminars



OUR VALUES

These values have their origin from within the NVC and Sociocracy frameworks.

- ✓ We commit to engage, seek help, and work together
- ✓ Find the courage to be vulnerable. Feelings are OK
- ✓ Inspect, learn, and adapt
- ✓ Acknowledge and work with development trauma
- ✓ Listen before expecting to be heard, speak with purpose
- ✓ Presence, transparency, and openness
- ✓ Know and disclose what I feel and want
- ✓ Vote with my feet, support ideas on merit, move forward
- ✓ We use tension or conflict as an invitation to explore and gain clarity
- ✓ Distributed leadership, everyone has a piece of the truth
- ✓ Share knowledge, make a difference

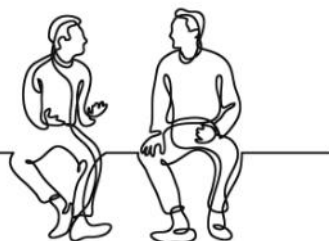


PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Members recognise that personal development is the key that unlocks engaged connection. The common strategy of minimising close contact with people to reduce the discomfort of inadvertently disturbing old development wounds, is no longer viable. Therefore we must engage with a process to address the damaged core beliefs and associated protection layers. This involves learning to be aware of, and manage responsibly, our feelings, emotions, and needs.

In order to come into connection, we must also have a positive relationship with ourself, a connection to our real self. When we do this we gain self-worth, self-love, self-acceptance and connection with the heart. We care and support our inner child. We recognise when our behaviour starts to be motivated by old brain systems. We gain healthy boundaries, and a deep seated connection to our needs.

This way when we come into relationship with others, we have a new, healthier set of core beliefs, that others are safe, that we value difference, we welcome the chance to dialogue, to learn to be empathetic and respect the needs of others. We believe that the work of improving our relationship with ourself and with others is work best done together. We were wounded in community and, with care, in community we can repair those wounds.



COMMUNICATION

When we understand the old brain chemistry of status, power over, strategies, demands, avoidance, enmeshment, pleasing etc, we are ready to design and construct engaged productive, quintessentially healing and transformative groups.

We must address power by distributing leadership so that there is a leader in every seat. By committing to learning, experimenting, piloting, and sharing a new social technology, we discover and invent group skills that might just have the power to change the world.

This work has many levels. At the personal and interpersonal level we see becoming really fluent in NVC as a hugely important tool. And, becoming well versed in the art of dialogue, allows us to listen before expecting to be heard. To ensure everything that comes out of our mouth has a purpose, that we say yes when we mean yes, no when we mean no, and ask for help when we need it.

By understanding that every thing we say and do is driven by needs, unconsciously or consciously, we can be clear in our requests of others. Emotions are something almost all of us must get more familiar with, and more comfortable with.

High up in our values are the qualities of transparency, and openness. By this we mean, if we have something going on we talk about it. If we have an issue with someone we take it up with that person directly. If we have a point of view, we voice it at the meeting, not in the corridor afterwards. Openness means we are keen to engage, and hungry to learn, adapt, and receive respectful (NVC) feedback.

DECISION MAKING

When it comes to negotiating group agreements and creative, win-win solutions, we now have proven tools to make consensus decisions, tools to manage conflicts, and tools to ensure that the piece of truth that each of us carries, has a voice.

The system that Earthsong uses is something we are very familiar with, and can adopt more or less wholly. Key to this system is getting sub-circles to do the legwork before bringing proposals to the full group circle for ratification (so avoiding long, tedious ill-prepared meetings). Resourcing facilitation is another important key to success. In this respect we aspire to train ourselves and many others in group facilitation as one important side product of this project.

Additionally, by exploring aspects of the evolving framework of Sociocracy 2.0, and 3.0, Theory U, The Core Protocols and the like, we contribute to the discovery and piloting of state of the art so called "teal" organisations. Organisations that resemble living organisms.

SUB-CIRCLES

The project will get things done using the power of sub-circles, small teams of people with a passion for certain tasks and focus areas. Participation in the circles is one of the core commitments that members of the project make to the group.



The overall operation of the big house, comprises a range of tasks, some of which are best managed by seeking volunteers, and others through the use of rosters. Cooking for example can work amazingly well and simply, using cooking teams who plan, shop/harvest, and prepare a meal for the group on Mondays, while another team does the same the following night, and so on. This kind of teamwork, once the system is established, reduces administrative loads to near zero.

And, to avoid death by committee, we want to use where appropriate, clearly defined and elected roles, to good effect as per the roles pattern from Sociocracy. Cooperative businesses are also something we have interest in exploring.

GROUP WORK

As this is no ordinary community, we wish to experiment with programs that we see overseas which incorporate periodic team-building intensives into their cultural repertoire. These are an opportunity to develop group skills, and discover more about, and work with, our developmental trauma. This creates transparency among group members and is a powerful form of mutual support. We see, in others' courage and vulnerability, our own. We create a positive spiral of increasing capacity for empathy and true connection.

One such model is used by several of Germany's larger ecovillages. It is a facilitated process of self discovery that is powerful precisely because the work is held in the framework of the community. We believe that the era of individual talk therapy has outlived its usefulness.

Ensuring that our bodies are included in our healing process is vital. For that reason, we wish to set aside at least one or two rooms for therapy and massage. And, Yoga, Qigong, meditation, various forms of dance,

such as open floor, latin, contact improv, and peace dances are expected to become a mainstay of our cultural life.

Mistakes, are something that we are coming to see differently. We must make mistakes and create a safe environment where we can take interpersonal risks, precisely so that we can explore, discover, and thus create something new. Nothing ventured nothing gained.

CULTURAL ISSUES

In many ways this project is about redefining what collaboration means. We acknowledge the shadows of colonisation, and actively seek the opportunity to work with local hapu / tangata whenua to learn from and share some of what we discover. There is a concept that says that colonisation is something that we each carry in the form of our development trauma. The legacy of the past leaves footprints on all of us, and perhaps by working together we can start to untangle this legacy of violence and neglect.

Members understand that tolerance and diversity are fundamental to a new and conscious collaborative culture. For example, while we are interested in health and food ethics, the project has no endorsed dietary regime, and members accept that they can pursue the diet of their choice without judgement from others. (Also interestingly, when we shed our anxiety, food intolerances quite often disappear.)

Because diversity is important, we see it as very much desirable that the community incorporates a range of ages, genders, ethnicities and other cultural subdivisions. That is one of the things about a cooperative, that there is a little more scope to manage membership applications to nurture this diversity and balance.

An example, common in many other projects is an unintentional bias toward the older generation. Whereas for us it is very much of importance that the younger generation are well represented in this project, as they are the most disadvantaged by the existing housing market, and they are indeed the future of this planet.

Another example where this matters, a big house environment naturally favours members who are coupled because it makes the most of each room. While discriminating is not something we feel comfortable with, the proportion of different family types needs balance. Sometimes creativity can unearth win-win solutions.

Some ideas to support younger residents... one of the simple ways that the community can support families with younger children is to collectively resource child minding during meetings, to allow full participation of parents. Unrelated teens could perhaps share a room as a creative solution to room shortages. There are two trains of thought about handling issues that arise with children. They can either be taken up with the parents, or there is also value in interacting with other peoples' children in a respectful manner.

This need to maintain diversity and balance aside, we also see it as important that new member applications are not able to be arbitrarily vetoed by existing members. The way we would put it is that people join by a process of consent carried out in good faith by all parties. If any member feels (as with any consensus decision) that a new member is not ready, then that member needs to explain how their objection relates to the objectives and values of the group. Not just because someone triggers us. However, new members do, as outlined below, have to complete a series of committent hurdles and this creates a strong bias toward self-selection, which is an approach most likely to produce members that are well aligned with the group's objectives.

Our view is that gathering together with people of "like mind" is not necessarily a full solution. In sociology there is a term that makes more sense to us, 'bonding and bridging'. That we must both gain support by bonding with those we relate to most easily and at the same time stretch to build bridges with those that we do not. Because diversity is often the germ of new ideas.



In the end, a big house is a small, somewhat intimate setting, and every super committed, willing to deeply engage person increases the odds of us making super wonderful discoveries.

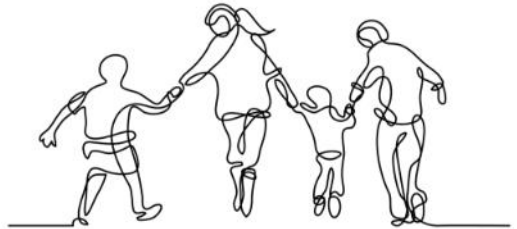
OUTREACH

This project is not about creating an island to isolate ourselves from the world. We seek to follow the examples of successful projects like The Zegg and Seiben Linden in Germany, and Tamera in Portugal, by using the power of experiment and prototype to share our discoveries with all

those who may be interested. For this reason, we would like to design and host workshops to share what we are learning with others. This work is an expression of what it means to learn, pilot, teach and share knowledge. While it's possible that the house that we repurpose may not be entirely (or initially) suited to pursuing this work to its logical extent, we do however, want to do what we can with the resources and time that are available to us.

These overseas projects also demonstrate the power of having an extensive network of non-resident supporters. These communities derive a significant portion of their members' income from this sort of outreach work, and the supporters additionally assist the project with their moral support and donations.

Finally, this project does not exist in a vacuum. As interest grows in this work, as it has done overseas, it is hoped that this will create demand for further projects. These we are willing to assist in what ever way that we can. Ultimately we aim for a world where ecovillages based on conscious committed collaboration and real interpersonal connection form a new basis for our civilisation into the future.



Why We Love Growing Food 4

RATIONALE

Bill Mollison said that if you aren't growing food then you are part of the problem, and we agree. Therefore, we need a property with a contour and soils conducive to gardening, a reliable water source (as Northland is prone to droughts), and a group with a passion to (re)learn the art of organic, biodynamic, regenerative bio-agriculture.



It's also about food security, food quality, removing the "food miles", finding a sense of meaning, purpose, and abundance in our lives. The energy and micro-nutrients available in fresh produce (consumed within 24hrs of harvest) is hugely beneficial, along with breathing the fresh country air in the garden and bush. The microbes in soils, and even floating around in the air amongst plants, improves the gut flora, aiding the ability to digest food and make the most of what we eat.

We increase the range and quality of our food by growing a diverse range of plants, trees, and suitable animals (land permitting), many of which are not available commercially. Growing food also teaches us about poly-cultures, symbiosis, and how species interact and collaborate with each other, their 'pests' and their environment.

There is a hugely social side of communal gardening, working together, planning and planting together, gathering together, teaching children the ways of the land, harvesting and collecting seeds ready for the next season. These jobs which often seem insurmountable attempted alone, with company become fun instead of "work".

For all of these reasons, we will have a very large food garden to provide for our residents, and no doubt an abundance of flowers interspersed throughout. We imagine also amazing, inspiring landscaped garden spaces for aesthetics, healing and enjoyment.

A REGENERATIVE LIFE

We see this as a spiritual path, a chance for the community to engage and cooperate in a real life way, regenerating the land and restoring it to abundance, integrating ourselves into it, and working on our own healing in the process. This is the inner gardener and outer gardener.

As the entire planet struggles to make the transition toward lowering our footprint, scientists are starting to wake up to the fact that “sustainable” is no longer enough. We are beyond needing to become sustainable, instead we must regenerate soils, air, water quality, species diversity and many other systems, some of which we barely even know exist.

For us this is about simplifying our life, reducing the consumption that is so often driven by an inner sense of lack, and assuming a stewardship role of the local environment. And as the Chinese Proverb says, the gardener’s footsteps are the best fertiliser.

With this project we want to make a small practical and personal start with engaging actively and sensitively with the land around the big house. As in Theory U, systemic change is all about prototypes.



IMAGE: NORWOOD & SMITH (1995)

*Growing food is the natural companion to building inter-personal capacity.
This is the inner gardener and outer gardener.*

COMMON & PRIVATE, INDOOR & OUTDOOR

We envisage this project embodying aspects of cohousing, such as private spaces for members with (perhaps more than average) shared common spaces, shared gardens, clustered carparking, walkable outdoor areas, having gradients between private and common areas.

Projects overseas aptly demonstrate the value of providing great indoor and outdoor common spaces. Human scale, beautiful places to dwell, break bread, celebrate and connect. Multiple semi-secluded outdoor spaces and nooks allow residents places to be in nature. The high ratio of people to garden, ensures intensive garden design and management. Common dining will be more developed in this project as a theme.

BEDROOMS AND BATHROOMS

By adopting a single large building, for example a former hotel, single or partnered residents can occupy existing bedrooms as they desire. The design is flexible enough to cope with any residents that wish to experiment with more or less communal living styles at their option. Small families might for instance choose to occupy two rooms. Larger families may not work well for this model, as rooms will always be in short supply.

The bedrooms might have either ensembles or more likely shared ablutions depending on what the building offers. From similar projects overseas, we would love to experiment with per gender bathhouse style bathrooms, where bathing is more of a ritual / family event, rather than a hurried, functional private affair.

KITCHEN & DINING

Its not envisaged that private spaces will typically have their own kitchens, however each floor or room cluster will have a kitchenette to allow drinks, snacks, and light meal preparation, and for times when members don't feel like dining with the group.

A single large kitchen serving two or three meals a day, is needed to provide food for the community, and a choice of smaller indoor and outdoor dining areas to avoid an institutional feel.

OTHER FACILITIES

On top of the dining/living areas, we need at least one large room for workshop / dance / yoga type use. Perhaps 40—50 m² in size. A few multi purpose, library, therapy, office type of rooms are also required. Possibly some leasable spare rooms (even land plots) for member businesses.



Other things commonly seen in European projects include:

- a wood workshop to support the house refit
- a facility for bike and tool maintenance.
- art, craft and creative work space
- car sharing, bike pool, loan/share tools and equipment.
- a retreat cabin for those that need a little quiet time
- all natural permaculture style swimming pool with reed bed filtration
- sauna, and naked friendly areas
- grey water reed bed
- nature walks around the property
- shared office support facility
- a single small wifi pocket, keeping the majority of the house low EMF
- food storage for the community, large pantry and/or cellar
- playgrounds

Depending on the property, and remembering that the projects in Europe have over 150 people we may not be able to have all of these, but its OK to dream big sometimes, right?

FINDING A BIG HOUSE

We feel the need to preface this section with the idea that members understand that if we are able to really connect whole heartedly, then where we live is somewhat secondary. In terms of work-flow, forming and upskilling a community of members precedes the community's geographic property in terms of priority.

The logic behind choosing a single large building to house this project (besides being a major chance to practice engaged connection) is that it avoids a lengthy and costly design, development and construction process, allowing the project to kick off immediately. And with informal multiple occupancy / tiny house village type models, there remain non-trivial regulatory hurdles that are yet to be resolved satisfactorily. And, almost all of the work to renovate a big old house can be done with our own labour, legally without consents.

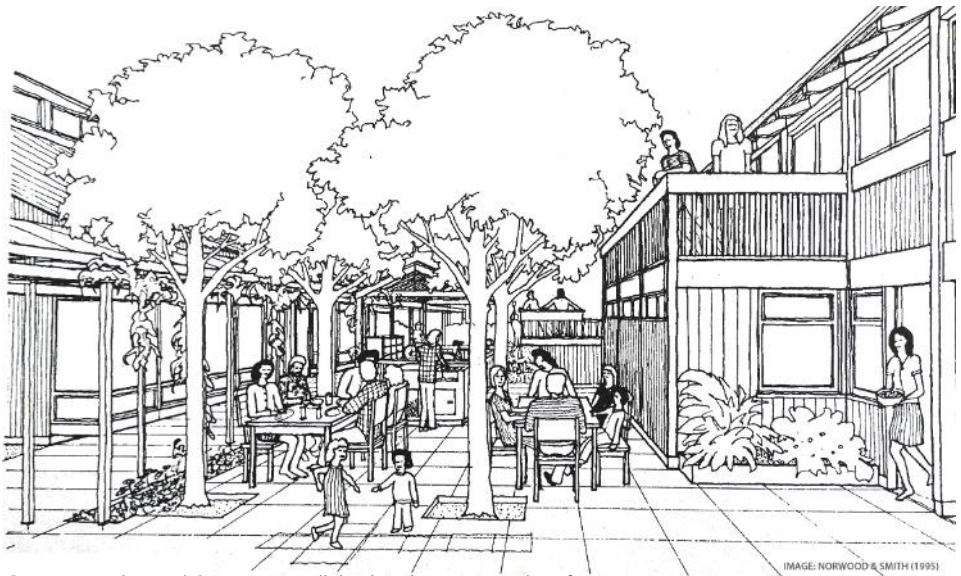
At this time we are in the early stages of searching for and evaluating suitable properties in the Whangarei area (as the initiating circle prefer a more northerly climate). The type of larger building we require is typified by an ex-hotel, however former schools, community halls, and retirement villages might also work. As may certain types of commercial building.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Ideally the property would comprise:

- big enough house to accommodate approx 12 adults plus children
- 1—10 ha of suitable contour, aspect and soils for food growing (if you aren't growing food you are part of the problem)
- zoned rural or lifestyle, for quiet and privacy.
- less than 15km (max 25km) from a city to facilitate commuting, and access to the wider community (we aren't building an island)
- possess a water source, for food growing and a clean, secure household supply

- existing kitchen and ablutions, or being easy to add
- smaller rooms that can serve as bedrooms, and larger rooms for group activities
- somewhat affordable, possibly requiring sweat equity renovation, to make the project accessible to as many people as possible
- structurally sound, not requiring significant structural or consent requiring modifications.
- car parking for 8+ cars
- having a cooperative owner for favourable sale terms
- safe, pleasant environment, mature trees and outdoor spaces, & swimming are bonuses



Overseas, outdoor social spaces are well developed as an expression of the community's desire and commitment to engage.

Aspects of Big House Life 7

HANDLING CURLY MATTERS

This community is an experiment in what a new society might look like. Did we say that already? While it is expected that the group will together formulate policies (as a pattern from Sociocracy) with which to collaborate efficiently and transparently, we do, at this point, have no particular “rules” in mind.

Having said that, we think it possible that the group will likely take a view that cats and dogs would not be that compatible with a big house and food growing operation (instead small farm animals can meet children’s need to interact with animals).

Drug use is another issue that communities get to address one way or another. Bearing in mind the tolerance principle, the NVC feedback principle, and the principle of engaged connection, habitual drug use is likely to be viewed as incompatible with our vision. But we feel it is important to state that many things can be drugs. Shopping, gossip, square screen time, recorded music, even yoga and meditation. Bringing the common tendency to numb our feelings into our consciousness, is something that we value. Instead, things like deep heart-felt conversation, touch, making music, song or dance together, these are all (oxytocin generating) human needs, and as such are a great remedy for most things that ale us.

Intimate relationships, and the various respectful ways that people choose to express their sexuality are, in this day and age, to be treated with openness, and tolerance. Our attempts to examine our deeply rooted and often times well hidden vestiges of body shame that many of us still carry, takes commitment and courage.

Neatness, building standards, colour schemes, noise, diets, excess vehicles, creatively filed possessions, absent members, politics, etc etc are all potentially curly matters that we fully expect to bubble up as tensions between members. All we can say is that these things will provide fantastic opportunities to practice our NVC. Hey, some things you just can’t learn from a book. Practice makes perfect.

THE PURSUIT OF ECONOMIC BALANCE

Money is something that carries a great deal of energy, diversity, and shadows. The present monetary and banking system tells us a uniform story of scarcity, conditionality, and frankly servitude.

For us, though, its a bit too tempting to become utopian in outlook and throw the bathwater out with the baby. To be clear, our view is that some things should never be owned, like the sea, the sky and yes, the land. They do not make any more of any of these things, and so in any sane society, the use of all natural resources must clearly and emphatically be shared equitably.

But for "man" made material things, ownership has a place. For instance, we could set such a project up as a trust. Many have tried, and many have failed. That is because with ownership comes responsibility. Of course our aim would be to make systems of ownership non-extractive, non-hierarchical, and as egalitarian as we can.

When it comes to personal finances, in our model we use separate member incomes as a starting point. Some sort of means to support ourselves does not go away in a new society. And, worker cooperatives, with deep roots in places like Mondragon (Spain), fascinate us.

However we also wish to experiment, using that familiar framework as a base, with small and perhaps incremental aspects of a gift economy. So perhaps with something like the gardening initiative we could experiment with how a more communal enterprise might work. Either way, to us, gardening is truly meaningful work, and connects us with the incredible economic abundance of nature.

For other initiatives we might experiment with worker cooperatives, such as subsets of members that are passionate about the house restoration initiative, or the seminar workshop initiative. Maybe some members want to set up a veggie box business. Perhaps members with spare funds could cooperate to invest in rental houses, or act as seed investors for new big house initiatives.

PRINCIPLES

Getting involved early in the process gives members a chance to help make the project happen, to help shape the design. From experience, this process of co-creation can be profoundly empowering and a life changing educational and social experience. Of course, room choice priority is a perk of early membership. First come, first served, fortune favours the bold. Once

the project is built and populated, people seeking membership will have to take their chance on a vacancy, or help seed additional projects.



This project is kind of an experiment in seeing what it takes to bring people together, working and living closely together, to see if we can discover ways to make a new level of collaboration possible. This is kind of important, because if we can not, then our species (and our planet) is in a pretty big pickle.

Because it is a small experimental prototype, it's in the groups interest to seek out people with the most passion for this experiment, those who are able to commit time and energy to actively engage with the project's work and each other. People who are ready to make the transformation from their old brain head space to something new, transformative and heart-full.

Because of the time required to participate meaningfully, the project suits people vocationally employed less than full time, (our design reduces both housing and food costs to as low as we can comfortably manage which makes this kind of lifestyle sustainable).

A clearly defined membership process means that a) potential members clearly understand what is involved in joining and participating in the project, b) that the small number of rooms available to us in the project

get used by those who are passionate about the project, c) helps avoid an overly rigid or arbitrary selection process.

In an ideal world all residents would be full group members, however at transitions, particularly when individual members are joining an established group, this may not be possible. So the general principle is that in order to reside or invest in the project, you must be at least an associate member, and, be actively working towards the process of becoming a full group member. For the founding group, timing dependent, full membership is required in order to be part of the design and development work on the project.

GROUP SIZE

From cohousing we know that 12 adults is the minimum workable group size. Above that number you have sufficient diversity to solve problems and do a range of stuff. This number by the time you factor the addition of children, gets you into the ball park of Dunbar's number 15. This is the number of people we have evolutionary experience with managing on a day to day basis, as in an extended family or tribal band.



However, ultimately the size of the house will be the determining factor in the number of members we can accommodate in the project.

ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP

The first step to joining is attending an orientation session. Here you get a taste for what this engaged connection work looks and feels like. In addition, reading some of the books on our reading list is a powerful way to help us all speak the same language.

The next step is to enrol for our in-house Collaboration Skills Course. This workshop involves six three hour sessions covering aspects of communication, decision making, facilitation as well as dealing with emotions, and conflict management. This runs on a weekly basis, perhaps

also as a weekend intensive for those that have to travel. This is a face to face event, that involves lots of experiential practice work.

After this, you will be assigned a liaison member and can attend project events such as meetings (as observer), garden work days, and celebrations. Here you get to meet the members, and experience first hand how we work together.

After your participation in the Collab Skills Course goes well for you, it's pretty eye opening—so maybe you want to try it a second time!—and you have attended at least three group business meetings you become eligible to become an 'associate member'.

Associate level membership is a stepping stone towards becoming a full member.

- By paying \$175 (non-refundable) you receive a resource folder,
- Acknowledge that you agree with the groups purpose, values, agreements, and past decisions.
- Sign the one page membership agreement (which outlines the expectations, rights and responsibilities of members.)
- Become eligible to contribute toward day to day consensus decision making.
- Join a sub-circle group in which you agree to participate actively.

FULL MEMBERSHIP

Full membership is the final committent threshold in order to become a permanent resident and co-owner of this community project. Its a chance to build up equity in the project property, and to shape its direction long term. Full membership, once the project is established involves:

- Having lived in the project for at least 6 months,
- Found your groove in the day to day economic and social life of the project
- Completed at least two of the group intensives designed and run by the group.
- You pay a full membership fee / minimum investment (\$4000 per adult member, which kickstarts equity in your coop shareholding)

After consulting the other group members and both they and you feel that you are ready, then that is the time to make this step. Just as with a consensus decision (high numbers of blue or orange do not make a good decision) if there is a large number of people who consider that you are ready, then you probably are.

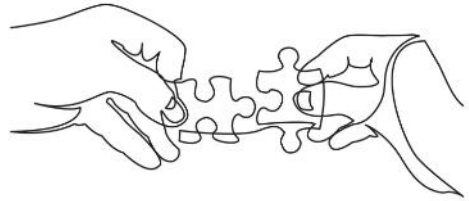
Achieving full membership gives you a final say in decision making (in the event of a failed group consensus then an issue gets taken to a 75% majority vote of active full members. In this way, the people making the decisions are the ones that live with the outcome of those decisions.

Regardless of the above, the group should comprise at least, say, 80% full members at any one time. And there should perhaps be an expected maximum duration in which to achieve full membership, say 12 months. We also seek to find ways for the 14-18 year age group to be given a more invested, inclusive status.



SUMMARY

The project is to be structured as a housing cooperative. Essentially, with a housing coop each member owns a specified share of the big house, and receives a share of the increased value of the property when they leave or the cooperative is wound up.



We envisage using two separate legal entities to achieve this. One entity will own the property, the "ownership entity", and the second will manage day to day household operation, the "operating entity". Member funds invested in the ownership entity, by way of shareholdings, are used to purchase the project's real-estate outright. Whereas the operating entity is responsible for day to day operation, management and collective expenses. Resident members will pay a monthly levy to fund these household running costs.

There are four broad equity principles we seek to factor:

- 1) we seek to reduce the living costs of members, thus reducing dependence on the legacy capitalist system, and add meaning, simplicity, and purpose to our lives.
- 2) that members be able to preserve the (local real-estate market) purchasing power of their investments.
- 3) that all full members are able to feel responsible for the property, and share in the product of their capital and labour investments.
- 4) that the welfare of the project is important and at times this takes priority over the wishes of individuals.

OWNERSHIP ENTITY

For the ownership entity, after evaluating the limited range of options for legal entities available for housing cooperatives, it's quite possible that we will end up having to use a company (structured as a not-for-profit). We are seeking advice on these options, but for now, let us use the word "Company".

The company's function is solely to own the land and buildings. It is the entity that holds the initial and ongoing investments of its members, and it allows these part-ownerships in the project property to be bought and sold relatively readily, much in the same sense that you buy and sell a house. In an ideal world each member would own an equal proportion of the company, but, especially at the start, this may not be possible or desirable. While doing so would make administration easier, it would also reduce the total investment available to us due to the lowest common denominator effect. And/or force members to seek loans in a non-standard mortgage market.

Because it is a cooperative, members' investments will be made via shares in the company, rather than via loans (each share might be worth, say, one dollar). This path avoids interest rate calculations, loan security, and other related complexities. Generally, for the sustainability of the project, it is preferable to avoid where possible, either entity entering into any kind of debt, especially that secured against the property. But that will also depend on the investment funds we can raise, and/or finding a sympathetic lender. If a non-member really wants to support the project at the beginning, then a second class of shareholding is likely the best mechanism.

Members will be able to sell their shares (for whatever price the buyer and the seller agree) to any other party, so long as the buyer goes through the process of becoming a member. The company will not generally be allowed to (or be in a position to) purchase shares from members. This system protects the viability of the project, and at the same time preserves the (real estate) purchasing power of members' investments over time.



To avoid shares passing to parties that are less sympathetic toward the groups objectives, in addition to the membership requirement, the existing members will also have the first right to purchase the outgoing members' shares. While the company may periodically issue guidance on the recommended share value (based on the current market value of the property), the share price remains up to the buyer and seller, (which may or may not drift away from the initial issue price). At the finance level, this principle is called "easy in—easy out". (At the membership level there are good reasons to adopt a joining process with non-trivial commitment steps.)

After the initial share issue, new share issues will be tightly controlled. Where the value of the property increases for reasons other than real-estate inflation, (ie capital improvements and sweat equity) this is the only situation where issuing new shares make sense.

For instance, building or sitework projects that might come later on, can be funded from new share issues (via particular member investors), or, minor improvements (even if funded from the operational budget), can have smaller amounts of shares issued to the members equally. In either case such new shares reflect the increase in property value.

In the same manner, members achieving specific sweat equity targets could be issued shares, allowing them to increase their ownership over time. This is much the same way that a homeowner adds value to their home by working on it. We feel that it is important that all members feel responsible for the property, and can share in the rewards of their effort.

So, the general principle is that the gradual increase in the number of shares should tightly reflect the increase in capital value of the property that resulted from our activities.

Also, for clarity, because it is the residents who pay for the entirety of the operating costs of the project, including full depreciation of the building assets, and, because investor members have their purchasing power protected, its not seen as necessary that the less invested members have any additional 'rental' obligation toward the more invested members. A housing cooperative is not for profit by design.

To achieve this elegant, coop inspired solution, given the minimal statutory support for coops in this country, a purpose built shareholder agreement will be required, which also clearly outlines the relationship between the two entities. In terms of decision making, in broad brush terms, the company relies in the first and usual instance on the consensus

decisions of the operating entity (the group), and only in the event of a complete failure to make a decision does a vote of company shareholders occur (in their capacity as full members) This model has been successfully used by other communities such as Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood, and their extensive shareholder agreement provides a template we can use.

OPERATING ENTITY

The day to day operation of the project is proposed to be managed by an unincorporated group, "the group". This group is also the anchor for the body of culture that includes the group purpose, group values, communication, decision-making and conflict resolution systems. For that purpose a short one page "group agreement" is desirable, that all new associate members sign, outlining expectations and commitments. Earthsong, and Peterborough have templates that we can use.

The operating entity necessarily incurs several types of expenditure.

- depreciation related expenses, eg maintenance such as exterior paint and roof replacement, ie. that which serves to maintain the property at its present condition and capital value
- other fixed operating costs, eg rates, insurance, service utilities (the latter may contain an element of user pays which may or may not be practical to assess
- discretionary items for activities and recreational amenity, that are consumable in nature.
- discretionary capital items such as building additions and earthworks (not levy funded)

Except the last item, these will all be funded from a monthly fee levied on residents regardless of their membership status. There is a need to clarify the basis for these levies, ie per member, per room, per square meter, "better rooms", what happens with teens etc. Most likely some combination thereof. In addition, systems are needed to allocate rooms, and lease spare rooms for temporary, family, or business use.

MEMBERSHIP FEES

Membership is a two step process. There is a nominal fee for associate membership, and a larger fee for full membership (see membership section). The full membership fee serves as a minimum coop investment, and has associated shares in the company (eg, one share per \$1 paid). Full membership entitles members to final voting rights.



The initial batch of membership fees will be used for establishment costs, eg legal and the initial refit. The membership fee, as with most other funds invested are able to be recovered via selling the associated shares to another member. This principle protects the project, while not disadvantaging exiting members.

All member fees are per adult member, as well as making family changes more manageable in the future, it is also more egalitarian in the event of a fall back vote. Eighteen years is the minimum age to be eligible for full membership.

Members with lower levels of shareholding will be encouraged over time to increase their shareholding as they desire, by supporting them to purchase shares either from any new issues, or from departing members. Later, and if the project finances allow, there may be an option to make the membership fee payable via instalments.

OCCUPANCY AGREEMENT

A more detailed form of occupancy agreement will be needed between the group and each resident member, to make things clear about the room(s) allocated, monthly levy amount, room maintenance, terms for things like noise, sub-letting, termination notice requirements and the like.

There must be clarity around such issues as, heritability of shares, kids reaching 18 years of age needing to become members, and any grounds for member expulsion.

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Overseas some housing coops place limits on share resale value, however they do this because they are able to receive subsidies when they establish the coop, and the resale limit passes the saving on to all future owners. Its not known whether such support exists in this country but it is certainly worth exploring. In addition to grant funding related to housing affordability, other possible sources of funds might be heritage funding, crowd / subscription funding.

In the future we could also look at transitioning to a partial Community Land Trust model to get the land portion of the project's property into a inperpetuity Land Trust structure, (by partially buying the investing members out over time). There are attractions to this model, to lock in some of the speculative gains that occur in property development, thus creating more affordable housing for future generations. This model is on the rise overseas but is not yet adequately tested in NZ at this time. Regardless, our view is that the building portion of the property should remain in cooperative shared private ownership. This principle avoids having a situation where there are no real owners, thus de-incentivising the investment of member energy into the property.



THE PLAN

Our preference is to allow sufficient time at the start to achieve an initiating circle that has clarity, unity, and a well articulated vision, before we invest too much energy in any one property, or in expanding the group. On the other hand, if a suitable property turns up, we might have to speed things up a bit.

The role of the initiating circle is to define the objectives and values. Once that is achieved, the circle can be expanded to achieve a critical mass of founding members, who then carry out the necessary work to purchase and develop the property.

Options to secure a property, include a short term lease, to give us time to assemble investor members to buy the property owner out, or negotiate a patient pre-sale or long settlement period, and/or vendor finance.

Work priorities for the initiating circle are these:

1. Complete the prospectus and solidify the initiating circle.
2. Make flyer and website, seek expressions of interest, design and run the first few orientations
3. Finalise design and run Collab Skills Course(s) for potential members, and solidify the founding group.
4. Design the Membership Agreement

Work priorities for the founding group include:

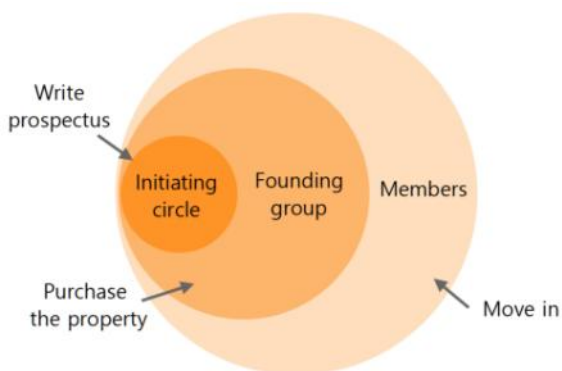
1. Open bank account for the operating entity / membership fees.
2. Property search, assessment, identification of any regulatory issues
3. Consult with a coop specialist, and select a local lawyer.
4. Prepare legal agreements, and company setup
5. Property valuation, prepare offer agreement

WHAT NEXT

If this project sounds like it might be for you, then we invite you to get in touch using the email address listed below. This is a unique project, so we welcome member enquires from far and wide, and we plan to support distant enquiries as best as we can. Please put something in writing explaining the nature of your interest, and we will let you know when the next orientation event is, either local to Whangarei, or via Zoom for out of town folk.

In the mean time also feel free to reach out to special people in your networks that would suit this project. And, certainly, If you think you might know of a suitable property, do let us know.

We don't know about you, but with this present health 'crisis' there is a tendency toward feeling disempowered and frustrated, but instead of protesting, we decided, as Buckminster Fuller advised, to instead focus on building a better model. So, thanks so much for reading this far, and, for considering such an exciting initiative. We believe that projects like these have the potential to change the course of history, and that with your help, together, we can make a difference.



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Contact

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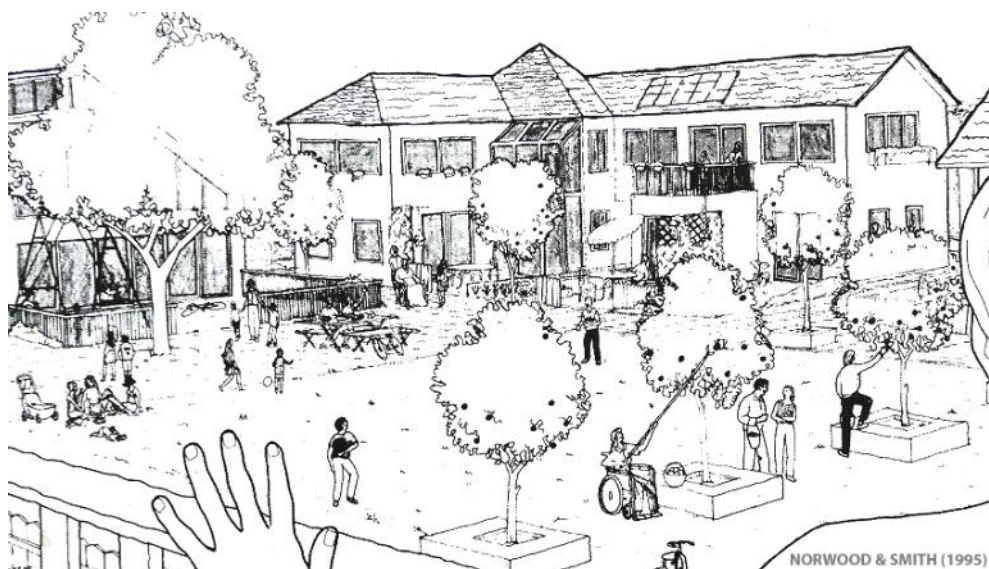
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Big house projects are about finding more connectedness and support in our lives, but they are also a great opportunity to address the housing divide.

