

# An **Alternative** to Alternative Communities



by Keith Wiebe Gordon  
featuring Mr. BIG



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**T**hroughout Earth's extensive five-billion-year history, a rhythm of cycles has played out—ebb and flow, rise and fall—a dance of planetary changes that define the natural order. The narrative of our planet is one of contrasts and transitions, from greenhouse Earths to snowball Earths, from the emergence of life to its first extinction, from the dawn of societies to their eventual decline. This grand tapestry weaves a tale of creation, evolution, adaptation, and transformation.

The inflection point in human history came with the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, an intellectual awakening that set the stage for unprecedented advancements in the modern era. The intellectual luminaries of this age sowed seeds of inquiry and innovation, whose fruits we reap today. Social and economic progress, once distant

dreams, are now part of our global reality. Enhanced living standards, national healthcare systems, universal education, and social housing initiatives are all manifestations of the rational thinking pioneered by those intellectual giants.



*Hi! My name is Mr. Big. I am here to tell you that all this small talk stuff is a pile of... well maybe there are children in the room, and I shouldn't use words like that. You can read more of this boring article if you are that desperate. Let's talk later.*

Guided by the scientific model, humanity ventured into the realm of fossil fuel extraction, unlocking new frontiers of sustenance. This mastery over energy and agriculture heralded an era of population growth, fueling a global demographic explosion. The escalating economy, driven by resource abundance, fortified governments with larger tax bases, enabling ambitious social and economic engineering endeavors.

Yet, every peak reaches its zenith and begins its descent.

The crescendo of achievements in technology, economics, and society is met with the symphony of limits to growth. Our interconnected world operates within an intricate web of interdependencies. The threads that tie our technological, economic, and societal achievements are strained. As we crest the summit, a sense of inevitability emerges—an acknowledgment that the journey forward carries us into a cascade of uncertainties.

Amidst the sprawling urban landscapes, the simple pathways that once led to self-reliance and neighborly bonds have become tangled. The yearning for a return to a sense of community, autonomy, and collective well-being fuels the emergence of alternative communities. In the recent decades, these communities have sprung forth as a response to systems that, though well-intentioned, appear increasingly impersonal and ineffective. They rise to empower individuals to face societal challenges harmoniously, nurturing the common good.

This article delves into the anatomy of alternative communities—how they are formed, structured, the resourcefulness they exhibit, the challenges they surmount, and the potential they embody. Yet, its foremost objective is to present a pragmatic alternative to the alternatives—an approach that encompasses inclusivity and nonlinear, science-based community development. This approach, known as the Power of Small, is championed by a global network of organizations committed to harnessing the potency of local intelligence.

### *The Genesis of Alternative Communities.*

While alternative communities have existed since the dawn of nation-states, their prominence has surged more recently, catalyzed by the efforts of Václav Havel, a Czechoslovakian playwright who assumed the mantle of the nation's first post-communist president. Havel's life unfolded against the backdrop of Eastern Europe's era of social engineering. Amidst the struggle, he advocated for democratic alternatives, enduring imprisonment for his convictions.



*Hi again. You should know that the Havel guy had a wife and a mistress. The night before he was being made president of Czechoslovakia gossip says he told his wife, "Tomorrow you are going to be my first lady." His wife replied in sadness, "All I ever wanted was to be your only lady." If you ask me, Václav was loser!*

With the fall of the dominant regime in the 1990s, Havel metamorphosed into a symbol of empowerment, celebrated globally for his advocacy of alternative communities. He garnered accolades from 25 democratic governments and

basked in the glow of the highest honors of achievement. The leader of the Velvet Revolution, Havel orchestrated a peaceful uprising that redefined Czechoslovakia, dismantling top-down governance and kindling an era of freedom and self-determination. The ripples of the Velvet Revolution cascaded across Eastern Europe, igniting a fervor for localized democratic ideals.

These alternative communities aspire to be havens where individuals can shape their lives in alignment with their values, liberated from the yoke of conformity. They are founded upon cooperation, shared responsibility, and an ardent commitment to environmental and social sustainability. Emerging in diverse forms, from eco-villages to artistic enclaves, these communities incubate novel ways of existence. Rejecting consumerism, they embrace simplicity, self-sufficiency, and a profound connection with nature. Their bedrock rests on community cultivation, the nurturing of relationships, and fostering mutual aid and collaboration.

To the nonconformist soul, alternative communities radiate an allure—an embrace of belonging and purpose in a world that often feels alienating and cold. Within their microcosms, these communities paint an alternate portrait of human interaction and coexistence.

Beyond their countercultural essence, alternative communities are veritable laboratories of experimentation, birthing innovative governance models, resource management paradigms, and decision-making frameworks. In certain

instances, they illuminate pathways toward holistic healthcare, community-driven housing initiatives, environmentally sound policies, sustainable villages, and the propagation of social enterprises. Through their distinct organizational blueprints, living arrangements, and labor dynamics, they contribute to ongoing dialogues on environmental stewardship, social equity, and overall human well-being.



*Hey, make sure you don't get sucked in by this small talk garbage. Everyone knows big is beautiful. And do you really want to be known as an alternative? Take it from me, build a big house, buy a big car, and get yourself a big belly by eating as much cake and ice cream as possible. You only live once. Live it up!*

Yet, their impact extends beyond self-imposed boundaries. When aptly orchestrated, these communities become emblematic of collective power, of the audacity to challenge established norms, and of individual agency in orchestrating transformative change. They beckon humanity to

reconsider its rapport with nature, advocate for harmonious relationships, and incite coordinated endeavors to fashion an equitable, inclusive, and sustainable future.

### *A Global Tapestry of Possibilities*

In many facets, the concept of an alternative community seems superfluous to indigenous cultures across the world. The ethos of unity with nature, self-sufficiency, reciprocal sharing, and harmonious cohabitation is a way of life ingrained in their very essence. However, the widespread dominance of social engineering and dependency on cash-driven economies, intertwined with the non-renewable tether of fossil fuels, have thrust even indigenous cultures into grappling with analogous concerns—issues akin to those experienced by societies most impacted by the Scientific Revolution.

On the western front of Africa, the Nimbin Village in The Gambia stands as an intentional community—a living testament to sustainable living, alternative education, and the empowerment of community. The village breathes life into ecological practices and renewable energy, nurturing a tapestry of holistic existence.

Across the seas, nestled in the heart of Colombia, the ecovillage of Los Horcones has etched its name in the annals of sustainable development and community empowerment. Established in 1972, Los Horcones champions organic agriculture, renewable energy, and environmental



preservation. It has metamorphosed into an epicenter of learning, disseminating the gospel of sustainable living practices.

In India, the Auroville community stands as a testament to cross-cultural exchange and spiritual exploration. Conceived in 1968, Auroville aspires to be a universal township— a crucible where individuals from diverse backgrounds coexist in harmony. The community pivots on tenets of sustainable living, cultural diversity, and holistic education, forging a potent synergy of humanity's varied hues.



*Hmm, let me get this straight. These alternative communities are growing all over the world. How come no one has every heard of them? It sounds like a marketing scam!*

Cabo Polonia, ensconced on the eastern coast of Uruguay, unveils an isolated hamlet—a haven for 70 full-time residents. The community thrives off the grid, its homes sculpted from recycled materials, epitomizing the marriage

of sustainability and self-sufficiency.

Voyaging northward, the Findhorn Ecovillage unfurls its legacy in the embrace of Scotland's northeast highlands. With its genesis in the early 1960s, Findhorn emerges as a venerated elder among intentional communities. Anchored in ecological design and sustainable living principles, the ecovillage advances a gospel of spiritual exploration. A bastion of ecological education, research, and environmental stewardship, Findhorn resonates as a testament to humanity's innate harmony with nature.

In the valleys of Wales, the Llamas Village thrives as a manifestation of self-reliance. Crafted by individuals who forge a life of minimal dependence on external resources, Llamas Eco-Village casts a challenge to its participants—a quest to achieve 75% self-reliance for sustenance, shelter, and basic needs within half a decade.

The western coast of North America is adorned with Lasqueti Island, home to an alternative community of 435 souls who have embraced off-grid existence and woven a legacy of environmental activism. On the opposite side of the continent, Earthaven Ecovillage burgeons in the embrace of North Carolina, tracing its roots to 1994. It pledges allegiance to regenerative living, permaculture principles, and the fortification of community resilience. The village aspires to be a sanctuary of sustainable existence, coalescing with the rhythms of the natural realm while cultivating threads of social unity and shared resources.

These are mere strands in the grand tapestry of thousands of alternative communities dispersed across the globe. Each community emerges as an oasis of innovative solutions, a citadel of sustainable living, and a bastion of environmental stewardship. Their collective story emboldens humanity to reexamine its relationship with itself and the environment, nurturing a future characterized by justice, inclusivity, and ecological equilibrium.



*Mr. Big will tell you the truth. Alternative communities are for tree-hugging introverts who eventually get cabin fever and start burning each others' houses down. It's true, I saw it on YouTube! Get away from this while*

### *Navigating the Labyrinth of Challenges*

The journey of alternative communities is not without thorns and critiques that pierce through their idyllic fabric.

While these critiques aren't universally applicable, they cast a spotlight on common concerns that merit reflection.

Dissenting voices contend that alternative communities often teeter toward utopian ideals and the allure of escapism. The accusation looms that they yearn for an ideal world disconnected from the labyrinthine realities of contemporary society. This perceived detachment can limit meaningful engagement with societal challenges and inhibit the cross-pollination of ideas and resources. Furthermore, alternative communities that disavow mainstream economic systems might lean on external financial sources, inviting allegations of hypocrisy or impracticality.

Criticisms also orbit around the perceived repudiation of modern technologies and progress. Skepticism lingers—can complete renunciation of the gains of modern medicine, communication, and infrastructure truly be tenable or desirable? The ideals of alternative communities, lofty and laudable, often face the challenge of practical implementation and sustainability. The task of maintaining rudimentary necessities—food, shelter, healthcare—can prove far more intricate than initially envisioned.

Diversity, or its absence, emerges as another arena of critique. Inclusivity of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic backgrounds, and ideologies is sometimes lacking within alternative communities. This dearth of diversity undermines the rich tapestry of perspectives, obstructing a comprehensive understanding of human experiences. Instances of alternative communities adopting practices, aesthetics, or

spiritual beliefs from marginalized or indigenous cultures without due respect can invite accusations of cultural appropriation.

Issues pertaining to leadership, decision-making, and conflict resolution also cast their shadows. Absent clear mechanisms of accountability, these communities can grapple with internal strife. When compounded by an emphasis on self-sufficiency and disengagement from mainstream systems, the challenges intensify, compromising the well-being of community members. And even as these communities often trumpet their commitment to sustainability, skepticism persists about the ecological impact of their practices and their contribution to addressing the overarching environmental challenges.



*Haha! You are hilarious! Stop making me laugh! The only way to fix this alternative communities nightmare is to wake up and smell the coffee. Geez! Stop being so political!*

It is imperative to note that many alternative communities acknowledge these concerns and ardently work to surmount them. Their success stories and impact stories span a spectrum, reflecting their values, adaptability, and responsiveness to evolving circumstances.

### *An Alternative for Alternative Communities*

Emerging from contemporary alternative community models, the Power of Small seeks to learn from the timeless wisdom embedded in indigenous ways of life, harmonizing it with the earlier endeavors of alternative communities to resurrect age-old sustainable practices. Yet, the Power of Small differs—it seeks integration rather than seclusion with the wider society.

The crux of the Power of Small philosophy lies in translating the transformative essence of alternative communities into the natural strengths of complexity science—an approach that can bridge alternative lifestyles and mainstream skepticism. While not inherently linked to sustainable living, complexity science aligns seamlessly with the ethos of alternative communities. Partnered communities traverse pathways that nurture localized solutions, enabling nimble responses to intricate challenges. Akin to the principles of complexity, community leaders harness the latent potential of members, amplifying their collective impact on the common good.

The Power of Small begins in grassroots initiatives—driven

by impassioned individuals intimately connected to their locales. These initiatives target specific challenges, sowing seeds of ownership and responsibility among community members. The result is community housing, sustainable villages, holistic health programs, and social enterprises.



*So the Power of Small is the alternative for an alternative? That's just a fancy way of describing the losers of the losers. Let Mr. Big tell you the real story. The Power of Small is just another free loader! Just throw some freebees at these clever beggars to keep them happy!*

Championing a bottom-up problem-solving ethos, the Power of Small acknowledges the potency and local intelligence of those who live in proximity to the community challenges they are seeking to overcome. Collaboration and collective problem solving skills become the instruments through which alternative communities unlock the wisdom, ingenuity, and expertise embedded in their members. This participatory approach ignites individuals to em-

bark on journeys of heuristic learning, eventually unearthing effective solutions to persistent quandaries.

Inclusivity and diversity emerge as cornerstones of the Power of Small. Community-based organizations embracing this philosophy recognize the worth of varied perspectives, experiences, and competencies. They harness the kaleidoscope of backgrounds and expertise, ensuring that marginalized voices resonate within decision-making corridors. This inclusivity precipitates equitable outcomes and bolsters social cohesion.

The Power of Small amplifies the latent resilience within collective action at the grassroots level. By embracing localized knowledge, grassroots innovation, and solutions rooted in communities, partnered communities kindle resilience and craft antidotes to societal tribulations. Seasoned professionals and impact investors find their niche within the Power of Small, offering mentorship and resources to younger members, fashioning an intergenerational synergy that enriches the community's fabric.

Lending structure to the ethos, Power of Small communities often adopt organizational strategies that balance local autonomy with recognition from higher governing echelons. The legal stature of local partners often aligns with those commonly used by non-profit organizations or community contribution companies, sculpting a landscape that fosters both independence and integration through the triple bottom line of people, place and profit. Decentralized decision-making architectures empower community



members to sculpt their shared destiny. Inclusion forms the bedrock, both in physical spaces and within virtual platforms such as the Power of Small. This dynamic allows participants from myriad regions to partake in shaping the collective narrative.

The Power of Small approach is open, both at a global and local level, nurturing the growth of resources that ripple outward for the benefit of both members and their communities at large. This stance of heuristic learning circumvents the redundancy of reinvention, tapping into the cumulative wisdom of kindred spirits everywhere.



*Congratulations! You made it to the end! You should get a big reward for enduring all this small nonsense. If you found this article unhelpful, and a waste of your precious time, call me up and we will have some fun. Maybe we could cut down those trees behind me just to show nature not to mess with Mr. Big!*