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Title: Retreat or re-connect: How effective can ecosophical communities be in transforming the mainstream?

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Abstract.

Ecosophical communities are utopian projects that have the potential to empower socio-ecological transformation. However, due to their tactical withdrawal from the mainstream, they also face a tension at the heart of their transformative project; namely, how do they forge their (re-)connections to the broader population? This paper draws on research at the self-styled 'leading European eco-centre' (CAT 2007a no page) – the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT), Machynlleth, UK, in order to gain critical insight into the tension. The paper explores how tactical withdrawal has been successful in generating a coherent and consolidated ecosophical community, but offers critical insight into how this withdrawal compounds the estrangement between this community and mainstream society. It also portrays how the pace and direction of change in both the ecosophical and mainstream community can serve to further isolate the former even when the latter makes strides towards sustainability.

Keywords: ecosophy, community, withdrawal, relations, environment

## Introduction.

The environmental crises facing the (non)human world require individuals to act. Whilst it remains possible to ignore it or deny it, it is also possible to choose to acknowledge it and form a judgement about what sort of (non)decision to make; as Sargisson and Sargent (2004:1) summarise, people may:

“simply accept it... or they [may] try, individually or collectively, to bring about change in the direction they desire”.

Notwithstanding the widespread problems inherent in challenging the direction, speed, and magnitude of the military-capitalist society (see Anderson, 2010), ecosophy is an ecological philosophy that underpins a number of attempts to do just this. Ecosophy, as outlined in the Editorial to this issue, is an ecological philosophy rooted in the separate but complementary praxis of Arne Naess’ deep ecology (1989) or the post structural conceptualisations of Guattari (2000) and Bateson (1972). It involves the imagineering of alternatives which put ecological principles – equality between species, the shared right to (and responsibilities for) self-realisation, and the inevitable interdependence of peoples-places-processes that underpin life on the planet – into practice. In the spirit of this volume, this paper follows Chatterton (2016) in offering “empirical evidence of real-life [ecosophies] that build socio-technical transitions” (2016:403); more specifically, this paper does so with respect to the ecosophical community.

With Sargisson and Sargent’s comments (above) in mind, ecosophical communities are intentional spaces established with ecosophical principles at their heart. Intentional communities are defined by the nature of their reaction to the ‘unhappiness’ (after Sargisson

and Sargent, 2004: 1) caused in individuals by the practices of mainstream society. Rather than simply accepting the situation or trying to challenge mainstream society directly, in this scenario individuals choose to ‘physically withdraw’ from it (ibid). The act of withdrawal, its causes and its consequences, focuses attention on the importance of geography to ecosophical communities. As Thrift (2000) argues, it is in geographical space that political and cultural power is made manifest, and thus all individuals have to engage with and contribute to different power relations in different places. In this case, ecosophical citizens perceive the place of the mainstream to be culturally ordered and geographically bordered (after Anderson, 2015) with the values and preferences of the military-capitalist project; this is a place where ecosophical perspectives are silenced, marginalised, or ignored. In the face of this dominating culture, those who share ecosophical values often feel an ‘estrangement’ from the mainstream (Sargisson, 2007); as Meijering et al outline, “because their numbers are too small, or because they are not heard [...] this results in feelings of frustration... they experience that they cannot *change* society [from here]” (2007: 44). With ‘no place’ for themselves in the mainstream, they feel the need for escape.

Ecosophical escape from the mainstream is commonly made to another material space in which the orders and borders of the majority hold less sway. In these spaces, it is possible for individuals to come together to experiment and establish their own (b)orders which resonate with different, in this case ecosophical, preferences. As Thrift implies above, for all cultures, but perhaps for minority cultures especially, this geographical opportunity is crucial; as McKay confirms: “one central way in which cultures of resistance define themselves against the culture of the majority is through the construction of their own zones, their own spaces. These can be distinguished ... through the subcultural elements of [their own choosing], but space itself is vital” (McKay, 1996:7). In line with McKay, withdrawal is a

logical 'tactic' (see Foucault, 1977) for ecosophical citizens in order to begin their challenge to the status quo.

To this extent therefore, ecosophical communities are utopian in nature (see also Anderson, 2007; 2012). Not content to simply 'bear witness' (after, for example, Luxemburg in Castree et al, 2009: 2) to environmental crises, these communities reflect the utopian "desire for a better way of being" (Levitas, 2011:9) alongside the practical urgency to actively "work... for [that] better world" (Levitas, 2011: XIV). (R)evolution, or at least the attempt to instigate progressive change, is central to their purpose; in line with Conti, their goal (in Castree et al, 2009: 3) "... is not the interpretation of the world, but the organization of transformation." The tactic of withdrawal is vital to ecosophical communities' ends, or rather their beginnings.

Ecosophical communities initially withdraw in order to enact their "desire to transgress the current state" (Jordan, 2002, p12) away from the cultural values and superstructural disciplinary measures (including surveillance and monitoring) of the mainstream. Withdrawal offers intentional communities the space to work through their own values from preliminary inchoate feelings and utopian desires into specific social and geographical practices. In contrast to the mainstream, it offers an opportunity to feel empowered, taking and making a place for the initial validation of their constituency (after Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993). As Sargisson (2007: 393) states, this withdrawal offers the potential to facilitate "critical distance and group coherence. As such, it seems that estrangement has a profoundly positive relationship with [their] utopianism". In short, acknowledgement of their estrangement from the mainstream and their withdrawal from it, "provide[s] a place where many members feel comfortable, accepted, safe and at home" (Meijering et al., 2007: 44). In short it creates an ecosophical 'homeplace' (after hooks, 1991).

The establishment of a functioning ecotopia means that, in part, the utopian intentions of the original ‘settlers’ have been met. A place has been created in opposition to the status quo, where individuals who share values attempt to live them out. However, this success has been created through the physical withdrawal of ecosophical communities from the mainstream, compounding a cultural divide which runs counter to the recognition (ecologically at least) of integration and interdependence within species and systems (see Editorial). As a consequence of this tactic, new questions are raised with respect to how ecosophical communities (re)engage with the mainstream. For example, how successful are ecosophical communities in enrolling further members, either to sustain their own utopia, or to create new intentional communities in other places? In Wolfson and Gamsfield’s (1993) terms, what is their potential not simply for ‘validation’, but also for ‘mobilization’ and ‘enlargement’? Is it possible for ecosophical communities to spread their praxis virally through attracting visitors to their ecotopia and send them back to the mainstream with new ideas and actions (see Scott-Cato and Hillier 2011), or will their own practice be recuperated and diluted through engagement with the mainstream? In short, this paper questions whether geographical withdrawal and cultural estrangement of ecosophical communities from the mainstream is a help or hindrance to the broader ends of ecosophical transformation?

These questions are particularly relevant for intentional ecosophical experiments as, whilst it is widely acknowledged that such utopian practices are vital to “encourage people to think beyond the immediacy of every-day problems, and to provide an explicit set of aspiration” (Hardy, 2000: 284), throughout history such communities have rarely been seen as

anything more than “small and ephemeral” (after Herring, 2002; 206). As X sums up in relational to utopian communities: “basically the rest of the world [has] ignored them” (Herring, 2002: 206, after Hardy, 2000, but see also Armytage, 1961; Goodwin & Taylor, 1982; Levitas, 1990). This paper seeks to engage with these issues to evaluate whether ecosophical communities can overcome the consequences of their withdrawal from the mainstream and reconnect with individuals interested in ecological futures. It does so by focusing on one example, the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT), Machynlleth, UK.

#### CAT: Background.

The Centre for Alternative Technology defines itself as the “major centre for environmental inspiration” in Britain (CAT 2015b, no page). The Centre was established in 1973, and has been in sustained operation since that time. It is located in a disused slate mine in the remote Dyfi Valley, mid Wales, a quintessential example of withdrawal from the mainstream. In the context of ‘The [Atomic] Bomb’ and the threat of nuclear war (after CAT, 1995 :6), the founders identified this location as offering an escape from modern society and a space in which to realise a socio-spatial critique of industrial- and militar-isation. Thus the choice of site for the Centre was not random, the disused mine functioned as a literal and figurative “crack” in the mainstream, enabling the site’s autonomy beyond the gaze of the State (see Bey, 2003, p101). In the spirit of Hakim Bey’s autonomous zones, CAT colonised a fold in the map so marginal and “so vacant, that whole groups [could] move into [it] and settle down” (Bey, in Hermetic Library, 1993, no page).

At first glance, the Centre’s permanence in this location demonstrates the success of the initial tactic of withdrawal. Indeed its growth and development evidences that, to some extent, the Centre has been successful and mobilising and enlarging its sphere of influence.



Today CAT functions as an education and residential community, with over 100 employees and volunteers. The Centre experiments with a range of alternative technologies, including photovoltaics, solar thermal, biomass, combined heat and power, air source heat pumps, reed bed systems, and wind turbines (CAT, 2015a: no page). The Welsh Institute for Sustainable Education recently opened on site, which supplements existing experimentation with postgraduate and practical courses (for example in installing photovoltaic technologies), whilst also functioning as a conference and wedding venue (see CAT, 2015a: no page; and CAT, 2015c: no page). The site remains open to the public and houses a well-established on-site community for up to 16 residents (CAT, 2015d: no page). However, the Centre for Alternative Technology faces the tension at the heart of all ecosophical communities, does its initial escape from the mainstream equate to a perpetual estrangement from the majority? In this context, what is its ability to realise socio-ecological transformation on a wider scale?

In order to gain critical insight into the transformative potential of this ecosophical community, this paper draws on qualitative research at the Centre for Alternative Technology. Firstly, 3 months of participant observation was undertaken within CAT's resident community and work organisation, with the author undertaking 30 in-depth interviews with a range of volunteers, employees and long-term residents of the Centre. During this period of participant observation, interviews were also undertaken with regular visitors and CAT members attending their annual conference (n=12). Thirdly, day trips to the Centre were held with a cross-section of individuals (n=120), all broadly interested in ecological issues<sup>1</sup>. Focus groups were held with visitors following each visit, and participants

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<sup>1</sup> This cross-section of individuals included a range of socio-demographics and nationalities; 20 were regular visitors to CAT, and the remainder had never visited the Centre before. All

were invited to write reflexive journals of their experiences (see Anderson, 2012b). The results of these methods combined to generate a wide variety of experiences of the Centre in order to develop an understanding of the relative success (or otherwise) of this community in re-connecting with individuals from the mainstream.

### CAT and the mainstream.

Although retreat made CAT possible in the first instance, the nature of the Centre's (re-)connection to the mainstream has always been keenly debated by those involved with the community. The original CAT community identified self-sufficiency as a desirable goal, and thus absolute disconnection from the mainstream was attempted. As the story of CAT's history recounts, "the whole idea was to be as separate as possible, hence the emphasis on self-sufficiency and a kind of anti-industrial primitivism" (CAT, 1995:18). However, the drawbacks of this approach were quickly acknowledged. The impossibility of providing all necessary foodstuffs, energy, healthcare, and economic security were virtually impossible in such a marginal location. As the Bradnam, an early resident, states:

“[Although] it makes a lot of sense for us to be self-sufficient in electricity – we’ve got a lot of wind, water, sun – that’s fine. But to try and be self-sufficient in food when you live on a hillside in Wales is crazy. It’s much more efficient to trade in good quality food with the southeast [of England]. ... Trade is very important... ” (Leslie Bradnam, in CAT 1995 23).

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were registered on a postgraduate sustainability degrees, and agreed to allow their thoughts to be included in published study, co-creating the terms of anonymity that have been implemented in this paper.

The practical impossibilities of CAT's withdrawal were compounded by the political consequences of isolating themselves from the mainstream. As CAT's original intention was to "be a workable model of a sustainable community" (Cat 1995: 32) it was important that this model, or variations of it, could be implemented at a variety of scales and contexts elsewhere; in short CAT needed to relate its practices to wider constituencies and their everyday lives. As Bradnam goes on to state,

"If you live in a high rise flat in Birmingham it's not appropriate to be self-sufficient in anything... [so] why [should CAT] do it? ... We are [now] not promoting self-sufficiency. I don't see any need for it, it makes you insular" (in CAT 1995 23).

Thus CAT acknowledged that the interdependence and interconnection that defined the ecological world as they viewed it, was also prevalent in the political and economic contexts in which their utopia operated. As a consequence, CAT ceased to desire absolute isolation from the military-industrial project, and instead sought to experiment with the nature of their (re-)connection to the cultures and citizens of the mainstream. The original founders opened the Centre to the public, and invited individuals to experience the project first-hand, either as short- or long-term volunteer workers or ticket-purchasing day visitors. As outlined above, they also opened a cafe, shop, and ran a number of education projects from their conference venue. As the following sections evidence, these (re-)connections to the mainstream have had a number of consequences for the nature of this ecosophical community and its potential to realise socio-ecological transformation.

Models for Withdrawal: CAT from the inside.

“I think if everybody had the opportunity to come and live with us here for a year, then they would probably go, ‘Whoa! This is great! I don’t actually want to live the commercial lifestyle on my own anymore and spend two hours on a tube going to work. This is actually not making me happy’” (GS; CAT former resident and current employee; Personal Interview (PI)).

As this paper has outlined above, withdrawal is an attractive strategy to some individuals who harbour ecosophical desires. The existence of CAT as an ecosophical homeplace, remote (if not wholly detached) from the majority, means that it becomes a magnet for many of those interested in furthering their experience of these values and practices and find no opportunity to do so within the mainstream. As we will discuss below, many are attracted as one-off day visitors, others engage through member subscriptions, on annual ‘pilgrimages’ as day visitors, as students on courses, as irregular volunteers, or attendees at conferences. Some individuals also seek to volunteer or gain employment in the Centre. This latter group of individuals gain regular and extended involvement in CAT’s own realisation of ecosophical culture.

As I have argued elsewhere, CAT creates a communitarian culture that helps individuals learn about ecosophy and how to put these ideals into practice (Anderson, 2007; 2012a). The knowledge and social networks built up over the decades of the Centre’s existence have created an environment which supports ecological living for those who wish to get involved, whether they live at the Centre or in the surrounding locality. As the following respondents confirm:

“It is only since I have lived here that I have realised just how limited my knowledge was. So although I tried to be environmentally friendly and recycled a lot and I did try not to consume very much, I knew very little about alternative technology. It took coming here to make me aware just how little I knew really” (HT, CAT employee, PI).

“[Living here] you are automatically involved in this wonderful group of people and it is just not like that in other places. ...the support network, the pool of ideas and the enthusiasm is ready made here” (LG, CAT employee, PI).

“In the area we do all our recycling through facilities at the Co-op, so it’s not complicated at all. We also live a few doors down from X and he is big on the compost thing so we just leave our compost in his garden. We all benefit from friendly neighbours. Perhaps if we didn’t then we would have to think about it, but we are really lucky in having things handed to us on a plate” (RA, CAT Employee, PI).

“A real community has been developed by CAT and by people who have been brought to the area by CAT. ...It’s about just coming here and living with people who are living that lifestyle, and realising how enjoyable it is. Living on site and living with a wood stove and living without a television and having communal meals and being around these people who discuss these issues and who are politically aware and who are politically alternative. I think that is the most influential thing really” (BA, CAT employee, PI).

As these individuals state, through direct involvement in the Centre's everyday activities awareness of their environmental impact is heightened, whilst alternative ways of reducing this impact are fostered. Perhaps most importantly, different ways in which social and community ties are forged are also experienced in practice. The strengths of these ties is perhaps only appreciated through extended and regular involvement within them; over time individuals become part of these networks and witness first-hand how they operate in different personal and familial circumstances. As the respondents above state, this makes the transition to a more ecological way of life less problematic, as well as making it possible to develop friendships, confidence, and social capital in the process (Putnam, 2000; Halpern, 2004; Ahn & Ostrom, 2003). Integral to these support networks is the role that existing members play in providing living examples of alternative lifestyles. For example, respondents stated how very few people in and around CAT aspire to the mainstream norm of high consumption patterns. Whilst opting out of the accumulation of material possessions or luxury experiences may appear to be a 'brave' decision for those outside the Centre (following HT, CAT employee, PI), when inside the community existing members make such voluntary simplicity (Soper, 2007; Cherrier and Murray, 2002) appear to be not only the new normal, but a satisfying contribution to a happy life. As the following respondents state:

"X had been the most powerful person for me, [he] never preaches and says 'you mustn't fly' or 'you are a bad person for flying'. He has never flown himself, he has made a point of never flying, never owned a car and that is so powerful. Just to see that someone is actually living out their principles, and that has more of an influence I think really than reading around the subject and somebody saying these are the facts about flying and you mustn't do it" (LS, CAT employee, PI).

“Now I think it’s completely feasible to live a comfortable lifestyle [without modern consumption patterns], I was quite surprised! For example, my line manager has a typical 2.4 middle class family. He and his partner have two children, a boy and a girl, well-educated, *and* they’re carbon footprint is very low: they have installed solar water heating, they have the right number of people for the right number of bedrooms, they go on holiday to France, but they take the ferry, they don’t fly, and they have a great life. They even have a television, which they watch occasionally, and the kids have everything they could ever want<sup>2</sup>. So they are managing [the good life] whilst not impacting on the environment very much at all” (emphasis in original, GC, CAT employee, PI).

In line with Aquist (1998, p256), those living or working at CAT clearly benefit from the example of “deeply committed persons” who motivate, give advice, and generally provide positive role models for more ecosophical ways of living. With these positive examples allied to practical social networks, the ‘bravery’ required to transgress mainstream norms is substantially reduced. As GS (above) suggests, many of these individuals believe that the benefits from making these steps into the CAT network are such that anyone who lived this life for a year, wouldn’t want to go back to the mainstream.

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<sup>2</sup> It was implied that these ‘things’ did not include the most up to date games consoles or tablets, but rather board games or commodities obtained from online auctions or second hand book shops; as one CAT employee sums up, “I’m like most people here, we use Ebay and we recycle things to our heart’s content, which always has a positive feel anyway. ... We very rarely go to town ‘to shop’” (FM, CAT employee, PI).

So for those who live and work at the Centre for Alternative Technology, their experience of ecosophy in action is a broadly positive one. Through the creation of green architectures (Horton, 2003) – practical and social networks that facilitate ecosophical living – the Centre has developed a community of like-minded people who are supportive in practical, psychological, and emotional terms when trying to live differently in the world. For this constituency, the ecotopia promised by this spatial practice is substantially realised. However, these experiences are premised upon, and in serve to strengthen, the desire of individuals to withdraw from mainstream society. Volunteers and workers have opted to live in a remote location relative to key UK population centres, transportation and telecommunication networks, they have accepted substantially lower-than-average wages (if they are on a salary) for their labour, and through their experiences often have a sense of detachment from the local (non-ecosophical) communities within the area. As a consequence, these individuals often do little to challenge the tactic of withdrawal as the culture created within CAT acts as an ecosophical substitute for it, more than compensating them for any perceived loss. As such, their actions works to strengthen their sense of detachment from the mainstream – why should they foster different connections to it as they are leading the good life without it? As a consequence, it can be argued that for those who live and work at CAT the utopian desire to change the world is realised predominantly on the scale of the Centre itself. Their primary focus is to sustain the Centre, and in turn, its original model of withdrawal. For those who choose to retreat from the mainstream, CAT remains successful in functioning as an ecosophical homeplace.

Ecosophical carnival: CAT as temporary withdrawal.

“I have been there many times before but I was still impressed by the energy that the guides showed last time I went. It was a lovely day. One thing I especially liked was the



obvious sense of community and slower pace of life they lived; seeming as though they didn't have a care in the world" (Visitor, Reflexive Journal).

Not all individuals attracted to CAT live or work at the Centre. Some may engage with the Centre through member subscriptions, on regular 'pilgrimages' as day visitors, or as students on courses. These individuals would not live on site permanently, but through familiarity and invitation may have partial access to residents' and staff's on-site facilities when they are there. Due to their position on the cusp of the CAT network, not fully within it but also not fully outside it either (for example, these individuals would typically refer to the ecosophical community as 'they', rather than 'we'), they experience the front- and back-stage versions of the Centre in different ways to full time workers and volunteers. In many respects, the experience they have of this ecosophical community is a positive one:

"I'm very fond of the place. I support it. I think it's a very inspiring place. ...Because I've done courses there I have a thorough understanding of the facilities; I know about the eco-cabins, I know how the hydro turbines works, I've visited the water reservoir at the top of the hill, and know all about the wind turbines and solar panels further up the valley" (Visitor, Focus Group).

"I like knowing about the back stage stuff, like there was a private house that we walked past and there was a guy delivering some bread to them. And they were in the conservatory and there were loads of them just sitting around having breakfast. And that was quite nice you know? It made me think a little bit about David Pepper's 'On Utopianism' [(Pepper, 2005)], he said that this sort of thing was an utopian ideal as it's harking back to the good old times – and it did look like that. Although they had triple

glazing in their conservatory, it did seem to be very traditional. I mean they're growing on the land and they're living in their families. It doesn't seem futuristic, it seems primitive. But I don't mean that in an offensive way" (Respondent, Focus Group).

"CAT is a very important place for me. I did four short courses there and all of them were very good. I made contacts with people from around the world and even now they keep in touch with me, thanks to CAT. The place has inspired me since my first visit for my first course, and every time I go there I discover something new and interesting" (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

"Whilst walking around the Centre I always see people doing little tasks or jobs as part of maintaining the grounds such as carving into a large rock, felling some trees, working together in the restaurant, moving waste around the site or cultivating the allotment. I guess this was kind of like a 'real life' in action exhibition without those manikins behind a glass screen you get at most museums. I found this fascinating and truly appealing. These people were learning from the land and learning off each other, they were working together with possibly no prior knowledge of the task in hand but nonetheless they were learning from that experience and in the process were supplying themselves with much needed resources. They all looked happy and content to be doing what they were doing, nothing seemed like a chore. The community spirit at CAT must be unique to such isolated places and that in itself is 'sustainable development'" (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

It is clear that these individuals are not only able to see the 'back stage' technologies that underpin the Centre, but are also able to 'get a feel' for the friendly, practical, communitarian

networks that insiders generate and benefit from. To many, this “obvious sense of community and slower pace of life” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary) is the most inspiring and empowering aspect of the Centre; as one respondent summarises, “I like the feel of the place. It’s not the technology that has this effect on me, I think it’s the lifestyle” (Respondent, Focus Group). Visitors admire the close networks between people that develop at the Centre, based on sharing ideological dispositions to more ecological lifestyles; they also aspire to the practical relationships built between humans and the world around them through daily interaction with the soil, plants, scenery, and air when working on the site. In these ways for these individuals, this often regular but always temporary engagement with the Centre is experienced as a breath of fresh air. Their experience functions as a carnivalesque (after Bakhtin, 1984) escape from the (b)orders of their ‘normal’ life (after Bourdieu, 1977, 1991). The values and practices that dominate the mainstream are displaced for a short period of time through their geographical repositioning within CAT, whilst the communitarian cultures they experience kindle utopian desires. This carnivalesque moment offers CAT the potential to send these individuals back to the mainstream with ecosophical ideas and the enthusiasm to put them into practice, and through so doing, it offers CAT the opportunity to realise in practice the emancipatory and radical potential of the carnival (see Shields, 1991: 91). However, this potential is reduced as despite general support for the ecosophical lifestyle at CAT, some individuals harbour reservations about other aspects of their experience in the Centre.

“I came away from my last visit to CAT feeling very positive, not so much about the energy efficiency or the education resources but more so about the community spirit and networks” (Visitor, Reflexive Diary).

Despite being involved and supportive of the lifestyles practiced at CAT, many of the temporary sojourners within this ecospherical community identify a problem rooted in its withdrawal from the mainstream. This problem is summed up by the title of the Centre. As outlined above, many are aware of the range of 'alternative' technologies that underpin the energy use and daily life on site (e.g. wind turbines, water power, photo voltaics etc), but they are also cognisant that these technologies are no longer 'alternative' in nature.

“They call themselves the Centre for Alternative Technology. I mean there are a couple of problems there. I mean the technology is not very alternative is it? I'm thinking maybe ten, twenty years ago it may have been. So [for me the Centre's] not about the technology anymore, I think people are there because of the lifestyle and the people are committed to the principles behind it” (Respondent, Focus Group).

“...What they're trying to peddle is an alternative lifestyle so they're kind of, they're called the wrong thing. I think they must be aware of that” (Respondent, Focus Group).

As stated above, many people who regularly visit the site become critical of the 'alternative' nature of the technology showcased at the Centre. Many are aware that society's take up and advancement of low energy, low carbon, high efficiency technologies has outstripped CAT's ability to be at the 'ecologically modern' (Mol and Sonnenfeld, 2000) cutting edge. As a consequence, despite their support for the principles of the Centre, many become constructive in their criticism of the contemporary uptake and implementation of these technologies at the site:

“It would be interesting to know more about their technological choices in terms of construction method. Because I saw that one building was south facing, and it had what was called a terminal sink. But this is old technology. I don’t understand, for example, why they have flat roofs with solar panels. They could easily have implemented pitched roofs and natural lighting - this isn’t alien or space age technology, it’s actual, ordinary technology... For example, it would be interesting to see whether they have intelligent lighting systems or solar underfloor heating. It’s the kind of thing that [many companies] would have implemented” (Respondent, Focus Group).

“The technology at CAT is old technology... it isn’t being used for the contemporary context. Their creative use of technology hasn’t evolved that much over the years” (Respondent, Focus Group).

“[Their technology] is very disappointing. For example, CAT believes that they could be carbon neutral by 2030 but if it’s supposed to be showcase for the future surely it should be carbon neutral now? (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

As outlined above, regular visitors to CAT critically engage with the Centre’s implementation of eco-building and technological devices, effectively questioning whether the Centre remains a “test bed for experimental technology” (CAT 2015d, no page) or a “showcase for the future” (Respondent, above). Whilst many new buildings in mainstream society adopt energy conservation technologies as a matter of course, the ecologically modern cutting edge is now a frontier at which corporations with large research and development budgets excel, rather than volunteers working in more rustic conditions in mid-

Wales. As a consequence, CAT could be seen to lag behind not only the cutting edge, but perhaps even mainstream retrofits or new builds, in the very area it claims to excel within. As one respondent pointedly summarised, in her view the Centre may be more accurately titled the ‘Centre for Antiquated Technology’ (Respondent, Focus Group).

These views therefore suggest that the tactic of withdrawal, and its entrenchment through the successful creation and sustenance of the CAT community through volunteers, employees, and (critically constructive) regular visitors, has limits for ecosophical communities. They highlight that withdrawal can mean that focus concentrates on the maintenance of the core community, rather than the nature of its connections to the mainstream. For some, CAT has proved unable to keep pace with and anticipate the trajectory of change in terms of mainstream, cutting-edge technology. This critique is extended to include the types of socio-ecological practice that recent developments at the Centre have indirectly encouraged. One of these developments has been the Welsh Institute for Sustainable Education (or WISE building). This building has enabled CAT to expand in terms of education and practical courses, open up as a conference and event venue, whilst also showcase environmentally friendly building and sourcing practices. As such, it is a new opportunity for CAT to recruit individuals from the mainstream, and convert them to the ecosophical cause. However, from the perspective of some regular visitors, the WISE initiative has also opened the door for mainstream values to dilute the ecosophical underpinnings of the Centre. The WISE building has been developed in a context where its energy usage could – theoretically at least – be provided by off-grid technology. Such a commitment would complement the Centre’s original aims, as well as encourage the continuation of low energy use practices. Rather than experiment with this possibility, some express frustration that CAT appears to have opted

for the less efficient alternative, and as a result, become as open to the temptations offered by industrial society as the rest of us:

“Originally CAT projected to be self-sufficient in energy and export its excess. But the guys on our courses said this is no longer the idea” (Respondent, Focus Group).

“I was told that the site now only produces 20% of its own power. In fact, I was given a frankly honest and gratefully received opinion that since CAT was connected to the National Grid, they had become electricity addicts, knowing full well that if not enough was produced on site, they could extract from the grid, rather than kerbing usage. That made me think: if CAT, the alleged eco-centric champions, could not be sustainable themselves, why I should I struggle to do so?” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

From the perspective of these respondents, the recent developments at CAT have led the Centre away from their original principles, and towards a more routine (i.e. high) consumption of energy. Up to date technology is either not being adopted as widely as it might, or not being adopted in ways that seeks to maximise conservation and sustainable living. This presents a problem to regular visitors who, although they are able to temporarily witness and partake in the living, convivial society which has been created on the site, are also aware of the day-to-day development of mainstream architectures within conventional society that are overtaking CAT’s own technological solutions. It could be argued therefore that CAT remains a Centre in which, due to its retreat from the mainstream, has failed to keep up with advances in smart post-industrial technology in terms of its exhibitions and public experiments. It offers a critique to a mainstream situation that at the cutting edge at least, no longer prevails. Coupled to this, it also appears that even though CAT keeps their front door

closed to smart tech in terms of their demonstration projects, they appear to have left the back door open to the temptations of high energy use through their new infrastructural developments. For those who attend the site as regular visitors, this situation presents mixed feelings with respect to their commitment to the Centre. However, for one-off visitors, this technological retreat but pro-consumption re-connection creates profound estrangement from ecosophy-in-action.

### **CAT as ecosophical estrangement.**

“Part of the brief originally was to show people how to live as part of an alternative society. But I don’t know how well that is portrayed to the visitors” (SW, CAT employee, PI).

“I’m sure Mark was frustrated [as a regular visitor] as he probably has very good memories of the place. Whereas the image that everyone else saw was not the same” (Respondent, Focus Group).

Beyond volunteers, employees, and regular visitors, CAT also attracts one-off visitors from mainstream society; these may be sympathetic individuals looking for validation of nascent ecological interest (on a ‘snap-gap’ carnival raid from the mainstream perhaps), or open-minded tourists visiting simply as a day out whilst on holiday in the area. Due to their positioning, these visitors rarely encounter the backstage aspects of the CAT community or have the opportunity to build up embodied and affective relations to the Centre’s human and nonhuman cultures. Without these, CAT is reduced to an educational exhibit of a range of alternative technologies. As implied in the section above, for many of these one-off visitors, the exhibits failed to be as alternative or up-to-date as they anticipated:



“The CAT centre was built in the 70s and the displays and information being presented was out-of-date for the 21st century lifestyles we all live in. It seems like the Centre had not moved on from when it was first built, all the ideas had good intentions when they were first conceived but these had not been developed and moved forward into the technological generation that we live” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

“On the whole I thought the presentation of displays was quite out-of-date, the displays were like those I saw when I went to school and the recent development of technology such as the progressions of the flat screen television, computers, mobile phones and even wireless technology, none of these technological advances seem to have impacted or influenced the Centre” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

“What were the chances that the answer to all of the world's problems would be found in remote rural Wales? It turns out not very high. Many of the exhibits that had been illustrated and presented to us previously were either broken or closed, and they were mostly out of date by many years. Many of the exhibits that were featured claimed to be futuristic – including solar panels and wind turbines, technology touted as the future decades ago. It certainly felt like CAT was in a time warp” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

Like the majority within conventional society, day visitors to CAT are socialised into the norms and expectations of the military-industrial mainstream, often furnished with modern technologies and based in urban centres. As such, many respondents experienced a degree of culture shock when encountering the Centre. This shock meant that day visitors not only

struggled to adapt to the pace of life in CAT (which regular visitors admired and appreciated, see above), but also found it difficult to accept the pace of change the Centre demonstrated in relation to technology. In their view, the technology exhibited at CAT was not alternative or even up-to-date; for them, the smart phone technologies in their pockets were deemed to be more cutting edge than those in the public displays. This disparity in technological advancement created a disconnection between these individuals and the Centre; they had anticipated that this community would offer them a language of environmental awareness and aspiration that would be relevant to their lives, and offer a workable solution towards a greener version of it. Instead, they were left with the feeling that, “the place has become a museum... quite alien” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary) from their everyday, and “completely isolated from the way we live practically” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary). This alienation from the technology at the Centre was compounded by the physical location of the site and the ‘primitive’ conditions encountered there.

“To me it didn't feel like a normal place where people would live, it actually reminded me of the film Mad Max insomuch as it felt like living in the remains of what was society. The way people seemed to live there was very unusual for me; it had a presence that made it seem a bit like somewhere a cult would live” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

“The physical location of the centre – even down to the point that it was situated atop a large hill added to the cultural distance; for me it was somehow separate from my everyday reality” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

“On my walk back to the bus, I distantly looked at the homes of those who chose to live on the site. They looked very simple, perhaps slightly less hygienically friendly than the average home, lacking in modern conveniences and using the elements to an extent to power themselves. I thought, ‘I honestly couldn’t live like that’” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

“The Centre, although meaning well in its aim of spreading the message about sustainable living, appears to be presenting the idea that leading a sustainable life means having to live up a hill in a rural part of the country. I believe that in order for sustainability to be taken as a serious and realistic movement it has to appear modern and workable within today’s society. There are many different communities that claim to be sustainable with a mixture of success rates, however I believe that in order to appeal to the masses, people need to feel as if sustainability does not require a massive change in lifestyle” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

The culture estrangement that these day visitors experienced when encountering CAT for the first time thus extended from disappointment in relation to the technological advancement exhibited on site, to disconnection from the apparently primitive version of utopia that was being practiced here. For them, the voluntary downsizing and simplicity on show had become alien to their expectations of sustainability as encountered within mainstream society. CAT presented the position that ecotopia are only possible through going back to the (20<sup>th</sup> century) land and being detached from the mainstream in the deep rural. This disconnection had significant repercussions for these day visitors as it severed the connection they felt not only towards this community, but also to the potential transferability of ecosophy from a remote location to more contemporary society.

“It frustrated me that due to this disconnection the people who knew most about the Centre were missing a trick about how to make CAT more meaningful and realistic to those of us coming from ‘normal’ life” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

As a result of this disconnection, the visitors accessed in this study left the Centre questioning their role in relation to the site. If CAT did not appear to be ‘for them’ (i.e. not for interested others from the mainstream), then who was it for? Many discussed the possibility that perhaps they had misconceived their own role from the outset: instead of them existing to be educated, enlightened, or enrolled into a more ecosophical life by their experience in the Centre, maybe they were better framed as a simple source of income which underwrote the core community. As the following respondents express:

“I [got the impression that] certain members of staff view the public, well, as just an opportunity for money. ...Possibly they don’t want to interact with the public all of the time and maybe possibly just get on with their own lives” (Respondent, Focus Group).

“I wondered whether the whole ethos of their attitude was one of ‘we’re here, we’ve got to do this [i.e. deal with the public], these people are coming but we’re not really that keen on talking to you about our way of life’, or whether some wanted to invite people to simply [show off and] say ‘this is how we are living and isn’t that good?’” (Respondent, Focus Group).<sup>i</sup>

Due to their growing alienation from the site, many day visitors perceived themselves to be cast in the role of unwelcome but necessary income stream for the Centre. Originally

assuming that they were positioned as a public that could be transformed towards to a greener life, many concluded that they were simply an audience to whom the Centre could be showcased, or an economic resource to be harvested. For many day visitors, it seemed as if their hopes that the site would offer them environmental and technological inspiration had been conceded to the needs of those ‘within’ the community; as one respondent puts it:

“There I was, on a soul-searching mission to find the solutions to reducing my carbon footprint and the one place in the world that I was positive would help was more interested in its own operation than the individuals that travelled and paid to discover information” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

Many day visitors were thus left with the impression that CAT does not exist to change ‘their’ world, but simply the world of its core community. Importantly, this impression had significance not just for these visitors’ view of the Centre, but also their view on ecosophy and environmentalism as a whole. As the following respondents reflect:

“My experience at CAT fuelled my annoyance; environmentalists are often thought of as self-righteous, alternative individuals, yet these people were making no effort to change that perception. It left me feeling that I would rather not consider myself in their category of an ‘environmentalist’” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

“So do I feel greener from the experience? I wish I could say yes, but I left feeling that being green is a losing battle” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).

For these day visitors, their experience of the public version of the CAT community left them estranged from the principles of the Centre and ecosophy as a whole. Initially hoping that CAT would (re-)connect to some extent with their lives and everyday contexts – an assumption informed not only by the virtual claims made by the Centre with respect to their role and function (see CAT, 2015a), but also to the spectatorial position the visitors themselves undertook as a consequence (they had paid their entrance free and thus expected to be impressed by the cutting edge exhibits and professional individuals put on public display, as they would at any ‘world-leading’ centre) – they encountered a physical, philosophical, and practical retreat that extinguished this hope. For these day visitors, no longer did they see CAT’s mission as helping to change their world, it had been reduced to solely a self-centred retreat for its inhabitants.

Towards a Conclusion: “What is the whole purpose of CAT? What is it there to do?”  
(Respondent, Focus Group).

In the spirit of this volume, this paper has followed Chatterton (2016) in offering “empirical evidence of real-life [ecosophies] that build socio-technical transitions” (2016:403). It has done so by focusing on the case of one ecosophical community: the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT). It has outlined that ecosophical communities like CAT, in line with intentional communities more broadly, premise their challenge to the mainstream on an initial withdrawal from it. Evaluating the effectiveness of this tactic can be undertaken with respect to (re-)connections this community subsequently makes. For CAT’s challenge to the mainstream to still exist, more than 40 years from its inception, means that the Centre must be doing something right. It continues to attract those who sympathetic to the tactic of withdrawal in order to practice their own ecosophical

desires, and growing numbers wish to experience and contribute to their own homeplace at the Centre. The community has built convivial and sociable networks both between people, but also between people and the local place<sup>3</sup>. This valuing and consequent nurturing of relations grounds CAT's ecological principles into a specific location, encouraging them to grow and develop in tandem with one another. CAT has therefore developed into a spatial practice that has substituted eco-political fear in the minds of those who wish to retreat, with positive hope for the future. It is a practical demonstration that modern orthodoxies can be challenged and alternative communities maintained on a durable ongoing basis.

“For me it feels a bit like a camping retreat. Like band camp or something like that”  
(Respondent, Focus Group).

For those individuals who regularly, but temporarily, visit CAT - the “wide circle of friends and allies who may not actually live full-time on ... in the ‘village’ but are nevertheless committed to their goals, at least in principle” (Hakim Bey, Hermetic Library, 1993, no page), this homeplace also functions as a ‘meeting place’ (ibid.). For them, CAT functions as

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<sup>3</sup> This co-ingredient attachment is valued, and is articulated by one respondent in the following way:

“We rely on these local networks, [including] the land around us, they’re our resources and we don't want to wreck them. No-one will go in and scrape it all away get a quick gain from it and then move on to the next place. These people have worked on this land for years and years and years; they haven’t got that ‘just move on to the next bit mentality’, they just keep it going” (BM, CAT employee, PI).

a place of carnival, they are able to mutually trade stories, ideas, inspiration and critique, temporarily subverting and re-placing the values of the dominant culture in which they are significantly connected, with ones more resonant with the ecosophy they aspire to. Although they appreciate the lifestyle and philosophies of CAT, these regular visitors nevertheless acknowledge that technological developments away from this retreat have outstripped its capacities to remain at the cutting edge. Thus whilst they are able to enjoy being periodically part of CAT's convivial community, they nevertheless feel a frustration at the growing disconnection between the trajectory of technologies in mainstream society, and those that are exhibited and utilised at the Centre. They are conscious of the need for CAT and its version of ecosophy to (re-)connect more strongly with the smartest and most ecologically modern aspects of the contemporary context in order that it stays relevant and meaningful to current and future generations.

In a similar vein, many day visitors arrive at CAT with the impression that a 'leading eco-centre' would (and perhaps should) be oriented around the general public's needs and aspirations; however, they depart believing that CAT's initial and ongoing commitment to the tactic of retreat means that any meaningful (re-)connection with the mainstream is foregone.

As one respondent concludes:

“My overall impression of CAT is that it is more about escapism than education; they are trying to escape the future of society by living at the Centre. It feels that they are letting the whole world pass them by without a second thought or regret” (Respondent, Reflexive Diary).



The different experiences of workers and volunteers, regular visitors, and one-off day visitors of this ecosophical community suggests that CAT's tactic of withdrawal offers help but also creates hindrance in (re-)connecting to the mainstream. Whilst ideally it could secure an identity for its members *and* a future for society, in practice it appears to trade-off the potential to transform the broader public in order to maintain its commitment to its core community. This trade-off is acknowledged to different degrees by some within the Centre. As SW states (above), there is uncertainty how well alternative living is "portrayed to the visitors", whilst a senior member states that with competing objectives, even in utopia "one has to make sacrifices" (AP, CAT employee, PI). These sacrifices may allude to CAT's focusing on retreat not as a means to an end (i.e. a first step in attempting to 'change the world'), but rather as accepting some necessary (re-)connections to the mainstream in order to sustain retreat as an end in itself. In this light, the necessary (re-)connections (i.e. sacrifices) could be seen to be the concession of visitors to the exhibition and education areas of the site, accepted in order to economically underwrite and culturally validate the member community.

The aim of this paper is not to undermine CAT's attempts at utopia, but rather draw attention to the ways we can understand and engage with these ecosophical acts in order to learn from them. Indeed, the requirement to balance the needs of different constituencies is not unique to CAT; it exists for all spatial practices that seek to change the world, at any scale. This paper suggests that the capacity of all spatial practices to appeal to all constituencies (what we may term insider, thresholder, *and* outsiders; see May and Nugent, 1982; Maloney et al, 1994; Grant, 2002), over the long term, should be the idealised criteria against which their achievements can be judged. Whilst the Centre for Alternative Technology may not absolutely succeed in functioning effectively for all individuals outlined in this paper, it does not absolutely fail either. If those who do not wish to withdraw in order to experience

ecotopia, their logical response should not be alienation and disenfranchisement from ecosophy, but positive action in line with their own philosophies and preferences. What the Centre for Alternative Technology is manifestly successful at is providing inspiration that a permanent alternative to the mainstream is possible. If some individuals feel that CAT has become 'individualised' (following Scerri 2009, Anderson, 2010), or is open to the charge of looking after their own backyard rather than the world itself, then they could do worse than attempt to "create [their own] utopia now" (after Bey, in Hermetic Library, 1993, no page). As the CAT example demonstrates, it is always possible, and perhaps even obligatory, to identify your own backyard, and work it to make it better. As Roszak fittingly reminds us, it is impossible to tell how far such good (or bad) examples will travel:

'Even if one only goes a few steps out of the mainstream to redesign some small piece of one's life - it is a sign to one's fellows that something better is possible, something that does not have to await the attention of experts but begins here and now with you and me. In changing one's own life one may not intend to change the world; but there is never any telling how far the power of imaginative example travels' (Roszak, 1989, p436).

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<sup>i</sup> As stated, the Centre's openness to the public is something that has been debated since CAT began its operations. As founder member Richard St George states, "There was always a tension between those who wanted to raise a drawbridge to the outside world and those who believed that what they were doing was primarily to serve others" (in CAT, 1995: 9). This tension suggests that for some within CAT, the economic reality that the site requires income from visitors to survive has always been conceded but not embraced. Thus for some, having day visitors on site was often,

"really difficult and intrusive. I personally wouldn't like to live on site anymore.

When we lived on site I would feel like I was [always] working, always on the visitors' circuit. In the olden days people would come home and people would be sitting there thinking that their house was part of the site; especially with children it was really hard because they would feel that they had to be on their best behaviour all the time" (MA, former CAT resident and current employee, PI).

For some within CAT, the constant presence of visitors on site renders their utopian experiment akin to an experimental zoo, in which they are the exhibits. For those inside the community, this was the unanticipated product of CAT 'lowering the drawbridge to the outside world'.