**Cohousing in Sweden and Denmark – David Entin – 2014**

1. Our first cohousing community, Sockenstugan, one of approximately 50 in Sweden and 20 in Stockholm, began in the 1999. A building for aging that was built in 1947 became available as the people died and there were problems with caring for them. A cohousing group formed and began to plan a community for people over age 40 without children, primarily singles. The city owned the building and accepted their proposal. The building was renovated, and 44 units of one, two, and three rooms with kitchens or half kitchens replaced the previous 75 single rooms. Common space was also carved out for dining, cooking, and socializing. There are also designated rooms for exercise, bicycle storage, sewing, carpentry, sauna, laundry, dark room. Outside is a large common flower and vegetable garden and perhaps twenty individual garden plots. There is an extensive composting and recycling program. They currently have 48 members (a few couples; the rest singles) in the 44 "flats."
2. There is an elected board and 20 work groups. Everyone is expected to serve on at least one work group. Decisions are made by consensus whenever possible. They have a good understanding of consensus and work through the various committees or work groups. All proposals are circulated at least a week in advance of their meetings, three or four "per semester." There are voluntary and compulsory activities. Everyone is required to help cook or clean for their five weekday meals a week, as well as clean common areas or work in the common garden. Other activities are voluntary. Ingrid, our hostess, is responsible for the common computer. For cleaning responsibilities, the person before you passes a wooden stick that hangs on a hook by your door until you complete your cleaning tasks and then pass it on to the next person. Everyone serves on one of the meal work groups; each group takes responsibility for one week in the month and the members make sure you are there to be part of the group. I asked what happens if a member does not do the compulsory work. She did not see that as a problem. Of course concessions are made for sick or infirm aging members and other less demanding work is found for those folks. Members are carefully selected and they understand the principle of shared work as vital to cohousing. Ingrid could not understand why all members, especially working parents with children, would not participate in the common meals, since they are provided three-quarters of the time without any work, and members only need to work for one-fourth of the meals.
3. There are external members who are interviewed and selected and serve on meal work groups. When a unit is available either through death or a member moving out, current residents have first choice of moving into that unit -- people generally want smaller units because they are cheaper. There is considerable demand for their cohousing community. After choices by current residents, vacant units are available for external members, who are again interviewed and those most meeting the desired criteria are selected. The group prefers younger prospective members and, if less than 25% of their members, men. We were asked how we select new members. We explained how our units are sold when a member leaves and that we has been fortunate that all new members at our community did contribute to the work of the community and how people shared their talents on a voluntary basis, though we did have expectations for every member to serve on a committee and contribute to the work. They were concerned that leaving new member selection to the vicissitudes of the market could undermine the principles of cohousing. They cited an example in Sweden where a community was "de-cohoused" by use of market forces.
4. Members pay rent to the owner, the city government, based on square footage of their occupied unit, and one forty-fourth of the common space. In addition the owner for the maintenance of the facility, including cleaning and gardening, pays them monthly. Our hostess extolled the virtues of smaller units as more affordable and the cost of expanding common space much more practical, since it cost each member only one forty-fourth of the cost per square foot in monthly rent compared to individual unit space.
5. The progressive nature of their members views became apparent, just as it is hard to find Republicans living in cohousing in the U.S. They were unhappy with the current four-party minority Center-Right coalition in power because of its adherence to market forces, which did not serve the best interests of most Swedes. They hoped for and expected a change of government in the upcoming September elections. They told us about the progressive policies of governing Swedish policies following World War II, how 100,000 new housing units were built by the government in ten years to serve the public -- this was democratic socialism, not communism, it was stressed. The current focus of relying on market forces has brought a real shortage of housing units in the country. In fact the national housing ministry in government has been abolished.
6. We were shown two housing units; both called "two room" units. One large room was like a living-dining room, with a small kitchen off to the side. The second room was the bedroom and office (computer and desk). There was also an entranceway for coats, bookcases, etc. Each unit has designated and neat basement and attic storage.
7. On our first night we were invited to their "extra dinner." Many Swedes vacation for the Midsummer celebration, held at the summer solstice each year, so they had suspend their usual weeknight common dinners. However, tonight they were having an "extra" meal together. We had seen the cooks working away earlier in the day in their large and very well equipped kitchen just across from the large dining rooms. One very long table was set up for the twenty-five or so residents in attendance. The meal consisted of slices of cooked roast beef, small boiled potatoes in a tasty sauce, and a very healthy green garden salad mix with a few tomato and red pepper slices. In response to my inquiry I learned they normally have an alternative dish for vegetarians in the group. For dessert was a chocolate cake (really like brownies) with whipped cream and some tasty home made cookies. With no children for distraction, the adults engage in conversation for a while after dinner. I joined the cleanup crew in the kitchen. They have two rapid (three minute) industrial dish washers/sanitizers. Our hostess Ingrid commented on the importance of the common meal for building community and personal connections. I showed some photos on my mini ipad of Rocky Hill cohousing, including the children's dinner. One gentleman was fascinated and commented "charming." Their large kitchen has a very large, commercial, floor to ceiling refrigerator and a separate large freezer. There are several sinks and large work areas. The eating dishes and silverware are kept on carefully labeled shelves in cabinets in the large dining area -- really two rooms where they combined dining and living space, such that there are couches and comfortable chairs on either side, with five tables and chairs occupying most of the two open rooms. Off the main corridor are a computer room, a common bathroom, guest room, and a room with all cleaning equipment and supplies.
8. Our hostess prepared a special dinner for us for the Midsummer Eve, a traditional Swedish meal. We had two types of herring, boiled potatoes, green salad, a strong Norwegian aperitif, and fresh strawberry shortcake.
9. Returning from a day of sight-seeing, the folks at the cohousing community ask about our day and offer suggestions of things to do and see. They are uniformly friendly and helpful. Tonight, June 22, one guy knocked on our door to make suggestions and take us to the local computer to look up sights and times for us. He also took us to another guy's apartment to look at local map.
10. We did laundry in a large and very functional laundry room, which has two washers, three dryers, and a separate drying room where clothes can be hung to be dried by forced heated air. Outside there is an interesting board where people reserve the laundry room for three or four hour blocks of time as often as they need to. The laundry room also has a large folding table, ironing board that swings down from the wall, and is immaculate.
11. As we came in each evening from sightseeing we saw several residents around the large TV in the living area of the double dining room watching World Cup soccer.
12. Majbacke Cohousing, Gothenburg (second largest city in Sweden). We arrived here on June 25 via train and stayed at in a typical apartment on the 8th floor. The generous occupants (a couple) are staying at their "summer house" and made their unit available to us. They were the founders of the community, bringing the idea of cohousing to the local government development arm that built and is responsible for this eight story yellow and white building. There are 41 units, essentially four on each floor, with one elevator. The building had been used for ill and senior citizens and was not working well. With approval of the owner, they began with occupying two vacant units on the top floor. Gradually as units became available through death or moves, over several years, they recruited new members who moved into units as they became vacant. The cohousing organization, Majbacke, has now fully occupied the building for ten years.
13. This community has many similarities to the one we visited in Stockholm: mainly for above forty single people; two "obligations" for all members are cooking as part of a team once every six weeks for twice weekly common meals and building and surroundings upkeep, for which they receive reimbursement for management of the building from the owner. Other activities and contributions are voluntary. They receive money from city government to plant fruit bushes and trees in the surrounding area -- anyone can partake of the fruit when it is available. Thorsten showed us a row of small apple trees and larger cherry tree that he had just planted. Residents pay rent to the cohousing association, which in turns pays, the city agency. Though majority, as required by law, makes decisions they are careful to take into account the minority. A decision can be revisited if some are still unhappy with it. Thorsten, who met us at the train station, told us that he shares a car with four other cohousing members, which works well in Gothenburg, which has a good public transportation network. He also owns a bicycle, which he rides regularly for pleasure and for necessary transportation.
14. Bertil, the founder and owner of the unit we stayed in has been active in the cohousing movement in Sweden. His wife Elizabeth, a retired nutritionist, served on the national cohousing board. Asking about the past, he feels they admitted some folks who were not suitable for cohousing because Majbacke wanted to fill units and there is a shortage of "flats" in Sweden. One person who turned out to be an alcoholic and was behind in rent payments was asked to leave; some others who did not fit in well left. He said there was considerable conflict in the early days. Now he is very pleased with the community. All prospective members are interviewed and those that most closely meet their criteria are selected. They have a waiting list but do not take people in order on the list. They desire younger members and maintain a 60-40-gender balance.
15. Attached to the attractive building is a one-story hexagonal structure that houses the common house, which includes an open kitchen, separate room for dish washing, and tables for eating and living room areas in the large open space. There are at least one hundred plants around the space, which is very attractive and surrounded by glass walls on three-quarters of the sides. The hallway lists cooking and cleaning assignments and other information. There is a separate library, guest room, exercise room, TV and movie room with projector and white wall for showing, and laundry room with four washers and two large dryers. A group meets for coffee every morning. The large common facility is used frequently for socializing and "hanging out." There are several outdoor tables and a barbecue grill outside. The community is rather urban, with other five or six story high rise condominium buildings nearby, but each has grass and greenery and woodsy paths around. Majbacke is one block from the tram or trolley, which takes them to the center of the city in ten minutes. Our apartment has gorgeous views of the nearby harbor.
16. We were also taken to see another cohousing community in a newer suburban community. The cohousing community occupies an eleven-story building and consists of forty-three units. The first floor has large dining and living room areas, plus a kitchen, library, carpentry room, and laundry. The 11th or top floor has a large, modern Jacuzzi, sauna, guest room, living room, and a large deck for grilling, sunbathing, and socializing, with a great view. This cohousing community also pays rent to a governmental owner and is primarily for people over 40. There was an interesting discussion of how people define clean -- what are the standards for clean for the work group responsible for this task?
17. Bertil and Thorsten feel that eating together and serving on work groups are necessary for the success of cohousing. Without this, Bertil states, cohousing will fall apart.
18. Thorsten and a couple who live next door invited me to join them in their common house. Many cohousing communities suspend their meal programs during summer vacation/holiday time. Here a number of people fix their dinner in their apartment but then bring their plate to the common dining room to eat together and socialize. So I joined them for conversation. When asked how she liked cohousing (they have been here seven years), she replied, "I found myself" and friends. When I asked her husband if cohousing residents were typical of Swedes -- there was agreement the answer was No. However, he does not see himself as a Swede, but as International, a citizen of the world.
19. On our last day in Gothenburg Thorsten explained why most cohousing in Sweden is rental, which they prefer. The housing seems to be owned by governmental entities and is not subject to market forces. They do no want people to buy a unit and later decide to move out because the market value has gone up and they want to make a profit. He feels that people should make their money from work, not from just living in a place. Clearly against the capitalistic ethic, and Sweden has been an overwhelmingly Protestant country. Thorsten has three children and seven grandchildren aged two months to fourteen.
20. Slottet Cohousing in Lund, a university town of approximately 115,000 in southwestern Sweden. Their three-story building was originally built in 1924 by the municipal government for very poor ("destitute") people -- especially mothers with many children. The idea was to give the most poor the best housing and 24 small apartments looked so grand to these people that it was called Slottet or the castle. After the war there was less need for this type of housing for the poor. A movement among those on the waiting list for housing ("in the queue") for a greater sense of community began to focus on collective housing, sharing common space but also having individual living units, smaller than usual because of the shared common space. Lennart Nord, a landscape architect was among the founders of the union of these people, a group whose membership reached around 300. They began to demand that the municipal government listen to them. The government decided to sell them the Slottet housing and gave them a million and half crowns (kroners) to renovate and convert to 16 modern units. In 1984 the first group moved in. Slottet claims to be the oldest cohousing community in Sweden. Lennart helped design the space.
21. The current cohousing community of 28 adults, after 30 years of existence, still has 12 of the original settlers, who are now elderly, but they have been admitting new members who now must pay market price for their units. A cohousing community where members buy their units is unusual in Sweden and was not the desire of this group, but the city insisted that they buy their structurally sound building. For twenty years a majority insisted that units only be sold for their original price so others like them could afford to move in. But after twenty years the majority changed and now units are sold for market price. They have a condominium association that handles the property and financing. There is also a social union that all members must join that deals with the life of the community. There are separate boards for each. In recent years they have admitted some young families. They now have six children and one on the way.
22. There are three requirements of all members: prepare and clean up for the four meals per week; clean the common spaces and keep the garden and exterior; attend monthly meetings. Though decisions are by two-thirds majority, they strive for consensus and sometimes fail to make decisions because some do not agree. Only once in 31 years have they "kicked out" someone for not doing what is obligatory. Lennart showed us lists the common hallway bulletin board, jokingly saying they are anarchists. Residents sign up after they have cooked and cleaned for a meal. If they have not completed the necessary six times in six months, they are assessed a fine. Preparing and cleaning up for meals is required, but participating in the meals is not.
23. Common spaces include: living room with TV, dining room, outside terrace with picnic tables, laundry, carpentry room, play room and computer and copy room, two guest rooms, sauna, movie room with large screen, attic living room with TV and some indoor play equipment, bicycle room, storage, outside yard which backs onto elderly housing. They have a table in the common living room with daily newspapers and popular magazines, which they share and read. Lennart gave us a full tour of the common spaces and their individual two-story unit. They have two large compost bins outside for their garden, which included an apple tree, black current bushes, strawberries, raspberries, and another sweet berry whose name was not translatable, as well as the usual vegetables.
24. As usual, the people at Slottet were very hospitable. They insisted we join them for the dinner meal. The delicious dessert included fresh rhubarb grown in their garden. As in other cohousing communities, they usually suspend their meal program in the summer when, we were told, most Swedes go away for the entire summer. However, they did have a special common meal the night of our arrival. The usual fee for use of a guest room is 40 Kroner, but we could not pay because we were "guests of the house."
25. Lund also has three other cohousing communities, named, in English, rainbow, violin, and raisin. The first two are for families and the last for people over 40 without children. All the units were built by the municipal government for the original union of people wanting to live in community. Respectively, they were built and have the following number of units: 1989, 19 units, 1992, 21 units, and 1999, 27 units. All are rental. Lund may have the most cohousing per capita in Sweden (like Vermont in the US).
26. Trandhoj Cohousing. Our first cohousing community in Denmark is markedly different from most others. It has an interesting history. Tranehoj is really out in the country, in north Sealand and over an hour's drive from Copenhagen. It is on the edge of a small village. When you drive in you see a large two-story structure dated 1930 with barns and outbuildings behind the main structure, with fields of grain beyond stretching as far as the eye can see, with a few "windmills" or wind power turbines in the distance. It is close to the sea. The original structure was built in the early 19th century as a poor house where the destitute lived and were required to work on the farms. When this concept went out of style, the municipality renovated the building as a home of the aged. Around 1980 the town built a new home for seniors. A commune interested in agriculture bought the building and farm structures and moved in in 1984. They worked the farm and were a shared economy, meaning that all income from outside was turned over to the collective and shared. The farm was gradually not so successful economically and members began to resent the shared economy. It was harder to attract new members. Sixteen years ago Gitte and her husband and a few others moved in, abandoned the shared economy concept, and became a cohousing community but kept the name Tranehoj. The small size makes the community really feel like an extended family.
27. Tranehoj today has five adult members and two young children (6 months and 3 years). They would like more members and have two vacant apartments but most folks find this too remote and difficult to find employment far from the major city. The members are dedicated and upkeep of the many old buildings and working the farm takes a lot of time and energy.
28. They grow a little over 50% of their food. They have two goats and nine sheep. The goats are useless but they eat lamb and sell the wool. They have about a dozen chickens that supply them with eggs, kept in a well-designed chicken house where the eggs can be gathered from outside. There is a large old orchard, primarily apples, which supplies far more apples that they can use. They convert the fruit to apple juice, which they store in a few freezers along with a large supply of lamb meat. There are several large plots of varied vegetables that meet their needs during the growing season and beyond for root veggies.
29. We got a tour of the various barns and outbuildings, with paint room, large wood shop, etc. There is new electric mower that runs on power from the large array of solar panels. Their solar panels supply all the electricity they need and they sell the excess to the electric company. The community is of course very environmentally conscious and their farming strictly organic.
30. This was their annual work week, where everyone takes a vacation from their outside occupations and works on the farm, repairing and painting buildings, farming, etc. All members are expected to help maintain the community and do the necessary farming chores. During the year they eat dinner together during the week.
31. The large structure allows for spacious individual apartments, including two that are vacant where they hope to attract new members. New members join provisionally for a year and then pay $10,000 Kronor to buy a share of the association, which owns everything. That is very cheap and only slightly more than the original cost of 1984. An average condo in the city can run five or six hundred thousand kronor. The individual apartments have sinks, but no stove so all cooking is done in the large common kitchen. We ate dinner with them of spaghetti and meatballs and large salad with fresh melon. And we also had breakfast, featuring homemade jams and freshly baked wheat and rye bread.
32. On July 2 we traveled from the smallest cohousing community in Denmark (six adults and two children) to what is believed to be the largest, Monksogard, with 100 housing units. Monksogard actually consists of five sub-communities located around a large old farm in a suburban neighborhood of Roskilde, the fourth largest city in Denmark. Each of the five has its own common house. The five sub-communities are: 1, for the young, under age 30 but can stay after reaching 30, with reportedly many children; 2, for seniors, aged 55 or older and with no children at home; 3, for families of all ages, for rental (so for those unable to buy, i.e., probably more likely low and moderate income); 4, a cooperative where members buy a share and then have the right to occupy a unit (same as cooperatives in the US); and 5, for all ages where members purchase their units and sell them on the market. Communities 1, 2 and 3 are rental and are owned by an independent non-profit that receives subsidies from the government. Communities 1 through 4 can select new members, establish criteria, interview and screen prospective members. In community five sellers inform prospective buyers of the cohousing community with its arrangements, expectations, etc. Prospective buyers come to meet the community, participate in one or more community meals, and learn about the cohousing community. Only three of the twenty units have sold since move-in in 2000. This last community spent five years in planning before construction. Each of the five sub-communities has its own area; all have three sets of connected two-story housing shaped in a square U, with the common house on the fourth side. There are gravel paths throughout.
33. Each sub-community has its own internal structure and board. There is also an overall board for the entire Muskogard cohousing community and separate boards or committees to manage a couple of the major function areas (farm, sewer and water). The entire community has meetings once every six weeks. It is possible to move from one community to another and in fact the latest new member at community 5 moved from another sub-community, number 3 I believe. Monksogard has its own sewer system. The toilets in the homes separate urine out, which means men must sit down to pee. The urine is used to fertilize the gardens. The rest of the water goes through their own sewage treatment plant and after cleaning goes into the nearby stream. Monksogard also has an extensive rainwater collection system that is able to supply all the water necessary for the toilets. We also observed solar panels on most south-facing roofs.
34. Each community has extensive sheds to hold the many bicycles. Denmark may have the greatest number of bicycles per capita of any country. Copenhagen, the capitol and largest city, was recently selected as the greenest city in Europe and 25% of the commuting is by bicycle. It is also on pace to achieve it's 2020 goal of being carbon neutral. Public transportation is excellent in Denmark with an extensive train and bus system and Copenhagen also has a large subway system. Monksogard is a short distance from the train station where trains for Copenhagen leave every 15 minutes and more frequently during rush hours. In our host family, he commutes to work by bicycle and she by train. They do not own a car but are part of the shared car program
35. 155 members have joined the car-sharing program, including a few from nearby neighborhoods beyond Monksogard cohousing. This program has 12 cars serving the 155 members, who sign up in advance for use via the program internet site Members pay a fee to join, plus a refundable deposit. These monies and bank loans enable purchase of the cars, except the last two, electric cars (the newest can recharge six times faster than the older one and it has a range of 150-200 miles), are leased. Members pay by time and mileage for use; all gas is provided.
36. There are extensive common facilities serving the entire Monksogard cohousing community. These include: old farm barn with stables where we saw three horses kept; large outside pasture for three goats and sheep and a separate one for a couple of cows (for meat, not milk) -- all the animals are individually owned); extensive community gardens (the seniors is the most impressive) and orchards with a great range of fruit (pears, apples cherries, raspberries, currants, and some form of grape-like fruit); small community store with fresh produce run by a local resident; a few private offices rented by residents in one of the farm buildings; a variety of interesting play structures for children.
37. Here are a few details about community 5 where we stayed in one unit and were invited to dinner in another by our hosts. The two-story housing units have a glassed-in entry way maybe 8 ft. by 8 ft., large open living and dining area and fully equipped kitchen on the first floor, plus a half-bath, and three small to average sized bedrooms and full bath upstairs.

1. Decisions are made by majority rule after extensive discussion and posting in advance whenever decisions are to be made by the entire sub-community at a regular meeting. They have now been there fourteen years. The units are very Danish modern, with smart design features.
2. The community constructed their own common house. They thought it could be done quickly but took several years. It is straw bale construction taken from the U.S. They say they had to build it twice because of the mistakes they made. Internal walls are from non-baked bricks, i.e., they would decompose if exposed to rain or water. The large common house has log beams with the ceiling two stories high and glass at the peak letting light into the building. There are many tables for dining, a small living room area, ping-pong table, small room with another game, and an open second floor at one end with games/space primarily for teens. They have three common meals, dinners, per week, Wednesday through Friday. Lotte commented that this was a godsend for a working mother with three children. There is a small laundry with three washing machines and one dryer, plus a separate drying room for hanging clothes to dry. Resident know all their neighbors. The roofs of the four bicycle sheds and common house are covered with seashells.
3. Monksoegaard is in a very suburban area of Roskilde, the ancient capitol and burial place of Danish kings and queens. This area has blocks of widely spaced two and three story apartment houses. Roskilde has grown in recent years and is now the fourth largest city in Denmark. Roskilde apparently has seventeen cohousing communities within its boarder. I took some photos of the cohousing subdivisions of the young and old. When touring the senior common house, a resident told me that in addition to eating together, they used the common house for singing in a choir, watching movies, and playing games.
4. The Monksoegaard sub-community where we lived has a connected telephone system. You can just dial a 1 and the house number to get other resident households. I believe they also have a connected or common internet system but I am not sure.
5. On July 5 we went to Lange Eng cohousing, in a slightly closer in suburb of Copenhagen. Lange Eng has 54 units, was first occupied in 2009, and has mainly young families. They also have a few single people and elderly. During the year they serve common dinners six nights a week. Every one serves on a three-person cooking or cleaning team for half a week (three days) in each six-week cycle. You are obligated to help prepare or clean up, but you can opt out of eating the meals. The family whose unit we are occupying while they are on vacation, says they come to about four out of the six per week, sometimes determined by what is being served. The menus are available in advance. Signing up and attending and budgeting are all done on the Internet. A catering service delivers the food for the cooks, so there is no need to shop. Keep in mind they are cooking for 100 adults and 105 children.
6. Lange Eng is a very modern, minimalist design with forming sort of a large rectangle with three stories on one side and two stories on the other. There are actually six sides at slightly different angles. On the three-story side, smaller units are on the ground floor and the upper two stories are larger apartments. The upper floor units have balconies on the outside because they do not have the ground floor decks of the units on the other side and also have a straight outside staircase from the second floor down to the inside courtyard ground. The basic color inside the courtyard is gray, while the color on the outside facing the parking lots is black. All units have floor to ceiling glass in several places. All units open on to the courtyard inside the rectangle and also open out back to where they is some space for plantings before the parking area. There are quite a few young fruit trees. Each unit opens onto a 12-foot wide wooden deck that runs around the entire inner courtyard and most families have picnic tables on their portion of the deck for outside eating. The inner courtyard has a large sandbox and a few other forms of children's play equipment. We were told there is considerable diversity here, which I took to mean economic diversity.
7. When families leave they sell their units on the open market. New members must abide by the rules. The unit we are staying in is narrow (25-30 feet) but has high ceilings and in fact part of the living room goes the full two stories. Downstairs are a living-dining area, kitchen, full bath and laundry in same room, another small room. Upstairs are three small bedrooms and a full bath. The open wooden stairs with white metal frame go straight up from a few feet in front of the back door in the living room to the second story with no curve or change of direction. the glass front door is part of two stories of glass from the floor to the near the top of the second story. This is the first cohousing community we have seen in Scandinavia that has individual clothes washers and dryers in the individual units and does not have a common laundry.
8. The local commuter rail is a twenty-minute walk along a footpath and parallel bicycle path that avoids the street traffic. Most members here work in Copenhagen and ride their bikes to the train station that has a large area for bicycle parking. Some even keep a bike at the other end, i.e., in the city so they can ride straight to their place of work. The train trip to the city takes 15 or 20 minutes with seven or eight stops to the center. These commuter trains have special places in the first and last cars for placing bicycles and are well used.
9. It's a quiet summer, sunny Sunday at Lange Eng cohousing. Like most people we have our front and back doors open. We have not yet seen any screens in Scandinavia -- must not have many bugs/mosquitoes. It is pleasant sitting in the shade on the deck in the courtyard. The warm sun is bearing down on the other side of the unit. Many people have closed the shades to the large floor to ceiling glass windows where the sun would be pouring in. Two little girls with sun hats are playing peacefully in the large sandbox.
10. I visited the common house on one end of the structure. Placing a small circle device next to the door sensor opens the main door. The first floor has a large dining room, which can accommodate the 150-200 people who eat regularly, and a large kitchen with industrial size refrigerators, stove, etc. Upstairs are the following rooms: two playrooms, one with soccer goals and outline for foursquare, a foosball and portable ping pong table, theater with large screen and plush red theater seats for about 25, and a cafe with library, living room area, etc. There is no guest room here.
11. Our next-door neighbors have been quite friendly and helpful and brought us some freshly picked strawberries. They have two children aged 4 and 10. He is an international photographer who travels extensively. He is so glad he is not leaving his wife and children alone when he travels -- that they have the community and common meals. They found out about Lange Eng on the internet during the planning stage that involved many meetings and decisions, which were by majority vote ("you can't satisfy all people all the time"). He is very comfortable allowing his children to play outside in the common courtyard for hours without parental supervision. His son rides his bike home from school with other kids from Lange Eng. Only a few units have turned over since initial occupation five years ago.
12. Two women invited us over for a glass of wine one evening, Nina, who arranged our stay in a unit where the family is on vacation, and Nita. Their husbands, Claus and Joe, came later after the kids were asleep. We learned that there are almost 100 adults at Lange Eng, and 105 children, many young. Both of these families moved in two or three years ago and really like cohousing. They described the appeal or "ideology" as "easy living." By this phrase they meant it is so nice to come home from work and at 6 pm go to the Common House where a meal is prepared for you. If you want, you can take it out and eat at home. In turn you serve on a team of ten that has to prepare and clean up only half a week (three days out of six for the meal program) only once every six weeks. Nita commented on how much she enjoys the dinner conversations. In addition, any time you need an item or help with something, you just go to their internet site and you receive several responses quickly. With a large group (54 units) there are many skills and offers of help. They said they do know all 100 adults living in Lange Eng. They also find there are not many maintenance chores necessary in this community (no vegetable gardens to grow, for example) which contributes to the easy living.
13. Frederick next door mentioned that he liked the "diversity" and I asked these two couples what he meant. They were surprised and said they would ask him. There are only two adults who are not white Danes, an Israeli Palestinian married to a Danish woman, and Nina's husband who is half African and half English. Lange Eng is overwhelming young families, with only a few single mothers, single individuals and older folks and one or two units rented by their owners. They concluded the diversity must be in occupations, from two Lutheran priests, lawyers, teachers, social workers, musicians, artists, academics, media, etc. They consider themselves middle class or upper middle class.
14. Nina and her husband Joe share a car with another family and also belong to a municipal car-sharing program as back-up. Nita and Claus own a car and he is now participating in the government program loaning motorized bikes for three months to get automobile commuters to consider alternative means of getting to work. They say they have a car because of a need to visit family in rural areas of Denmark. Nina and Joe have bought a sailboat with four other families from Lange Eng.
15. As seems typical of Danes we meet, all four speak excellent and idiomatic American English and have been to the U.S. The English they learn in school is often British, depending on the teacher, but the influence of American movies, television programs, and pop songs are pervasive influences.
16. Lange Eng has an elected board and many groups or committees, such as outside grounds, common house, finance, etc. All members are required to serve on a group. There are also popular voluntary groups of cohousing residents, such as running, knitting, literature, and, the newest, kayaking. Nita's literature group has been reading feminist literature this spring led by two people who really know the field. They have made many friends there and 27 of them (that number also includes children) are going on vacation together in Italy next week. These four really like living in cohousing, though some outside friends ask about living so close, especially when the large glass walls mean everyone can see into your apartment. Some Danes want more privacy, individual lives, and less socializing.
17. A guy came by last night from unit 55 and wanted to see if his case of wine had arrived. Turns out he is a surgeon who has a hospital in Sierra Leone He is returning there on Friday to do some training and to work on the deadly and growing e-coli epidemic.
18. July 10 we drove from the Copenhagen area through central Denmark to Jutland and northwestern corner of this country to stay at our last cohousing community, Vissebakkegard with 18 units in the city of Aalborg. This community is 30 years old but not the oldest in this area. It was formed as a cooperative and subsidized by the regional government. In a cooperative, members buy a share and earn a right to occupy a unit. To help prospective members buy a share, the government provided loans and subsidized the interest, until 1999. At that point the government pulled out and new members had to buy their shares without government help.
19. Some original members were primarily interested in government help to buy housing, while others wanted to form a community. After a couple of years, those not interested in community sold their units and moved out. This is really when this cohousing began. New members replacing those who moved out were interested in community. When someone moves out, their share in the cooperative is sold on the market. The cooperative does not screen or select prospective buyers. Most of the original members or those who moved in shortly after are still here. Their children are mostly grown, so they are now an older community. The last unit to turn over was five years ago. The original units were small; the government would subsidize loans for only so much cost per square meter. Many units have added on as needed and possible through the years.
20. Vissebakkegard built their common house with their own labor and help from a public employment project, as well as some contracting. The common house has a kitchen, large dining room, living room area with large TV screen, room for repairing cars and other projects, carpentry shop, bicycle shed, storage for individual units in the attic, exercise room (used to be children's room), and guest room and bathrooms. Members live in individual houses, mostly connected, but with double walls between. The houses are white on the outside with orange tile roofs.
21. Vissebakkegard has an elected board and holds meetings of all the members twice a year or more often as needed. Decisions are by majority vote. When I mentioned that we make decisions by consensus our hostess looked at us like we were crazy. Do you ever make decisions, she asked? She said in the early days they had forceful arguments and discussions, but always got along despite major differences from time to time. Now there is more harmony.
22. Twenty years ago their community bought a piece of nearby land and installed a wind turbine (windmill they are called) for alternative energy. They sold the electricity on the grid and received lowered electric bills. Some neighbors complained about the noise of the windmill. Five years ago, as part of a government program to replace smaller windmills and those in residential areas, with the very large ones out in the countryside or offshore, their windmill was bought out by a utility and closed. Solar panels are apparently not economical to install, so we did not see too many.