

MODELS OF SUSTAINABLE LIVING



Damanhur



BedZED

IMAGE COURTESY OF BIOREGIONAL



Findhorn Foundation



La Borie Noble

Jo Middleton tells us about four communities, two of which are in the UK, that are setting the bar for sustainable living.

In a world overshadowed by the threat of climate change, with mass food production systems churning out a constant torrent of chemical ridden processed junk, and human relationships seemingly reduced to a stream of online status updates, it can be hard to stay positive about the future. Considering the extent to which our own actions can bring about positive change, it was cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead who said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing which ever has."

Throughout the world there are people who believe that we have the ability to make positive choices and to live better lives. In many places, groups of individuals have taken this one step further, coming together to form communities with like-minded people. Although these communities vary enormously, from single homes of fewer than half a dozen people to entire neighbourhoods of thousands, they all have one thing in common: namely a passion for sustainable living and for reconnecting spiritually both with ourselves and with the people we live and work with.



Findhorn Foundation

Permanent population: 400+
Location: northern Scotland
Established: 1962

The Findhorn Foundation community describes itself as "an experiment in conscious living". Centred on an eco-village and education centre, it is home to more than 400 people from diverse cultural backgrounds, and welcomes thousands of visitors every year – people keen to tap into Findhorn's spiritual philosophy of inner listening and self-knowledge, and to explore new ways of living sustainably.

The eco-village is a work in progress. Formerly a caravan park, the old caravans are gradually being replaced with more sustainable alternatives, from traditional yurts to homes using eco-building materials such as straw bales. There are currently 90 different ecological structures within the community, including living and work spaces, a sewage treatment centre and electricity-generating wind turbines.

Findhorn's key vision is education. Through a programme of residential retreats, workshops and events, it aims to inspire a creative energy, a sense of mindfulness and motivation, of hope and self-awareness. Findhorn wants visitors to leave believing that it is possible to make a difference in the world, every day, through the simplest of actions and interactions.

"Before I came here, I already had a spiritual practice," says

resident Chris Brown, originally from South Africa, "but living here has made it much more immediate and real in my life. Everyday there is always something to experience and learn, and it is as relevant in the rest of the world as it is here."

This is one of the key lessons any of us can take away from Findhorn and apply to our own lives: the idea of life as a constant learning process. Wherever you live, whatever you do, there is always knowledge and personal growth to be gained from our daily interactions and achievements.

"For me, being at Findhorn is not about being perfect," explains Carin, another Findhorn resident, "it's about opening up to the possibilities in myself, the opportunity to get up each day and do the best that I can, to try to bring as much presence as I can to everything that I do. And that's something that anyone, anywhere can do."

IMAGE COURTESY OF MARCUS LYON



BedZED

Permanent population: 200+
Location: Wallington, Surrey
Established: completed and occupied 2002

Beddington Zero

Energy Development, known as BedZED, is

the UK's largest mixed-use sustainable community, initiated by BioRegional, an entrepreneurial charity interested in developing and delivering practical sustainability solutions.

Made up of 50% housing for sale, 25% key worker shared ownership and 25% social housing for rent, BedZED aims to create a community where a high quality of life is balanced with a sustainable approach to living.

Key to the BedZED ethos is that an environmentally friendly lifestyle comes from much more than just living in a particular type of house or community – it is about the daily choices we make in every aspect of our lives, and this is a philosophy that we can all learn from.

As well as offering eco-housing, BedZED takes a practical approach to reducing carbon footprints through initiatives such as car sharing schemes, local organic food boxes and community composting. During its first year, BioRegional employed a Green Lifestyles Officer to promote a holistic approach to sustainable living, and to train residents to run these schemes in the long term.

Sue Riddlestone is director and co-founder of BioRegional. "A key lesson from BedZED is the importance of considering not just the buildings," explains Sue, "but how to design communities to help residents live sustainable lifestyles. It is important to make it easy for people to

take sustainable actions, and difficult for them to take unsustainable ones. The monitoring consistently shows that sustainable lifestyles account for around half the eco-savings at BedZED, and putting them in place when the community is built is key."



Damanhur

Permanent population: 1000
Location: 520 acres northern Italy
Established: 1975

Damanhur is a diverse community of more than 1000 people. Living in groups of around 20-30, each shares

a particular interest. Damanhur has its own kindergarten and junior high school, along with a complex system of management involving regular elections, a constitution, and even its own currency.

Founded in the 1970s by Falco Oberto Airaudi, it has a vision of a life infused with magic, where everyone is able to look into the future, to have personal dreams supported, and individuals are encouraged to turn these dreams into reality.

Damanhur is famous around the world for its Temples of Humankind, a vast underground temple complex, built and elaborately decorated entirely by hand. The numerous rooms, and miles of connecting corridors, are designed to symbolise the inner space within every human being, representing the journey of discovery of our inner selves.

Formica Coriandolo is a resident at Damanhur. "What I like most about Damanhur is the people," says Formica. "Damanhur is a community, and was created in order to build really meaningful relationships between human beings."

What is most striking, when looking at Damanhur, is the emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual, despite the large and diverse community. It reminds us of the importance of nurturing our own talents and appreciating the richness of our own lives.



La Borie Noble

Permanent population: 13 adults,
2 children
Location: 450 acres southern France
Established: 1962

La Borie Noble (the Noble Hut) was set up nearly 50 years ago by Lanza Del Vasto, inspired by his friendship over 20 years

earlier with Mahatma Gandhi. The community, which took root in an abandoned village in the stunning Haut Languedoc

mountains in the south of France, is founded on Gandhian principles of non-violence, no profit and no technology, and was a hugely influential part of the European eco-movement of the 1960s. Many of the homes today still have no electricity, and residents strive to be as self-sufficient as possible, making a collective income from selling hand-made foods, such as bread, and traditional crafts.

Communication is key at La Borie Noble, and human relationships are valued highly. As well as sharing practical tasks and skills, the people of La Borie Noble support each other emotionally, through a culture of listening, tolerance and acceptance. Individuals are encouraged to explore their own uniqueness, to value themselves, to be themselves, and this strong sense of self and the cherishing of human connections is reinforced through a tradition of celebration.

Sebastian is a long term visitor, who came to the community feeling disenchanted with modern society. "I came here because my vision was very negative," Sebastian explains, talking as part of *A New We*, a documentary looking at alternative ways of living throughout Europe. "I have the feeling that we're heading towards the end, to the destruction of the ecosystem, humanity, nature and the entire planet. I would really like to change this vision. My hope is to reach as many people as possible through this community and move them back into working with nature."

One particular feature of La Borie Noble is its large bell, which is rung on the hour throughout the working day. The bell acts as a reminder to everyone to pause for a moment, to look inside themselves, and to be aware of the moment. Taking even just a minute out to really appreciate the here and now, making a conscious effort to live life in the moment, is something we all know we should be doing.

Eco-living for all

What Findhorn, BedZED, Damanhur and La Borie Noble teach us is that sustainable, environmentally conscious living begins with us as individuals. These eco-communities may be setting the example, but the principles they live by are principles that we can all learn from and use to inspire our own choices. By making our homes greener, giving ourselves some time and space for personal growth and nourishing our neighbourhoods, we can enrich our own communities.

Sustainable living isn't just about where we live; it is about our relationships with ourselves and others, and living consciously every day and in everything we do.

For more information go to Findhorn: www.findhorn.org;
BedZED: www.bioregional.com; Damanhur: www.damanhur.org;
La Borie Noble: www.arche-nonviolence.eu/borie.html;
A New We: www.newwe.info.

Jo Middleton is an award-winning writer and journalist. Read her popular blog at slummysinglemummy.wordpress.com.