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Evolution of the slow living concept within the models of sustainable communities



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ABSTRACT

The study presents analysis of three case studies of sustainable communities to reveal their distinctive features through the novel Functional Models of Sustainable Communities framework. The case studies signify phases of evolution of the slow living concept starting from the traditional representation (Model A), through the hybrid (Model B), to a more contemporary model (Model C). Based on the novel SLOW LIFE analysis, the study found that contrary to expectations the latest high-tech model of sustainable community in Masdar City failed to generate the same level of social cohesion and enjoyable living experience as evidenced in older, more established communities (Damanhur, and Toarps Ekoby). The study highlights the pivotal role of slow living concepts in the transitional period of the 21st century, moving towards the next ideational phase, according to Sorokin's pendulum theory of social change. Further, the T-Cycle analysis revealed a converging trend in the shifting dialectical relationship between mainstream Western society and sustainable communities. The findings of this study indicate that evolution of the slow living concept in the context of sustainable communities followed broader trends in society—moving towards a more technologically oriented model.

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1. Introduction

In the 21st century sustainable living is no longer merely a lifestyle choice as it was in the 1960s; it is increasingly presenting itself as a necessity. Pressing economic, social and environmental issues are urging for more active intentional approaches and changes in our living conditions (Judge, 2010; Taylor, 2008; Suzuki & McConnel, 1997). Sustainable communities (SCs) based on slow living concepts may offer a viable alternative. Already a growing number of young families with children are actively seeking out possibilities of being part of a sustainable community (Walljasper, 1992), in recognition of current and future abating economic and ecologic conditions. Nonetheless, they find that their choices are somewhat limited, since out of the large number of communities established worldwide over the past 50 years, only a small percentage managed to survive to the present day, due to a high failure rate (Melville, 1972). However, slow living concepts practised in these communities are experiencing a revival in the form of new eco-villages and eco-cities under construction worldwide. This trend may partly be the result of recent global upheavals, such as the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and occupy movements, highlighting a need for re-examination of prevailing economic and social models in the Western world (Bodget, 2011; Inayatullah, 2010).

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1.1. Genealogy of voluntary simplicity as a precursor of slow living

Some of the earliest accounts of the philosophy of voluntary simplicity can be traced back to Ancient Greece around 400BC. The philosophical school of Epicurus established in his garden was a community of friends living a self-sufficient life, congregating to reach peace and happiness in a tranquil natural environment. Another prominent Greek philosopher Diogenes was less of a pleasure seeker and more of a loner. He was highly critical of the values and corruption displayed by his contemporaries, in what he believed was a confused society. Diogenes saw virtue in poverty, and practised an extreme form of simple life in harmony with nature, in order to attain peace and happiness.

Historically, peaceful environments offering a simple life and time for regular reflective, meditative practices were typically situated in religious environments such as monastic orders—Eastern (Hindu, Buddhist) (Addiss, Lombardo, & Roitman, 2008) or Western (Christian) nunneries and monasteries (Scudder, 1931). These lifestyles could be considered early models of voluntary simplicity. Presently, there are still a small number of secluded religious communities offering slow living conditions in the Western world. Many of these communities, such as the Amish and the Quakers, are still based on Christian principles.

According to Hostetler (Hostetler, 1993), the Amish community follows a traditional path where simplicity in speech, dress and possessions are highly valued. Another religious group, the Quakers, also place importance on simplicity and inner reflection, as integral part of their way of life (Fager, 1972). At the beginning of the 20th century Gregg (Gregg, 1936), who was a Quaker lawyer, devoted to Gandhi's teachings, praised the above practices and was the first to define certain ways of life as voluntary simplicity. His version of simplicity related to both inner and outer conditions and involved decluttering and focusing on what is important in life. At the same time, Gregg expressed concerns about the implementation of this value system in the midst of the second industrial revolution. The barriers to slow living Gregg listed in *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* in August 1936 closely resemble today's dilemmas:

But the vast quantity of things given to us by modern mass production and commerce, the development of science, and the complexities of existence in modern industrialized countries have raised widespread doubt as to the validity of this practice and principle. Our present "mental climate" is not favourable either to clear understanding of the value of simplicity or to its practice.

Concepts of downscaling and slowing down are alien to the Western mindset focused on continuous growth that is inherent to the aspirations of the capitalist economic system. Consequent rapid non-sustainable development and wasteful practices are becoming a major threat to the survival of all species on the planet, including humans (Redclift, 1996). As Wiberg (2010:10) postulates, "we are trapped in an entropic world, a prison totally dependent on fossil fuel", with grave consequences. Furthermore, the capitalist system of thinking does not recognise that there are limits to growth (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, & Behrens, 1972), and that perhaps we have already reached a point when slowing down and re-framing reality is our only way forward (Taylor, 2008). Although awareness of this condition is slow to emerge, and is yet to be reflected in the world of mainstream commerce and politics to a substantial degree, worldwide alternative philosophies have been promoting mindfulness, sustainable developments and cooperation based on transcultural spiritual ideals since the middle of the last century. These ideals often embraced Eastern philosophies and informed the novel value systems of communities pursuing slow living options.

A large variety of communes appeared in the 1960s, although most of them disintegrated, as they became subject to hedonism, overt idealism and poor management practices (Melville, 1972; Bennett, 1975). However, those surviving to present day are viewed as successful experiments. The very first, and one of the most resilient "classic" intentional communities in Europe is the Findhorn community, established in 1962. Since its humble beginnings 53 years ago, it is still offering both spiritual and economic base for communal living. Over the years, Findhorn expanded to house 32 businesses offering holiday packages, solar panels, flower essences and personal development books (Bearn, 2002). Another significant classic SC, Auroville in India, is hailed as one of the most prominent communities, delivering innovative ideas for spiritual, social and ecological transformation (Kapoor, 2007). It was established in 1968 and by 2014 reached an impressive size, comprising 2333 inhabitants of 49 nationalities (Anonymous, 2014). Apart from these large scale SCs numerous other communities of all shapes and sizes are scattered around the world; all contributing to the promotion of the slow living principle, as a contemporary form of voluntary simplicity.

1.2. Development of the slow living movements

With emphasis on localism, sustainability and family, slow living can be viewed as an antidote to today's stressed lifestyle and globalisation. Slow living is re-connecting to local traditions in an era of mass culture, and it is also a reaction to a high-tech, fast paced world (Matchar, 2013). On the local scale, embracing craftwork and small interest group meetings (gardening, DIY building/renovations, yoga and meditation groups) have been steadily developing into a trend over the past few years. On a larger scale, more formal and organised movements emerged, such as the Terra Madre network, of 2000 food communities, 1000 cooks, 500 academics and 1000 young activists. Terra Madre is part of the Slow Food movement.

The Slow Food movement consists of about 100,000 members in over 150 countries, and is promoting the ideals of care for the environment, respect for tradition, workers' conditions, general health, and wellbeing of livestock on local, regional and global levels (Slow Food, 2015). Slow Food is not just another grass roots organisation; it is funded and supported by the

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