Man is by nature a social animal
(Aristotle)

The need to seek and maintain interpersonal relationships is a basic need of all human beings. Humans need the acceptance, presence and comfort of others to feel psychologically and socially well. This case study will look at the general organizing principles at play in one kind of social group called intentional community - a group of people who live together or share common facilities and who regularly associate with each other based on explicit common values\(^1\). Intentional communities are very different from cults, which center on religious veneration and devotion directed toward a leader or object\(^2\).

From Indian retirement communities in Florida, upscale communal living estates in Brooklyn to kibbutzim in Israel – instances of intentional communities can take a variety of forms and shapes. Nevertheless, they are organized following common principles geared towards social cohesion of their members and realization of their shared values.

The primary resources organized in intentional communities are their members. The overarching goal of these organizing systems is to provide them with a community that generates a sense of belonging and fulfill a dedicated purpose such as leading a meaningful life, more truly practicing a religion or living by a social ideal. The Embassy, a co-living space in San Francisco, for example, aims to create ‘a home built around purpose, intention, and exploration’\(^3\). Shanti Niketan, a retirement community for Indian-Americans in Florida, ‘is based on the philosophy that as one ages they would like to have their own food and be around people who speak their own native language’\(^4\). The organizing system is designed to satisfy the members’ personal goals and the goals of the new society that is created.

The members of intentional communities are also their main users and organizers. This results in the organizing system being able to determine its own organizing principles, select its resources and transform itself over time.

Inherently, resource selection plays a key role in fulfilling the system’s main purpose. Since the alignment of individual and communal goals is a very important aspect for the success of the organizing system, existing members curate the collection by having a formal application process in place that can include multiple steps. To get a room in the Embassy, one applicant has to interview with 11 out of 12 occupants\(^5\). The selection process is usually based on single or multiple demographic or cultural properties, with the purpose of creating a heterogeneous membership base while still having a common base for social cohesion. Once people are part of such an organizing system, its design

\(^{1}\) http://www.ic.org/the-fellowship-for-intentional-community/
\(^{2}\) https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cult
\(^{3}\) https://embassynetwork.com/locations/embassysf/
\(^{4}\) http://www.shantiniketan-us.com/common/content.php?pid=MQ==
\(^{5}\) http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/12/fashion/Bay-Area-millenials-intentional-communities-communes.html
ensures they have access to and interactions with other members, providing opportunity to bond and socialize. Intentional communities exist within a precisely defined physical location, with members sharing an estate or a house. These sites usually provide large communal living spaces that are intentionally designed to foster interactions between members while cooking, eating, working or relaxing. For a long time, kibbutzim did not allow their members to have tea kettles in their room to force them to use tea kettles in the common areas\textsuperscript{6}. Communal events further allow for interactions while pursuing the community’s main goals. The Embassy frequently hosts dinners, storytelling nights, and musical performances\textsuperscript{7} while Shanti Niketan boasts its own theater for Bollywood movie screenings.\textsuperscript{8}

Living in larger groups and sharing resources comes with a need for explicit order and structure to organize communal living. Once accepted into an intentional community, members often need to promise to internalize and live by the community’s core values - in fraternities, these are explicitly written down and called the ‘creed’. The creed is usually handed down and transcends those that currently make up the collection. While the core values serve as the foundation of the community, more concrete rules and guidelines - necessary to not fall prey to the tragedy of the commons\textsuperscript{9} and create the desired social environment - are at the discretion of current members. The core values, activities and attributes exclusive to the group (such as exclusive clothing or a logo) also serve the purpose of building and preserving group identity - fortifying the social bonds between members.

The extent and granularity to which the intentional community is organized varies largely. For example, in kibbutzim, members are organized to work in the group’s own companies and teach their offspring in their own schools – following a rigid community schedule. Up until a wave of reforms in the 1980s, kibbutzim accommodated the children separately from their parents, all property was shared and everybody received the same pay regardless of their work – representing a very granular and uniform degree of organization across the system\textsuperscript{10}.

\textsuperscript{7} https://embassynetwork.com/locations/embassysf/
\textsuperscript{8} http://www.shantiniketan-us.com/common/content.php?pid=Mw==
\textsuperscript{9} Hardin, Science, 1986
The structure imposed can also be very different. Some communities prefer very flat hierarchies where decisions are made by all members, while others do have elected leaders or leadership committees in place.

Some of this organization is imposed on the members when they become part of the collection – such as being assigned to rooms, chores, work. In the Embassy, members can further classify themselves into ‘interest groups’ once they have joined the community. They use the popular communication tool Slack to improve communication and enable the communication among such interest groups in dedicated channels.

Although financial hardship has been a driver to live in an intentional community for some, most members are willing to pay a premium for the opportunities and tangible and intangible services provided by these communities. Shanti Niketan is able to sell its condos far above market price. The Embassy has been so financially successful that it developed into a chain of locations across the globe. Companies catering to well-off, lonely & purpose-seeking creatives and professionals, offering a new way of life have appeared in all major cities in recent years. People do not always pay with money for the opportunity to live in these communities, however. Joining an ecovillage somewhere might be free but members are at the same time forced to abstain from the cultural and social offerings of the big cities. While joining a community that shares the same values and beliefs might be rewarding, deciding to join a monastery - another type of intentional community - is still one of the most incisive decisions one can take.

Since joining and leaving is voluntary, for those who decide to join an intentional community the benefits of joining clearly outweigh the costs. While living in such a setup is not for everybody, intentional communities have substantially risen in popularity in recent years. The intentional design around social interactions and purpose strike a core with younger and older generations alike as they fulfill an unmet demand in an increasingly anonymous society. More and more people prefer joining a lively, tight-knit community and less personal space to a spacious lonely apartment – even if that also means more dirty dishes and less privacy.

Artifact:  https://www.buzzfeed.com/carinasauter/which-intentional-community-should-you-live-in-2q1m9

Artifact description: During my research on intentional communities, I stumbled across a lot of stereotypes and hilarious self-descriptions of some communities. In a tongue-in-cheek effort to help people classify themselves into an intentional community organizing system, I built a simple quiz on Buzzfeed that recommends the right community for you. While neither the classification nor the description are precise sources of information, the survey achieves to create a general awareness of the broad scope of intentional communities and hopefully a reassuring feeling that there is a community out there for everybody.