

Riverview Village Project

Intentional communities with therapeutic or developmental objectives

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The proposal for a Riverview Village Intentional Community stems from a concatenation of two unique factors: (1) the availability of a large area of “free” land within an urban conurbation, and (2) the powerful historic legacy of this land, Riverview, as a place for helping the seriously mentally ill. It’s not surprising, then, that nothing exactly like the proposed village currently exists anywhere else in the world. Yet different strands of the proposal do have counterparts elsewhere, most importantly with regard to its central idea – “intentional community.”

An “intentional community” might be defined as bringing together a particular grouping of people in a community specifically designed to help them and allow them to flourish, most critically by giving them a sense of belonging in a way that otherwise they wouldn’t be able to manage.

This document is an introduction to a few such intentional communities.

Geel, Belgium

Geel, Belgium is the original intentional community for those with a serious mental illness, dating back to the 13th century, when the legend of a Catholic saint martyred in the area, Saint Dymphna, the patron saint of the mentally ill, attracted pilgrims to the town looking for cures. Many mentally ill among the pilgrims ended up in a church guest house, effectively become an infirmary. During the day, these patients went out into the town and interacted with the community, then returned to the infirmary at night. Keep in mind that anti-psychotics wouldn’t become available for another seven centuries, so the patients could be quite disturbed. Geel’s reputation for gentle care was such that ultimately pilgrims came from all over Europe seeking treatment for those with mental illness, so that even an expanded sanctuary couldn’t accommodate them. Something like a foster system was then adopted, where the mentally ill were taken in by families. Stays varied from a few months to decades or their entire lives. The practice continues to this day, although numbers have declined from a high in the 1930s of almost 4,000 “boarders” to around 500, in part because of the advent of anti-psychotics.

What was common to both the early “open village” arrangement and the family placement system was not only the acceptance of those with a mental illness but also the awareness in the community of a collective mission to help them.

Resources

- Mike Jay, “The Geel question,” aeon, January 9, 2014, <https://aeon.co/essays/geel-where-the-mentally-ill-are-welcomed-home>
- Wikipedia and references: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geel> on Geel itself, with a section on the model, and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dymphna> on Saint Dymphna. Note that here and in the Wikipedia links for our other examples, the Wikipedia items carry many additional references.

L'Arche

When you mention, in Canada, the subject of intentional communities committed to help a particular group of people, the name most likely to come up is L'Arche, because it was founded by Jean Vanier, the son of a Canadian governor general. L'Arche, named after Noah's ark, is dedicated to creating homes, programs and support networks for people with intellectual disabilities. As described by Wikipedia, It follows a not-for-profit community model as different from "client centered" medical or social service models of care. Or to cite L'Arche's own website: "At L'Arche, people with and without intellectual disabilities share life in communities... We foster mutual relationships, celebrate the unique value of every person, and strive for a world where everyone can belong and contribute."

"Creating a world where everyone belongs" is L'Arche's slogan.

Each L'Arche community normally comprises a number of homes and, in many cases, apartments and day programs as well. L'Arche is now an international federation, operating 147 communities in 35 countries and on all five continents. There is a L'Arche Community in the Lower Mainland, L'Arche Greater Vancouver, in Burnaby.

Resources

- Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27Arche>.
- L'Arche Canada, www.larche.ca:8080. See, also, www.larche.ca/en.
- L'Arche International, www.larche.org
- *Enough Room for Joy: Jean Vanier's L'Arche, a message for our time*, by Bill Clark, Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 1974

Camphill Communities

Camphill communities are residential communities and schools that provide support for the education, employment, and daily lives of adults and children with developmental disabilities (learning disabilities) and other special needs. The movement was founded in 1939 just outside Aberdeen, Scotland, where the first Camphill community was located. There are now over 100 Camphill communities worldwide in more than 20 countries across Europe and in North America, southern Africa and Asia. One of the most prominent Canadian examples is here in British Columbia, in Duncan – Glenora Farm, a rural, agriculturally based community for adults with special needs, established in 1993. The original Camphill community in B.C., an urban community in North Vancouver, now called the Cascadia Society, was instrumental in establishing the farm in Duncan. The two communities have a close working relationship.

Like L'Arche, Camphill communities are mixed, with the developmentally disabled and "co-workers" living together in what are described as "housing communities."

Resources

- Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camphill_Movement
- Camphill Association of North America, www.camphill.org,
- Camphill Family and Friends, U.K., <https://camphillfamiliesandfriends.com/>
- Alliance for Camphill, <https://www.allianceforcamphill.com>; an international site with an interactive world map and links to multiple videos.
- Glenora Farm, Duncan, www.glenorafarm.org
- The Cascadia Society, North Vancouver, www.cascadiasociety.org
- *Village Life: The Camphill Communities*. edited by Carlo Pietzner, Cornelius Pietzner and Wanda Root, Simon & Schuster, 1987

San Patrignano

San Patrignano is an intentional community for the rehabilitation of young men and women suffering from addiction. It is perhaps the most inspiring illustration, among our examples, of putting the power of community to work for a therapeutic objective.

San Patrignano is in Italy, just south of Rimini in Emilia-Romagna. It offers addicts a home, legal and medical assistance, and the opportunity to study and learn a trade – a community and program which changes their lives and returns them to being fully respected members of society. It does so, moreover, without charge and without government funding, in good part because the community has a diverse, functioning economy, producing goods and services on its own.

San Patrignano operates thanks to volunteers, “collaborators” (staff and consultants, a third of whom have previously come through rehabilitation), and the work of the “residents” themselves. It is also home to children (both of those in rehab and some staff) and a small group of minors who have struggled with marginalization and drug abuse. Duration of stay varies from person to person based on their progress, but is never less than three years. The community has over 50 different training sectors, making it relatively easy to match training with an individual’s inclinations.

Since 1978 when it was founded, the community has welcomed over 25,000 people. According to follow-up studies of former residents, more than 70 per cent of those who go through rehabilitation at San Patrignano fully recover.

San Patrignano is of particular interest to the Riverview Village Project because of its large scale – about 1,450 in San Patrignano itself (roughly 1,250 residents in rehabilitation, 110 volunteers, a small number of staff, and 70 children), and another 300 or so staff plus their families living in neighbouring small villages.

Resources

- SanPatrignano or SanPa as it’s called, at www.sanpatrignano.com (Italian at www.sanpatrignano.org)
- *You have to live it*, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_pmchnZew0
- Paolo Guidicini and Giovanni Pieretti, “San Patrignano: Environmental Therapy and City Effect, 1996, https://www.sanpatrignano.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/terapia_ambientale_eng.pdf
- The San Patrignano Model, presentation Monica Barzanti, San Patrignano head of international relations, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bGm-L3GJXY>
- Assortment of videos on YouTube, mostly in Italian but some in English
- Wikipedia: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comunit%C3%A0_di_San_Patrignano. The Wikipedia entry is in Italian, but can be translated with a right click.
- Powerpoint presentation from the 2015 International Workshop at San Patrignano provided by Rob Turnbull of the Streettohome Foundation, Vancouver, <https://www.dropbox.com/s/9rlkqodjuiz97f/San%20Patrignano%20International%20Workshop.pptx?dl=0>

Delancey Street

The proper name of the organization, in San Francisco, is the Delancey Street Foundation, but such is the imprint of their project that they’re known, simply, as Delancey Street. Like San Patrignano, its residents are largely former drug addicts.

Perhaps the best way of describing the Delancey Street community is to use their own words, from the welcoming statement on their website:

We're considered the country's leading residential self-help organization for substance abusers, ex-convicts, homeless and others who have hit bottom. Our average resident has been a hard-core drug addict for sixteen years, abusing alcohol and multiple drugs

and has dropped out of school at the 7th grade and has been institutionalized several times. Many have been gang members; most have been trapped in poverty for several generations. Rather than hire experts to help the people with problems, we decided to run Delancey Street with no staff and no funding. Like a large family, our residents must learn to develop their strengths and help each other. It's an approach to changing lives that is "against all odds".

We said we were going to take ex-convicts and ex-addicts and teach them to be teachers, general contractors, and truck drivers. They said it couldn't be done. We said we were going to take 250 people who had never worked and had no skills and teach them to build a 400,000 square foot complex as our new home on the waterfront. They said it couldn't be done. We said we were going to partner with colleges and get people who started out functionally illiterate to achieve bachelor of arts degrees. They said it couldn't be done. We said we were going to run successful restaurants, moving companies, furniture making, and cafés and bookstores without any professional help. They said it couldn't be done. We said we were going to do all this with no staff, no government funding, and no professionals. They laughed and said it couldn't be done.

We struggle a lot but we've been doing it. For over 40 years we've been developing a model of social entrepreneurship, of education, of rehabilitation and change.

The minimum stay at Delancey Street is two years, while the average resident remains for almost four years. Delancey Street follows a peer educational model, with longer-term residents teaching the newer ones ("each-one-teach-one"). Residents receive a high-school equivalency degree and are trained in three different marketable skills, but also, by way of the socialization process, learn important values and interpersonal skills much as if they were in a large extended family.

Delancey Street now has facilities in Los Angeles, New Mexico, North Carolina, New York, and South Carolina. The largest community, in San Francisco, varies from 300 to 400 people.

Resources

- Delancey Street Foundation at www.delanceystreetfoundation.org
- Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delancey_Street_Foundation

De Hogeweyk

Known familiarly as just Hogewey, after the nursing home that operates it, De Hogeweyk is a gated village for elderly people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease, in Weesp, Netherlands. Instead of a traditional residential-treatment or hospital setting, the Hogewey complex is set out like a village, with a town square, supermarket, hairdressing salon, theatre, pub, and café-restaurant, as well as the houses themselves. The houses, each with six or seven people in them, are organized in different settings, seven in all, according to what the residents are used to – urban, aristocratic Dutch, the trades and crafts, Indonesia and the former Dutch East Indies, homemakers, cultural (for those who worked in cultural industries), and religious (although not confined to just one religion). The theory behind it is that people like to interact and be

surrounded by like-minded people of similar backgrounds. Music, interior design, food and even methods of table setting follow accordingly.

There are no locks. Residents are free to walk and cycle around the village as they like, or visit the café. They shop themselves in the supermarket and assist with the cooking. The objective is to make the experience of living in the village as real as possible.

The doctors, nurses, and carers, including family members, are an integral part of the village mix. There are 250 staff plus visiting family members for a residential population of approximately 150. In keeping with the working premise of creating as unclinical an environment as possible, staff wear ordinary clothing rather than clinical clothing and adopt roles that the residents are most likely to be comfortable with. In the working-class (trades and crafts) setting, for example, carers are taken as neighbours or carers, while in the aristocratic/upper-class setting, the nurses are seen as servants.

Resources

- *Dementia Village*, CNN's World's Untold Stories, DVD, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwiOBlyWpko>
- Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hogewey>

Gould Farm

Gould Farm is a psycho-social rehabilitation program, an intentional community, a “healing community,” a “therapeutic community” – each is a good description – for people with a serious mental illness, that is schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, major depression, and related disorders. The community is located on a 700-acre working farm in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts. It's the oldest, and best known, of the therapeutic communities for the mentally ill in the U.S., dating back to 1913, the same year, as it happens, that Riverview Hospital opened its doors.

The Farm provides rehabilitation together with clinical care. Most pertinently, it's a community – one into which patients, referred to at the Farm as “guests,” are welcomed and embraced. Staff and their families, plus volunteers, live and work on the Farm together with those with an illness. Meals, holiday celebrations, and special events are shared, as everyone is encouraged to participate in activities that strengthen interpersonal relationships and self-confidence.

Meaningful work in a supportive environment is a central part of the Gould Farm experience. The farm is diverse and multi-faceted – livestock, dairy, pigs, chickens and eggs, crops, maple syrup, bakery, kitchen, and a roadside café, with related vocational opportunities like welding, carpentry, and handling machinery like tractors.

Everything is in the context of people living normal lives in a community, working, participating in activities, and spending time together – “really wonderful and fascinating but normal at the same time,” as one staff member put it.

The Farm accommodates 41 “guests” (residents) and four others in transition, plus 43 “co-workers” (staff) and eight full-time volunteers, all of whom live on the farm, as well as 14 children of staff, with a day-care centre on site for preschoolers. The average guest stay is eight to nine months, although some stay a year to a year and a half; 15 months is considered by staff to be an optimum time. There is also a transition program, not only for the four in transition on the Farm but also 11 transition beds in Boston, which allows former residents to keep in touch and access help even after they've left.

Distribution of illnesses is currently: schizophrenia 26%, schizo-affective disorder 25%, bipolar disorder 23%, major depression 10%, the remainder (or roughly 16%) a variety of disorders like borderline personality disorder. Generally speaking, Gould Farm works with the most serious cases, one step down from hospital – people with multiple hospitalizations in their history who have been unable to find a footing in community mental health.

Gould Farm, however, is an expensive model. The daily fee is US\$335 to start, with a sliding scale down to \$250 a day over time, although financial assistance allows many who cannot afford the full fee to nevertheless access the Farm. An effort is made not to let money or duration affect decisions. Some pay only \$10 a day. The average daily rate is around \$225.

There are a few other similar communities in the U.S.: Hopewell (Ohio), CooperRiis (North Carolina), Rose Hill (Michigan), and Spring Lake Ranch (Vermont).

Resources

- *We Harvest Hope: The Gould Farm Story*, video, <https://www.gouldfarm.org/post/we-harvest-hope-the-gould-farm-story>
- Gould Farm, www.gouldfarm.org
- *Gould Farm Tour*, video, <https://www.gouldfarm.org/post/gould-farm-tour>
- *Gould Farm: A Life of Sharing*, by William J. McKee, 1994.

Discussion

These different intentional communities are each a story of their own, with all their variety, but they share profound commonalities.

Innovation

What strikes one first, as one explores their origins, is that when they were established they were breaking new ground, arising directly from need, circumstance, empathy, and inspiration. Nothing like them existed anywhere else in the world. Geel from the beginning was absolutely unique, so much so that families of those with mental illness in other countries, in one case as far away as Japan, turned to Geel as an answer to illness in their relatives that they couldn't manage. De Hogeweyk is one of a kind although, now that it's up and running, one wonders why nobody thought of it before (and, indeed, the Hogewey designers now have a project underway in Italy). L'Arche began with Jean Vanier inviting two men with disabilities into his home in the town of Trosly-Breuil, France.

The original Camphill group, in Aberdeen, was led by an Austrian pediatrician, Karl Konig, who had ended up in Scotland as a refugee from Nazi Germany. The initiative arose from the belief, derived from a humanitarian philosophy called anthroposophy, that every person possessed a healthy personality independent of their physical characteristics. Konig and his group were following through on that general premise.

San Patrignano began with a first step in the metaphorical wilderness, providing support for a single drug addict, a woman in her thirties, on a farm which one of the interested group had previously been given by his father-in-law. The addict was a family friend. Drug addiction at the time, the 1970s, was a growing phenomenon in Italy, but there was no effective or concrete remedy. Before very long, other addicts in need of help were welcomed, and when the number hit 30, a co-operative was formed, named after the road to the farm, San Patrignano.

Circumstance and innovation. The citation from Delancey Street's website, in our examples, above, makes the point explicitly, with its repeated recounting of how "they said it couldn't be done." Yet it was done. The fact there was no exact precedent for it elsewhere only added to the founder's and the group's conviction that, in being innovative, they were doing something all the more valuable, which was indeed the case.

Intentionality

It goes without saying that common to all of these examples is the power of community and the importance of feelings of belonging and of connectedness that go with it. As communities, things are achievable for people that wouldn't otherwise be possible. "Community itself is a core healing modality," as the executive director of CooperRiis, a therapeutic community in North Carolina, has described it. Browsing the different websites, soaking up their language and their articulation of why they're succeeding, one almost feels a part of their community vicariously, so vibrantly does their sense of community resonate.

However, it's not vague, general community that is operative here, nor even tolerant, purportedly inclusive, high-minded, and well-designed community. The operative factor here is *intentional* community. It is intentionality that is central to all these examples – the intention of helping those with a serious mental illness, or the developmentally disabled, or those with dementia, or those struggling with addiction – an intentionality which is the very premise of the community to begin with *and, even more importantly, around which the community is structured and its programs are designed*. This operative premise is at work even when many members of the community are not themselves struggling with the illness or disability in question. A mix of people is, in fact, common in these communities, as we will explore later.

The intentionality is worked into the warp and woof of the community, as one would expect. It begins, indeed, with the very beginning, that is welcoming people – embracing them when they come through the gate. This happens not because San Patrignano, say, or Gould Farm, are communities, but because they are intentional communities of which a key element is giving people a sense of belonging. The welcome implicitly recognizes and passes on the recognition that the disability that brings them there is understood and, far from being an obstacle to acceptance, they can count on the support of those around them. Encouragement to participate in activities, the structuring of work so that there's team sharing, eating together if it fits the model – these and other devices, which create relationships and increase self-confidence, are generated naturally by the intentional-community ethos.

Sometimes, colloquially, reference is made to "a big family," "family spirit," or "an extended family" as the functioning principle – a family not by blood but by the purpose of the community. "Solidarity," is another shorthand description of the dynamic.

The intentionality also provides for safety, psychologically speaking, where residents can be open to trusting each other and to interacting and sharing feelings, out of which develop relationships and a sense of belonging – these in turn leading to more interaction, sharing and participation, in a virtuous circle.

Mixed and integrated

When the Riverview Village Project developed its proposal for an intentional community for the seriously mentally ill on the Lands, it included those without an illness in a mix of population as part of the community. Interaction with those who weren't struggling with mental illness was integral to the therapeutic concept (see www.riverviewvillage.ca/thevillageoutlined.pdf for details). This was a departure from group homes or from larger dedicated buildings where all of

the residents have an illness or are struggling with addiction, with staff working shifts and living elsewhere.

We have discovered since that our idea of a mixed and integrated community, which had arisen from our own particular preoccupation, wasn't so novel after all. A key instrumentality in most of these communities is such interplay – a complementary mix of those who are well with those facing difficulties.

Start with Geel in the “open village” days in the late 13th and then the 14th century, when disturbed people in the church infirmary were given free run of the village during the day. Geel was just a hamlet then, so the intermix would have been intimate and immediate. Move forward in time, now, to our current examples. The Camphill model has “companions” (the developmentally disabled) and “co-workers” and their families living in mixed households and working together communally, with the two elements roughly equal in small communities and a greater percentage of staff (up to 60 per cent of residents) in the larger ones. L'Arche has the same kind of mixes but generally lower staff percentages, for example five assistants and eight disabled residents in a house, or 17 assistants in a complex with 20 disabled. The whole point is that those without a disability, but committed to the community's mission, embrace the other.

At San Patrignano, those undergoing rehabilitation, volunteers, and staff all interact. Within training sectors there is also a mix, with longer-term residents, nearing the end of their rehabilitation program, acting as mentors for newer residents and, of course, socializing together.

At Gould Farm, staff and their families and volunteers live and work on the Farm alongside the “guests,” sharing meals, holiday celebrations, and special events.

Importance of the group

In San Patrignano in particular, because of its overall size and the threat of feelings of hopelessness and of relapse of those struggling with addiction, the group has special importance as a modality, beginning with the very entry of someone into the community. The newcomer, on admission, is integrated into one of the training sectors. They are simultaneously taken in tow by another young person in the same sector who becomes their tutor, sticks with them 24/7, and follows their progress. This personal mentoring lasts for as much as a year, with the time varying from person to person. In the same vein, the new member of the community lives in a room of six to eight people in the same sector, including their mentor. Each room, in turn, has a resident in charge and each sector has one or more education/training specialists available.

The group functions as an extended family in other ways – eating lunch and dinner at the same table, collectively deciding on leisure activities, and so on. It's described by SanPa as a “nested family” or “nested day-to-day guidance,” and is a key modality in the rehabilitation process. The socialization, in the words of a SanPa presentation, provides an “opportunity for observing each other interacting and holding each other accountable for acceptable behaviour.” The nested family “encourages [newer members of the group] to hang in during inevitable moments when difficulties arise from adjusting to a new environment and supports their motivation in overcoming any challenges while encouraging a positive attitude towards change.”

In the much smaller Gould Farm community, work is organized in groups – the Farm Team, Garden Team, Kitchen Team – with a co-worker as team leader. Camphill communities are organized in mixed households, each of which constitutes and functions as an extended family.

De Hogeweyk, as already mentioned, is organized and designed by cultural grouping, not for support and solidarity as in these other examples, but for comfort and familiarity.

Meaningful work

In San Patrignano and Delancey Street, both dealing with addicts in rehabilitation, work is closely tied to education and training. In both these cases as well, together with others like Gould Farm and the Camphill communities, work has a more profound rehabilitation and therapeutic function, helping people to interact with others, building self-confidence, and providing a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

Arising from particular circumstances

While these different examples of intentional communities share some core things in common, what ultimately makes them effective, each in its own way, is how they have arisen from a particular sensibility, in a particular environment at a particular time, and responding to a particular awareness of need, with the unique structure and dynamic of each community reflecting those circumstances. Rather than form following function in these cases, both form and function follow need, in a process of creative adaptation.

Appreciation of everyone's humanity

Intentional communities such as the ones described here all have rules, understandings and routines, and finely articulated structures and modalities. Very little is haphazard. At their heart, however, is something quite different and quite profound – an appreciation of everyone's humanity. This is also the framework in which participants describe their own communities, perhaps using different language from case to case, but expressing the same common impulse. For Camphill Communities, for example, it's "celebrating each individual," "care for the well-being of the human spirit," "life-sharing." At L'Arche, which also embraces people with intellectual disabilities, the language is much the same – "sharing life," "mutual relationships," "celebrating the unique value of every person," "creating a world where everyone belongs," "working together toward creating a more human society."

The folks at San Patrignano talk of "a community for life," "a place where everyone's equal," "a program of recovery that is primarily a path of love." "Solidarity" and "friendship" are also words that frequently crop up when San Patrignano residents describe their experience. Delancey Street refers to "earning back our own self-respect [and] decency," and "a community in which every member helps the others...where people with nowhere to turn, turn their lives around."

And of Gould Farm, one hears of "respect and relationships," a place where everyone is friends, a "family-like community [where] all members are accepted, respected and celebrated as individuals."

In the end, this is what really counts.

Added understanding of the Riverview Village proposal

This survey of a few intentional communities with therapeutic or developmental objectives provides added understanding of the Riverview Village proposal. It illustrates the power of community. It shows innovation at work. It underscores the necessity of intentionality. It provides a glimpse of how a mix of people functions, with those without the disability or

challenge in question being an integral part of the community and its therapeutic and/or rehabilitation purpose.

It also reminds us of some key modalities that, in going forward, we shouldn't lose sight of, for example the importance of meaningful work and creative engagement, inasmuch as they can be managed.

And, finally, it shows us that, like the envisioned Riverview Village, each of these communities and their inspiration have arisen out of particular needs, circumstances and possibilities. Being responsive to those particulars is what makes these communities so vibrant and living in them so rewarding.