

Permatopia - a story about becoming an ecovillage

Karise Permatopia is a permacultural eco-community as well as an enterprising, working and living community for 90 households on the outskirts of Karise, south of Kjøge on Zealand. The project started in 2013, when a small bank had an organic farm with 30 ha of land (incl. 12 ha of forest) as a bankrupt customer. The bank set up a development group led by a project coordinator, as the bank had other customers interested in developing a permaculture farm on a larger scale. In the spring of 2014, they were ready to invite the first future residents to participate in the development of the community. The first set of objectives, the name and framework of the housing association was thus set before the current residents joined the process. Occupancy took place in 2018 and in 2021, the residents are in the process of a 'value and vision process' to adjust the original.

Permatopia's vision

“Karise Permatopia is a modern, self-sufficient and sustainable housing and agricultural community, where housing, communal farming, organic agriculture and shared supply facilities are thought of together as a whole - for the benefit of the residents, our nature and the environment. All as far as possible ecologically, fossil-free and environmentally sustainable, designed according to the permaculture principles and in the best cradle-to-cradle manner, based on renewable energy and a complete resource cycle, as well as resident involvement in the operation of the residential area, communal farm, agriculture and supply facility - so the place can be self-sufficient in food and supply, reduces residents' living costs and enables reduced working hours, forms a meaningful self-governing, enriching and socially sustainable community, as well as builds natural resources and increases biodiversity. Based on the above, it is also the intention that Karise Permatopia should be a learning place and a knowledge center with action research within sustainable housing, agriculture and supply.”

The association was established as early as 2013 and from 2015, the association took care of being the client for the construction of the homes, establishing contact with the municipality and establishing a cooperative - KP amba, which was to be responsible for the operation of agriculture, communal houses and supply facilities (wind turbine, geothermal, treatment plant, water, rainwater collection etc.).

About homes and their residents

Resident involvement in the start-up phase - from establishment to moving

In the years before the residents moved in (2014-2018), a large number of work teams emerged, consisting of some of the future residents. Each team nominated a representative to a coordination forum, which coordinated, prioritized and collaborated with the board of the establishment association on finance, etc. for the tasks (e.g. planting of fruit trees, start-up of cleaning project, communication, joint meetings, renovation of the farm, construction of a greenhouse etc.). In 2015, the residents themselves took over the establishment association and the continued contact with project managers, architects, consultants, lawyers and banks. There were "community development days" approx. every 5-6 weekends, which could often gather between 70 and 100 people where future residents among other things discussed housing with the architect, objectives and organization, agricultural activities, permaculture and self-sufficiency, community values, rules of consideration, eco-labeling, etc., just as there were “learning evenings” on relevant topics in the bank's office in Copenhagen. In the years before moving in, the residents had access to both the farm and the land and participated in clean-up, renovation of buildings and common areas, organization of agriculture and start-up of the cleaning plant. Many came to work on weekends and in their vacations and participated in self-organized work. Thus, many activities were carried out in the time before moving in. In this way, the residents got to know each other, the place and the local community better. Some moved to Karise in temporary housing while waiting for housing.

The homes

In Permatopia, all households have their own home with a small private garden area. There are 3 forms of ownership and 5 different home sizes in 2 levels: homes of 76-126 m², from a small home with living room, loft, bathroom and kitchen to a home with 4 rooms. The houses are similar in construction and built simultaneously from 2015-2018 in a collaboration between Sydkystens Housing Association as the developer of the 44 public housing units and the establishment association as the developer of the 46 owner-occupied and cooperative housing units. The aim was, that regardless of the form of ownership (which in principle is just a form of financing), the scope of the interior of the home and any extensions should be the same.

The homes are built sustainably and non-toxic with a light wood construction and paper wool as insulation and wooden bats in exterior walls, with plasterboard, plastered and painted with non-toxic and natural paint. Floors are solid beech and ceilings are in sound-insulating wood concrete. The homes are built according to 2020 energy requirements and has become a bit more expensive due to the choice of separation toilets and the consequent extra piping as well as the collection of rainwater from the rooftops in central tanks, from which the water is returned to the individual home for use in the toilet and possibly the washing machine. Architecturally, emphasis has been placed on light, indoor climate and spaciousness.

The exterior of the houses is clad with linseed oil-painted spruce cladding in blue, gray and green colors. There is a design manual, which shows how residents (regardless of ownership) can get an approved building permit to add a winter room, attic w/u balcony, a shed on their own plot, expand the loft, possibly establish extra room as well as terrace and bicycle sheds. There is a communal laundry in the common house.

The homes are built in 8 terraced house clusters, where 3-4 homes are built together. In each cluster there are 4 types of sizes so that different generations and family forms can live side by side. The residents are jointly taking care of the common living space.

The residents

From the beginning, a framework had been set for a mixed distribution of residents: young people, families with children, middle-aged people without children and the elderly. In 2021, there is now 147 adults and 90 children (most of them in preschool age). The residents come from many places, but with predominance from the Copenhagen area. Most adults are in the labor market and are employed in agriculture, the construction sector, the social sector, the health and education area, engineering-IT supply professions or earn a living through creative professions in the alternative treatment, theater and music industries. Professionally, the residents together have very different competencies. The level of education is remarkably much higher than in the municipality in general.

The work in Permatopia

Organization

What particularly distinguishes Permatopia from many other Danish housing communities is the ambitious circular supply system, the self-sufficiency ambition with permaculture as a starting point and the 30 ha that the community owns together. The work and management of the many common tasks is therefore a central focal point for discussions and solutions in Permatopia. At the start-up phase, 35 working groups became too many and the Coordination Forum quite unmanageable. The many work teams were then comprised in 6 areas (Agriculture, Economy, Common Areas, Farm, Supply and Social Sustainability), each with its own coordination forum for 4-10 teams. After moving in it was decided that the formal board organization should be supplemented with a "main circle", a forum consisting of 2 representatives from each area, who together with the board take care of major and principled decisions.

Work responsibility

From the start, it was determined that each adult resident of Permatopia is expected to participate with approx. 100 annual working hours - and there was a similar target for child participation. Whether the work is done with 10 hours in one weekend or ½ hour 4-5 times a week is up to oneself and depends on the nature of the work. However, many work in periods of more hours, both because it is necessary and because they take responsibility for operating and developing tasks that the community wants and needs. Especially in the summer, the agricultural activities in Permatopia are in great need of hands. The daily dinner production in 9 dining groups and board work in 3 housing associations and 5 boards under the cooperative KP AMBA are in line with other interest groups voluntary work, which is outside and beyond the compulsory work effort.

Distribution of work

Every year, a workplace distribution is carried out so that a team's need for manpower to solve priority tasks can determine who would like to work in the team in question. The value processes in the beginning of the community mean that the work - and the organization - rests on desire, job satisfaction, opportunity to learn, community needs and permaculture principles. (However, there is also a lot of work that is not so pleasurable and that is done anyway - "because then we just make a party out of it"). There are also several ambitions that are not really fully realized every year. The community now employs a farmer and a kitchen manager, both part-time. From 2021, there have been regular joint working mornings on Sundays, especially the field work is mostly fun when there are many people doing it.

Team organization

Teams can have very different sizes, from a store team of 3 to a field team of 24, which is then divided into a number of subgroups/field responsibilities. All teams carry an approved mandate and a vocalizer who is responsible for coordinating the work in collaboration with the other teams in the area and ensuring that development meetings with plans and decisions for the entire community are open, announced, have an agenda and minutes that are made accessible for the community. Major decisions that affect many residents must go through an open workshop or a joint meeting before an area coordination forum or the main circle can take a stand.

Decision-making processes

Permatopia is still in a phase of establishment and it is depending on the structures of the surrounding communities regarding lending, municipal approvals, etc. All formal decisions concerning finances and legally binding matters are implemented at general meetings of one of the many associations. In the work organization, more work is done with sociocratic processes, where emphasis is placed on especially that all voices are heard, that objections are integrated and that decisions are thoroughly prepared with the participation of especially those who are influenced by the decision. About 4-6 joint meetings are held annually and a number of idea workshops are held as well.

The joint responsibility

The cooperative KP amba, which is run as a company by all residents, has taken out a double-digit million loan for the purchase of the property, renovation, purchase of wind turbine, cleaning plant, geothermal heating system, communal house and renovation of the old buildings, laundry and the agricultural establishment. The financial obligations have become approx. 25% larger than expected, so a large part of the community's focus is on investing in the activities. The construction process with the common facilities became quite chaotic and delayed, and the establishment economy became tighter than expected. There are therefore many interest projects, which are funded by the residents themselves. The move was also delayed for almost 2 years. The documentary by Erlend Mo about "The Journey to Utopia" tells a strong story about the construction process and its significance for a few affected families.

Agriculture and supply

The total area of Permatopia is 29.2 ha; of which 4.7 ha are urban zones with residential buildings, roads and parking spaces. The remaining 24.5 ha are land zone, of which approx. 12 ha is a former protected forest. Approx. 1.5 ha is filled by the common farm with associated garden and farm buildings, common house, etc. and the remaining is just over 11 ha for agricultural and supply operations. Here, the area is used for willow cleaning plants and the wind turbine. In addition, in 2015 1 hectare of new orchard with approx. 300 fruit trees, beekeeping and mobile hen house for 75 hens was included. The remaining area is used for 2 large greenhouses, which were built in 2018 and 2019 and for approx. 3 ha vegetable growing; ca. 5-6 ha are laid out with barley with clover grass, crops that fix the nitrogen in the soil. After harvesting barley, grass can be harvested 3 times a year for compost and then soil is incorporated into vegetables.

In the agriculture project, residents grow between 80 and 100 different crops in crop rotation, such as many kinds of cabbage, root crops, berries, beans, corn, pumpkins, greenhouse crops and also try old varieties and varieties that contain more bitter substances. Permaculture is cultivated as far as possible, especially in the permanent beds, which are expanded year by year, and a number of principles are drawn from the permacultural to the traditionally organic approach, e.g. fixed tracks and fixed areas where the ground is not trodden. Experiments with composting methods and perennial vegetables have been launched in 2021. Permatopia's agriculture is eco-certified and the products are sold primarily to the residents and to the communal kitchen, but vegetables are also delivered to some Copenhagen restaurants. The farm is run with hectare support and has a part-time farmer.

Supply

Permatopia buys water from Karise Waterworks and the wastewater goes to our own willow treatment plant. The willow grow in the plant's 9 large beds and is cut every year by approx. 1/3, which is chipped and distributed on the ground. The plant is one of Denmark's largest. Heating for the homes is produced by geothermal hoses. Electricity for the common plants is produced by a 46-meter-high recycling wind turbine with a capacity of 225 Kw, which annually produces 320 MWh. The electricity can be used free of charge on the agricultural area where it is produced, i.e., for communal laundry, cooking, pumps that drive the supply as well as charging stations for electric cars. The surplus electricity is sold back to the electricity grid. Private electricity in the homes is with its own choice of electricity supplier, due to legislation on electricity supply.

Social sustainability - social cohesion

The main motto in permaculture - "Care for the soil, care for people and equal distribution of resources" means that care for people also has a significant focus in Permatopia. Resources have been set aside to keep the large group of residents well informed through newsletters, minutes and joint meetings, to ensure that everyone is 'up to date with information'. Conflict resolution between one/several residents and the community takes place through a dialogue team that acts as mediators - or can raise issues on their own.

The residents meet in work teams, in food groups, in the respective housing association and at joint meetings. It is important that the meetings take place with good, calm dialogue processes and that there is transparency in the decisions. There is therefore a chair and facilitator at the large meetings as well as meetings where there is potential conflict material on the agenda. From the outset, common rules of consideration have been created in a community process.

Common meals in Permatopia is the daily meeting place for many residents. Approx. 85% of all residents participate in a voluntary food scheme, where the residents participate in food production for the weekdays of the week. Vegetarian food offerings are mainly produced from the raw materials produced in the field.

Children's activities are important, as approx. 1/3 of all Permatopia residents are children. There is a children's democracy group that helps the 6+ year old children influence Permatopia's activities and priorities and on the integration of the children in both the children's community and the work of the large community.

Replacement and new residents take place by inviting future residents to information days. A Friends Association has been established for those particularly interested in the local area.

Permatopia as a place of learning

From the beginning, it has been part of Permatopia's foundation that the project, the buildings, the agriculture and the results from the many experiments with sustainable living should inspire others. In the long run to new Permatopias to be initiated. Permatopia residents are therefore happy to participate in external activities, just as researchers have been invited into the processes from the start. Visitors' visits are arranged by regular monthly tours, just as local, national and international groups can receive special lectures and tours for a fee. There are also course activities in the pipeline, including summer courses and activity days for children and young people.

A personal perspective

A board member from the period 2015-2020 talks about Permatopia's creation:

“We are a community where we actually started our joint project several years before we came to live here together. We have been unlucky in many ways: An example is a whole year of delay in financing because we could only get building loans if ALL homes were sold or rented out. Also, the first year of construction was the wettest winter in man's memory, the houses were not finished, everything was scratching, and water damaged; the main contractor went bankrupt and we are only now getting the deficiencies at the houses rectified - for our own money! The common facilities became much more expensive than assumed, and for a long time the economy has been looking bad. Just as we came out in 2019 with an honorable account with a tiny profit, Corona came and prevented the 2 most important sources of income: tours and dissemination to paying visitors from outside - and the sale of vegetables to Copenhagen restaurants.

Here from the 2021 outlook in retrospect however, I think some of our mishaps have also been beneficial. That the most important reason why our rather young housing association has come through the beginning and establishment phase here in the first years, the increasing financial burden and after only 2 years – after a closure of every joint activity - joint meetings, communal dining, major work initiatives - yes, the community's strength is precisely that most in the community have known each other very well for several years - and have succeeded in integrating the new ones that have been coming in. Participating in development days through several years of games, exercises and conversations, sharing dreams and values, but also discussing solutions and compromises. Most people took part in planting trees, sowing seeds, digging soil, making renovation of the buildings during their holidays with others who also were longing to move in; it has been one very important factor for the community that still wants Permatopia as a project and concept to succeed.

Another factor has been that we all moved in pretty much the same half year. Compared to other eco-communities, where you live (for up to 5 years) to build your own home before focusiing on the common facilities, we could move into (almost) finished homes and continue working on the common facilities that we started the construction of 2-3 years before the actual move-in.

The corona situation has been a serious barrier to the development of the community in recent years, so right now we are struggling with a huge social backlog. We must find the good tune again, develop interest again in what happens in teams other than our own and we have big decisions about priorities of our joint work before us.

When you look at our community from the outside, listen to the visitors and look at other similarly large communities, we have come incredibly far. We have built so much in a very short time. The amount of work and enthusiasm has been enormous. On the results side, I note that we have a farm running with vegetable crops, chicken, ducks, bees and forestry. We already have a great deal of permaculture knowledge and experience; we have established 2 stores, an online store for agricultural products and a store for joint purchases of health food and care products. Our administration works, we pay our loans and expenses. There are fewer liberal professions, a course business and a large day care institution named Permatotten. We have influenced the local community by participating in associations, creating our own friends' association as well as a range of cultural events, music and theater offerings. Socially, we have established (yet fragile) structures for decision-making, a team-based work organization and a flexible communal dining scheme. Of course, we have disagreements and conflicts, but the meeting culture works for most people and we work methodically with the coherence and relationships. Some have had to leave us because the dreams broke or the conflicts became too big, but as a community we have come over it - and new residents are moving in with their ideas and refreshing views on what we have established.

In the autumn of 2021, our main circle has put a re-discussion of Permatopia's common values and mission on the agenda. It is important and we need to re-establish a bit of the 'pre-move-in spirit' because there have been some years of financial worries and a bit of discouragement. Many people's dreams did not come to realize, at least not as fast as they had dreamed of. There is a lot more work for many of us if the dreams are to become real. Now we are taking a "adjusting-ambitions-phase", which I believe applies both to the individual and to the community as a whole. Communities are just like relationships or parent-child relationships: it moves in waves of dream-ambition-realism-demotivation, and just as you hit rock bottom or lose perspective, there is new light ahead. The greatest thing in communities is that you can share with the many other about finding a foothold again and there is always someone who at the right time has the surplus energy to make the unexpected happen".

Inger Maaløe
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