

Opening the Ecopreneurial Dome

Reflections from the second session of the ERAMUS+ project on Applied Ecopreneurship Methodologies in Copenhagen, September 2018.

By Oliver Matikainen

Introduction

Rows of roots, edible flowers and herbs stretched out in front of us, calmly resting in the morning sun. The plants here had all survived the summer drought. The sign in front of the garden read “NOMA’s Garden”. This is where NOMA, four-time winner of Best Restaurant in the World, harvest greens for their pioneering menu based entirely on local products.

On the other side of the dusty path we were walking on, a ten-meter-tall, transparent dome rose majestically behind a tiny pile of green rubbish. This was the retired *Dome of Visions* which had been moved 25 kilometres west of its previous location in central Copenhagen. Now it was standing in [Grennesminde](#); one of several social enterprises we visited as part of the second session of the ERASMUS+ project on Applied Ecopreneurship Methodologies. The original Dome of Visions was presented as a “visionary and inspirational meeting place where visitors are invited to engage in discussions about a sustainable future” which requires “innovative thinking, new cooperative formats and innovations”. The dome now served essentially the same purpose in Grennesminde and became, as you will see later on, a symbol of both the potentials and challenges we experienced during this second session.

Spinoza’s dome

For many people, myself included, “ecopreneurship” is associated with ideas of being innovative, forward-looking, fast, disrupting and progressive. Not surprisingly, ecopreneurship is often regarded a close relative of oxymoronic concepts like “green growth”, “eco-capitalism” and “sustainable development”. In many cases, I think this is true. Too often, the entrepreneur is idealised as an inspired, individual hero, standing out from the masses by virtue of his creativity, confidence and innovative thinking. The entrepreneur is to the modern world what the artist was to the renaissance: a demigod guided by divine inspiration.

Luckily, this is not the full picture. Our experiences from Denmark show that ecopreneurship can also be something else. The main characteristics of the social enterprises, folk high-schools and cooperatives we visited were their historical awareness, local rooting, community values, a tendency to look backwards, appreciating nature in itself, and slowness. All these characteristics seem to contradict our initial understanding of ecopreneurship. Afterall, how is it possible to be backwards-looking and forward-looking at the same time? How is it possible to be both conservative and progressive?

I believe the Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, can help us make sense of this contradiction. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza wrote that “the imagination never creates anything entirely new but only combines”. This means that the ecopreneur is not the divine figure we often make him out to be; he never creates anything *ex nihilo*. The “self-made” entrepreneur is a myth. Instead, the ecopreneur is more of a construction worker, combining practices, artefacts and ideas from the past and the present to create new combinations of known things and concepts.

This has led critical thinkers like the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, and the Danish psychologist, Svend Brinkmann, to suggest that perhaps the only way to be progressive today is to be

conservative. By rejecting the current one-dimensional focus on constant development, innovation and growth, we can use ideas from the past to create exciting new combinations.

This seemed to us to be what was being done at Grennesminde, the [Svanholm Collective](#) and many of the other places we visited in Denmark.

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There are, however, risks of this 'conservative' approach and they take us back to the dome behind NOMA's Garden.

First, it is important we remain critical. The *Dome of Visions* cannot simply be turned into a *Dome of Conservatism*. The aim should not be to recreate the past. Rather, it should be to look for elements from the past that can be meaningfully combined with elements of the present. While Enlightenment thinking tends to uncritically reject all that is old and embrace all that is new, we cannot balance this out by rejecting all that is new and romanticising all that is old. It is true that life in some respects was better in the old days – but in many respects it was also much worse. The difficult task is to identify what traditions, ideas and assumptions – whether new or old – we want to use as building blocks and which we should discard. This is perhaps impossible to do purely theoretically but requires practical experimentation of the kind we saw in Denmark.

Second, the dome at Grennesminde was not just a place where “innovative thinking, new cooperative formats and innovations” are nurtured *within*; it is also a construction where some people are *left out*. The dome marks the border between a privileged *inside* and an excluded *outside*. While “visionary and inspirational” meetings can take place between the people who are invited inside the dome, this is not enough in itself. A dialogues needs to be opened with those who are standing outside the dome; in other words, we must make the domes more permeable, so they do not become self-enclosed systems. We appreciate different dialogues are required for different contexts and between different people; the conversations taking place inside the dome need not be the same as the conversations taking place outside of it – but information, wishes, criticism, ideas, arguments and questions should be able to pass the walls of the dome.

I see CEMUS as such a dome. More precisely, CEMUS consists of several smaller domes, each constituting a space where some people are *in* and others are *left out*. CEMUS tries to open up domes that are in many other cases impermeable by taking a student-led approach to education: they hire student course coordinators, have students in course working groups and provide a platform for various student-run projects. The question is, of course, how well does CEMUS succeed in this?

At the same time, CEMUS as its own ecopreneurial dome has relations to actors outside of it; it is a part of Uppsala's two universities and has been described as a force for renewal of higher education, it has built constructive long-term partnerships with organisations such as Zennström Philanthropies and the Sigtuna Foundation, and it tries to open up its doors to the general public. All these relationships require different dialogues, and this is what we want to explore more in depth at the next session which will be held in Uppsala in February 2019.

Next steps

When we host our four partner organisations in Uppsala in February, we have a few ideas for what to focus on: First, we should aim to get a better understanding of our current position and main tasks in a historical context without romanticising the past. Second, we should focus on dialogue and participation, on the relationship between those who are inside and outside of different domes (e.g.

coordinators-students, coordinators-CEMUS, students-CEMUS, previous students-CEMUS, CEMUS-wider society, CEMUS-Uppsala University, students-Uppsala University, wider society-students). Third, we should reflect upon what role the *place* we are in plays, and can play in the future, for the work we do at CEMUS.

We would like to invite all of you to participate in this project with us: get in touch with us about the project, ask open and critical questions and let us know if you would like to be a part of planning or contributing to the third meeting in Uppsala in February.

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