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## Places

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# Settlements: David Spero

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Over the last three years British photographer David Spero has been working on a number of interrelated series that explore architectural structures and ideological beliefs. “Settlements” is one of these, a series of photographs of low-impact settlements around the U.K. Spero has chosen to focus on dwellings that are self-built by communities wanting to live on the land in a sustainable way. The aim of these communities is to be at least partially self-sufficient and inhabit dwellings with a minimal ecological footprint. To do this, where possible, renewable energy sources are used, and building materials are recycled or locally sourced, such as timber, thatch, daub and turf. Some structures are temporary, made of canvas and tarpaulin, designed to be easy and quick to dismantle. Several of his images show isolated, distinct buildings, while in others, taken at different times of year and across the seasons, the structures are hardly visible, camouflaged in the rich and dense foliage that surrounds them.

Proximity to nature is essential to these communities. The dwellings themselves seem reminiscent of a preindustrial age when most of the population lived in small rural communities. The shift by modern

societies to a more urban existence has led to an increasingly sanitized and remote relationship to the natural environment. Mainstream consumer society, with its focus on material wealth and mass consumption, stands in stark contrast to the way these people have chosen to live their lives.

In *Low Impact Development: Planning and People in the Sustainable Countryside* (1996), Simon Fairlie explained how settlements such as these have often been hindered, and at times prevented, by local and national government edicts and planning acts. U.K. planning laws since the World War II have been predicated on the assumption that all forms of development, except agriculture, are a threat to the countryside and needed to be strictly controlled. Although this has allowed the protection of national parks and forests and the establishment of greenbelts around cities and towns, it has also prioritized and encouraged large-scale industrial farming over small-scale land use. This has been especially damaging to small groups wishing to live an ecologically sustainable existence on the land.

Over the past few decades, political awareness has started to change, as the need to reduce pollution and waste, limit the use of energy and raw mate-

rials, and protect fragile ecosystems has become more urgent and pressing. These settlements serve as examples and models of this approach.

The structures themselves have an organic, fluid and ramshackle appearance; since they are predominantly hand-made, they feature few straight lines and little symmetry. Their individual character is further reflected in their names, which include reference to the people who live in them. The names also reveal how over time the communities share spaces as they evolve.

Through these images we can start to understand and appreciate the beauty of the dwellings themselves and the surrounding landscape. Photographed in contemporary Britain, they stand as powerful visual and architectural testimony to people who choose to live according to their ideological beliefs.

#### For further information

Chapter 7 (Sustainable settlement planning campaign group): [www.tlio.org.uk/chapter7](http://www.tlio.org.uk/chapter7)

Ecovillage Network UK: [www.evnuk.org.uk](http://www.evnuk.org.uk)

Diggers and Dreamers (intentional communities database): [www.diggersanddreamers.org.uk](http://www.diggersanddreamers.org.uk)

Steward Community Woodland: [www.stewardwood.org](http://www.stewardwood.org)

Brithdir Mawr: [www.brithdirmawr.com](http://www.brithdirmawr.com)



### Steward Community Woodland

A small low-impact settlement near Mortonhamstead in Devon. Set up in 2000 as a cooperative, based on permaculture and vegan principles combining woodland conservation management techniques with sustainable living. Granted five years temporary planning permission in 2002. Currently about eight

adults and four children. Electrical energy is sourced from solar cells and a water turbine. Wood is burned for cooking and heating. Income is mainly from the woodland, running courses, and local environmental, community and care work. Children are home educated, and some organic food is grown.

**Above:** John, son, Daisy, Marley and Asher's under construction, Steward Community Woodland, Devon, August 2004



**Above:** “The Longhouse” communal space and new kitchen, Steward Community Woodland, Devon, November 2004

**Opposite:** Emma and John’s, Tir Ysbrydol (spiritual land), Brithdir Mawr, Pembrokeshire, October 2004



**Brithdir Mawr**

An intentional community founded in 1994 on a former 165-acre farm in Wales. Home to a mixture of projects aiming at ecological sustainability. Currently around twenty residents. The two projects photographed by Spero, Tir ysbridol and Tony and Jane's roundhouse, have been seeking planning permission, and fighting demolition orders from

Pembrokeshire Coast National Park since being "discovered" from the air in 1998. PCNP have decided to defer their threat of demolition until their new policy on Low-Impact Developments comes into force in July 2006. The projects will then be able to apply for planning permission and possibly become the first legal low-impact settlements in Wales.



### **Tinkers Bubble**

Founded in 1994 on a smallholding near Little Norton in Somerset with the objective of creating sustainable livelihoods with minimal environmental impact. In January 1999 it finally received five years temporary planning consent. Renewed in 2004. Consists of 43 acres of conifer plantation, orchards and gardens, with a community of around ten adults and three children.

Solar and wind electricity sources. Steam powered saw mill. Wood burning for heating and cooking. Water is pumped from a spring. There is one shire horse for logging and field work. No fossil-fuel engines are used on the land. Income is from a mixture of organic market-farming, greenwood crafts, and value-added products derived from the land.



**Above:** Tinker's Bubble, Somerset, June 2004

**Opposite:** Shannon, Chris and Alex's under construction, Tinker's Bubble, Somerset, February 2005



**Kings Hill**

Near Shepton-Mallet in Somerset. Started in 1992. Granted permanent planning permission in 1998 (for sixteen eco-dwellings). Sixteen adults and ten children living on a four-acre meadow. Electrical energy is sourced from solar cells and wind turbines. Food is grown and income is from rural work in the local community.





**Above:** Michael's, Tinker's Bubble, Somerset, June 2004

**Opposite:** Tony and Jane's, Brithdir Mawr,  
Pembrokeshire, July 2005