Background

- Intentional communities take on many forms and can vary in size, purpose, governance, demographics, etc.
- I studied intentional communities using two working definitions:
  - “An intentional community is a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values” (Kozeny, 1995)
  - “Five or more people, drawn from more than one family or kinship group, who have voluntarily come together for the purpose of ameliorating perceived social problems... they seek to live beyond the bounds of mainstream society” (Metcalf, 2004)
- The earliest intentional communities are dated back to 525 BCE, however they became more of a cultural phenomena in the 18th and 19th centuries as people wrote about utopianism and began to reimagine communities as solutions to social, political and economic issues (Metcalf, 2012)
Members of intentional communities distance themselves from mainstream norms and values such as individualism, consumption, materialism, and lack of spirituality or religion (Meijering et. al, 2007).

Physical design process as important to the forming group phase
- They feel a part of community due to the active participation, not only in designing the community, but also in common activities and work (Ruiu, 2016).

Less private space also encourages greater social interaction within communities
- Communities adopt a similar non-hierarchical social structure which alleviates barriers to social interaction.
- Residents maintain and manage indoor and outdoor communal spaces and organize regular social activities within the communal spaces - regular activities encourage greater social interaction and help to form stronger social networks (Williams, 2005).

Some form of communalism is at the heart of most intentional communities
- Degree of communalism varies widely
  - Some strict governance, and some it happens symbolically (Manzella, 2010).

The level of ideological commitment varies widely within contemporary intentional communities
- More recent communities are bound by values and beliefs such as a commitment to nonviolence, nonsectarian spirituality, or environmentalism, although the ideology may be softer in practice than in the past (Manzella, 2010).
Interest

The interest in this field of study was driven by my desire to live communally in my life. I have always been interested in the different types of established intentional communities, and the ways that they function in the contemporary world. Living in such an industrialized and technologically advanced society, community is often fragmented and displaced, but intentional communities can be viewed as places that reject norms and attempt to cultivate divergent values.
Scope of the Research

- For a majority of the summer I was working with the question:
  - What are the ideological and practical aspects of intentional communities that allow them to remain connected and cohesive?
  - I aimed to explore both the ideological (value systems, beliefs, governance) and the practical (physical infrastructure, meetings, gatherings, everyday interaction) that comprise intentional communities in the contemporary world.
- The two main communities of focus are Salmon Beach in Tacoma, WA and River Farm in Whatcom County, WA.
Methods

- For this research project I utilized semi structured interviews and participant observation.
- Many interviews were conducted online due to the challenges posed by the COVID pandemic.
  - Others at Salmon Beach and River Farm followed socially distant guidelines for participant observation.
- All interviews were conducted and analyzed using a modified form of grounded theory (Emerson et al. 1995).
- I am currently working on a podcast which contains interviews with community members and synthesizes what I have learned this summer.
Salmon Beach

- Salmon Beach is a spatially bounded community, comprised of 80 stilted homes that sit on the Puget Sound.
- The community was established unintentionally as fishing shacks and summer cabins in the early 1900s
  - Characterized by six distinct phases -
    - Family camping at Tacoma Narrows 1903-1918
    - Cheap rent, fishing and moonshine 1919-1933
    - Shacks to Cabins with Electricity 1934-1948
    - Earthquake, Eviction and Legal Action 1949-1958
    - Leased Land, Hippies and Blind Faith 1959-1977
    - Land Ownership and Social Change 1978-Present
- Is managed as two separate entities: Salmon Beach North and the Salmon Beach Improvement Club

“Everyone owns their houses, but they own the land in common” - Salmon Beach Inhabitant
Salmon Beach Cohesion

- The physical layout of Salmon Beach greatly contributes to its connectedness:
  - “You meet people every day of your life practically, particularly when you’re working. Because you’re passing them as you’re going to work or you’re coming home from work. There’s a lot of camaraderie and friendship that developed that way.”

- The natural environment, and combating the difficulties it poses is a component of togetherness that inhabitants express:
  - Geographic isolation
  - The resiliency of the community - coming together to overcome

- The kinship ties are an important aspect of the Salmon Beach community:
  - “And so people walk back and forth down visiting friends. Location and the children bring the community together.”

- Historical Legacy
- Meetings and Traditions/Events
River Farm

- River Farm is an 85 acre, land based intentional community in Whatcom County, WA.
- Established in 1984 as a Part of the Evergreen Land Trust
- 12 full time members with many part time members and visitors
- All decisions are made communally with a consensus system
  - The consensus system is dedicated to collaborative and egalitarian decision making
- Everyone cultivates the land and raises livestock together
  - Each year the community grows and harvests different types of crops
River Farm Cohesion

- Monthly meetings allow members to make group decisions
  - Bi weekly smaller cohorts deal with specific issues and bring them to larger meetings
- Weekly dinners allow members to gather around food
  - "It's amazing what food can do for people, and eating it together and sharing it is really one of the cornerstones of the community" - River Farm Community Co Founder
- The system of governance is an important aspect of community cohesion, where everyone gets a say in the decision making process:
  - There is no hierarchy in the community, and no leaders
- The lengthy decision processes for new members, which creates tension, simultaneously allows the community to remain self selecting and insular
- Inviting surrounding community to events - Camp-a-thon, music events, outdoor cooking
Evergreen Land Trust

The Evergreen Land Trust, established in 1974, is the oldest community based land trust in the Pacific Northwest. It is comprised of 7 intentional communities, all based off of different value systems and types of organization - some are urban and some more rural.

- “The organization began as a grassroots effort to promote affordable housing, cooperatives, recycling, and other progressive initiatives related to land reform.”
- “The purpose of the Trust is to encourage the development of cooperative communities and sustainable land use practices through the preservation of land and housing.”
- The landtrust is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, meaning none of the earnings go towards any private shareholder or individual
- Under this title, River Farm is ran as a conservation non-profit community

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) funds River Farm annually to do conservation work on their land. The money is then used to maintain community infrastructure.
Additional Contacts

In addition to Salmon Beach and River Farm I spoke with a member of a co-operative in Seattle, a Kibbutz and Israel, and the founder of an intentional community based school in Floyd, Virginia. Each of these conversations lent to greater insight into the aspects of each community that create togetherness.

"It draws other people who are willing to do that work. So I would say this is 100% an intentional community. And it is intentional, because of what they just showed you with the values." - Springhouse Founder
Findings

Practical aspects:
- Physical layout of space - how communal spaces are engineered for frequent interaction between inhabitants
- Environmental factors
- Group gatherings - communal meetings, celebrations, traditions

Ideological aspects:
- Value systems
- Beliefs held as a community
- Ways of organizing/governing
  - An system of electing representatives at Salmon Beach, vs a consensus at River Farm
- Aspects of seclusion and exclusion
Importance and Future Applications

- This research is important because it contributes to an expansive academic study of community living and engages with the spaces around us that diverge from societal norms which impose restrictions for the organization of space and people.
- I plan to let this research guide my senior thesis and continue to study alternative communities.
- This summer I was able to visit the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle several times to participate in various marches, sit-ins and community events. The community had a daily meeting called the People’s Assembly which I attended. I think it would be incredibly beneficial to engage in future research that looks at both sustainable long term communities and those like CHOP, that are created out of social disruption and revolution.


