Autarky together

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Out of the many projects viewed in this catalogue a select few stand out regarding autarky. One of them is the "tree log house", because of its extreme devotion to building the home completely autonomous. The other one is the "Villa Kogelhof", because it's self-sustainable, thus autarkic, after the building period. These two buildings combined give a pretty complete view of a perfect imaginative autarkic house.

Looking closer at the tree log house, we see great scores on autarky in the building process, materials and maintenance. Aspects that where a goal from the beginning in an attempt to reduce cost, be independent from contractors and suppliers but also for the satisfaction and fun of building it on his own. Local materials are used and processed by himself and a lot of materials were reused. This way it was possible to completely build the home by himself, thus really following the autarkic philosophy.

The way the "Villa Kogelhof" gets its great score is a sort of extension to the last project, as the building process leanson several parties, like the contractor and suppliers. After the construction is completed though it get great marks for being autarkic. The villa is not connected to the electricity network, doesn't need to be connected to the gas network and processes its own waste water. This is due to a completely different reason it became autarkic, as this comes from a wish to be a sustainable home.

These two reasons we see throughout the projects mentioned in this catalogue. In search of a more sustainable solution for a home, in a world where a changing climate and our effects on the world are getting clearer every day, they chose to take some aspects in their own hands. By using solar panels, collect grey water, clean their waste water and so on. They try to reduce their impact on earth and at the same time they are automatically getting more independent, thus more autarkic. These solutions often come hand in hand with a long term cost reduction a more sustainable home could offer.

The ambitions these buildings express, (and also other projects in this book) could be questioned though. The rather autarkic way of operating is one that is rooted very deep in our origins and we as a species have moved beyond that for a reason. Because of the specialization in our society, we can make products and deliver services better and more efficiently.

Why produce your own window frames when someone else can make these better? Why process your own garbage when this could better be done in larger quantities? Why filter your own drinking water when you can do that together with ten thousand other people more efficiently? This thus raises the question: is it really good to become less dependent?

As you would already expect, the answer lies somewhere in the middle. It does really make sense to produce your own energy at this point but the buffering of the peak loads makes sense to do with a larger group on the network. Collecting of grey water can be done really effectively on your own but to all have a complete filtering system for

drinking water would not be (cost) effective. It is always good to insulate your home well and use eco-friendly materials but is it such a good idea to all have an excavator and sawmill to produce everything by yourself.
Being an autark on your own may not be the most efficient, smartest and cheapest way to live in the Western world. But what if you could be an autark in a group? This might sound contradictory, but it really makes sense. How to draw the line between pure autarky and group autarky though, is partly efficiency calculation and partly personal preference and probably not the same for every project. One example where they ought to make such a balance is Eva Lanxmeer.

In the early 00's a group of people started to plan and build their own ecological neighborhood in the Dutch city Culemborg. This green oases was planned as a reaction to the harsh Vinex districts. Although this district was not meant to be autarkic in the first place it has some great autarkic features. The focus on sustainability gave them an extra autarkic bonus.

The district has its own water treatment plant, to treat the 'black water' into 'grey water'. This water was then used to washing machines, toilets etc. but due new legislation it cannot be used anymore. The 'grey water' is these days pumped back into the surface water. They planned to be energy-neutral. They did not succeed completely, but they came far. Ecological materials were picked, which resulted most of the times in materials from nearby. The water treatment plant was only profitable when working together on a neighborhood scale. Same goes for the greenhouse houses, there were insanely expensive when building only one of them.

Besides the ecological cooperation between the inhabitants they managed to create a special social cohesion in the neighborhood. They share gardens and vegetable gardens. And the people living there have – mostly – the same ideals, so they connect well.
In contradiction with the cooperative spirit in this district is the energy supply, which is arranged individually. Some are energy-neutral due the use of solar panels. Others are not so autarkic and use electricity from the

figure 1. Tree Log House

figure 2. Villa Kogelhof

figure 4. Kowloon Walled City

net. The waste management isn't regulated in the neighborhood at all. From the start of the project it became clear that this would not be effective on this small scale.
Although not all measures were successful, Eva Lanxmeer is not so dependent on the rest of Culemborg as the 'ordinary' districts. By trying to be ecological, and by working together, Eva Lanxmeer also became relative self-sufficient at low cost.

"Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success."
- Henry Ford

Eva Lanxmeer became a pretty autarkic community, which started with an ecological ideal starting point. The opposite happened in Kowloon, Hong Kong in the 20th century. An autarkic district developed without any connection to ecology or sustainability. The Kowloon Walled City, possibly the most polluting autarkic community.

The Kowloon Walled city was a densely populated area in New Kowloon, It was demolished in 1993 and at that time had a population of about 33 thousand, on a lot size of 2.6 hectares. This area was a port of refuge for criminals and illegals. Inside this district the authorities were powerless,it was a complete anarchy. It controlled its own, it served its own and it lived on its own. People from outside where not welcome, it was almost impossible not to get lost in the labyrinth of little hallways and streets. But in reverse it was impossible for most inhabitants to get out of the Walled City, since they were prosecuted in the 'outside' world. Kowloon Walled City was maybe closest to autarky as seen in history. Although the inhabitants combined their forces and specialties to survive. One specialized in making clothing, the other one became a baker while the third took care of the security. Most of the vertical sheds and flats were constructed by the inhabitants themselves with help of local architects and constructors. The people of Kowloon Walled City managed to create a district which was self-sufficient in a natural way.

figure 3. Eva Lanxmeer

But even Kowloon Walled City was not 100% autarkic. Since the electricity was tapped from the Hong Kong power grid, ingredients were smuggled into the Walled City and the garbage was unmanageable. The life circumstances where horrible, although the inhabitants managed themselves a relative livable life. It is not in any way comparable with modern standards. But they were almost independent from the outside world, by binding each other qualities.

In most projects there is a strong relation between sustainability and autarky. This can be declared by looking at the starting point of the inhabitants. Why do they want to be autarkic? Is it an ideal? Is it about money saving? Or just because there is no other option? This starting point tells everything over the outcome. Or maybe they started with sustainability as an ideal, and got autarky as a bonus. This is what happened with the Villa Kogelhof for example. But whatever the starting point may have been it cannot be neglected that complete autarky is impossible in the western world. It can only be approached when ignoring certain facets.

Being autarkic is being self-sufficient, being on your own, being independent. An 'autarkic community' is therefore automatically a contradicting statement. But it might be a great way to be independent (with a small group of people) from the outside world and approach some form of autarky. As said before there are certain aspects, like waste management and water which are more efficient when organized in a group. Other aspects, like energy and materialization can be easily regulated individually. Each project has to find out on its own how to make the balance, but one thing is certain, you can't do autarky on your own, you do autarky together!