

Brenderup Folk High School

A musical and democratic straw bale building

Interaction and shared decision making can change people. We need to take charge of our lives and assume responsibility for our actions. We can read lots of books about ecology and sustainability – and we do that too – but people need to act together in the real world. We built the straw bale building with music as inspiration – and with music as we worked.

The school's enthusiastic principal, Ole Dedenroth, relates how they discussed their need for a room for concerts and other occasions. Paying for a new building would be too expensive. The school's leaders and teachers wanted a process where both staff and pupils could participate all the way, from planning to building and operation."So we decided to do it slowly and on our own. With the straw bale building we ensured participation and ownership of the whole process – inspired by a wish to build and live in new ways", says Dedenroth. They achieved their goal at a cost of 35,000 Euros, whereas a conventional building would have cost 500,000.

Peace, democracy and international work

The school's founding in 1986 was inspired by the Danish and international peace movement, under the motto: "The Nordic High School for Peace in Brenderup". Initially, peace-focused education was the central theme at Brenderup; the school was also in the front line of the many civil actions and demonstrations for peace. Peace activities declined somewhat after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989; without abandoning those roots, the school's work today is founded on the conviction that modern peace work must be built above all on meeting and understanding between cultures.



A multicultural and ecological building process (photo: Brenderup folkehøjskole)

Brenderup Folk High School now has a long tradition of inviting pupils from all over the world. Another basic tenet is "Democracy in practice". These principles were central to the whole building process in addition to the focus on musicality.

"Dogmas" for a democratic and musical building process

As a practical approach a set of "dogmas" for their project were developed, inspired by the Danish "dogma films", in dialogue between the pupils, teachers and an external facilitator, Steen Møller, one of Denmark's best known experts on straw bale construction. Dedenroth gives a few examples of these guiding principles: "It must be a building that we can make ourselves; it must be beautiful; and in order to find beauty we must go within ourselves".



From planning and process to final result
(photo: Brenderup folkehøjskole)

Usually one fights weeds with chemicals, but they are also beautiful. The building should be made from materials that can return to the earth as part of the ecological cycle. Another principle was that no two sides of the building should be quite the same. Instead of a fear of not achieving perfection, each part could be slightly different; instead of a square shape it became a hyperbolic parabola. "Which sounds nice", smiles Dedenroth, and continues: "Since it was to be a space for music, we also wanted music to be a part of the building process, with as many nationalities as possible participating. With all my heart I can say it was a real democratic process, everybody was a part owner of the process and the dogmas were followed".

Economical as well as reduced emissions

Before starting, a goal was set that CO2 emissions should be no more than 20% of conventional building. The result is around 30%. In addition to

the straw bales, mussel shells were used as insulation; the only cost for this was for transport. Timber was fetched from nearby forests, and the construction required almost no machine power. Most was done with manual labour, involving everyone, including making air dried clay blocks that form the external wall. "You take time to take the time it takes", says Dedenroth. The timber floor was made with reject materials that had minor dimensional errors. Thus a floor that would normally have cost around 11,000 Euros was built for 150 Euros! "Yet the construction fulfils all of the Danish building requirements. It's really just a question of smart thinking", he concludes.

The UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development

"Learning to change our world" – thus was the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (2005 – 2014) launched. Sustainable Development should provide today's needs without reducing the capacity for future generations to fulfil their needs. It requires a better balance between ecological, economic and social considerations. The goal of the UN decade is to strengthen awareness and knowledge in order to enable us to think and act in new, sustainable ways.

The target is both schools and society at large. Governments are urged to "promote public understanding and broad participation, including cooperation with civil society and all stakeholders". Broad public information should play a central role, combining theory and practice in values-based decision making. UNESCO is the international coordinator: see: www.unesco.org/en/esd as well as: www.thebalancingact.info

Themes for discussion:

What is needed in order to initiate similar work where you live?

Does your own municipality have plans for the local sustainability work?

What is the policy and practice of your municipality for citizen participation?

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