

COB – building with earth, Greece

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It's the end of April and after long bus rides I finally get off the bus in Nessonas, Greece – feeling like I am in the middle of nowhere. With a view on the Olympus mountain and some nearby hills I walk towards COB following the directions on my phone. COB has been started by a family 25 years ago as an experiment of building with natural materials and since then it has grown into an eco community and permaculture educational farm with many workshops and projects. Entering the space feels like walking into a magical forest full of trees and bushes. There are paths connecting different cob houses and outdoor spaces. I pass by a central red house with a kitchen and a fireplace, a wooden pavilion with sofas, compost toilets, a square with tables and benches, many houses in different colours and shapes, a construction site, various solar panels, a kitchen house with a wood fired oven and different houses for storage. I find frogs sitting on leaves in a pond, chickens waiting to be fed, beetles crossing the paths and dogs and cats resting in the sun. Surrounding the living area of COB there is an almond field, a food forest, a vegetable garden and a community café. The project is focusing on self-sufficiency and living environmental friendly in community with the main topics of construction and cultivation.

I joined COB as part of my Master's research project Bread Complex, which explores bread as a commons and baking as a participatory practice. Besides supporting everyday activities on the farm, I was particularly interested in learning how bread-making, shared meals and community living can create spaces for participation, learning and social connection.





Access to land



In the area 20 min from Larissa where COB is located most of the land is cultivated. Different farmers are growing almonds, wheat and apricots. Many years ago the area used to be a lake, today there are hills surrounding a flat area of land. Villages like Nessonas, Kalochori and Sykourio sit in the valley with their small numbers of inhabitants, farmers living in this rural area for a long time. COB is one of the few farms working organically and in this way restoring the soil quality. By hosting events, workshops and open farm days, COB is opening the doors for interested people to teach, show and inspire. One of the goals is to motivate people in the area to follow the example of organic farming and permaculture. There are some scattered projects around that are doing the same thing and last year they have started doing regular meetings to connect these likeminded farmers. It may not be COB ´s main idea to give people access to land, but welcoming guests and volunteers to their home is already a start of making their land accessible to these visitors.

My work with bread also made the connection between land and food more tangible. Every loaf begins with access to land where grain can be grown. Seeing the almond orchards, fields and food forest highlighted how closely bread depends on healthy soils and local agricultural practices.

Intergenerational relations



At COB there are mainly two different generations permanently living and working together: the founders´ generation and their children's generation. In addition, during the workshops people of different age groups join the farm. COB is also collaborating with various schools in the area and also the villagers of Nessonas and in this way connecting with younger and older generations. One of the most obvious advantages of that is that this variety of age creates a combination of knowledge of the older generations and the curious energy of the younger. Furthermore, this way of community living is opposing age discrimination – every age group is welcome. Of course, also challenges appear such as one generation believing that there is only one right way to do something without being open for change. In the rural environment of Nessonas differences in perspectives on life and social matters between generations might be stronger than they are in Greek cities. At COB it's also different generations of a family living together which surely influences the dynamics and challenges of the project. In any case, important topics such as future plans need to be discussed carefully between the different generations to prevent bigger tensions and to find a common vision for the evolution of a project like COB.

Baking also became a space for intergenerational learning. Traditional techniques, recipes and practical knowledge are often passed on through doing together rather than through formal teaching. Bread therefore became another way in which experience was shared between generations. During two workshops I invited people of all ages to join a baking session, share their knowledge and enjoy this manual activity together.

Gender dynamics



In Greece stereotypical gender roles seem to be quite present and interwoven in culture. The amount of violence against women in Greece is high, in many families women are expected to stay home and cook for their husbands, the money usually stays with the man. Also in Nessonas, people seem to follow this role division: At the café you will only meet men while the women stay at home or sometimes gather at the playground. There is a women's club already giving the women more opportunities and COB collaborates with them inviting them to workshops at the café. At COB, more men than women live as permanent members. There is no clear reason for that, but since there is generally a lack of people, one relevant question is how to make the space more welcoming and inclusive for everyone. The different roles are assigned by interest rather than gender. Still, the current division is following the stereotypical gender roles, coincidence or not. Even though, most people voluntarily choose these positions or tasks, I sometimes got the feeling that the presence of gender roles is limiting the individual development and the feeling of community within the team. From my observation, these stereotypes are enforced by most people at COB regardless of their gender or position. And even though there already is the recognition of these dynamics and for sure also a evolution that has happened before I got to experience COB, I think that the powerful impact on gender equality a rural innovative project like this can have, is underestimated.

Bread also reflects existing gender dynamics. While baking has traditionally been associated with women's domestic labour, the wood-fired oven at COB and in the village also became a shared space where different people participated in baking regardless of gender. Nevertheless, I observed that many food-related responsibilities still fell primarily to women, raising questions about how everyday practices can either reproduce or challenge traditional gender roles.

During my stay I also initiated activities connected to my research. I organized a communal baking day, prepared and facilitated a bread workshop in a food forest in Thessaloniki and did several interviews. Also, I experimented with the wood-fired ovens and the solar oven. These activities allowed me to connect the practical experiences at COB with the broader research on bread, participation and commons.




sour dough starter
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After two months living in this little cosmos I am grateful for everything I have learned, for feeling welcomed into the community for this time and of course for all the kind people I have met. Before coming, I imagined this place to be mainly peaceful and calm, but soon after arriving I got absorbed into the chaos of Cob with its struggles, expectations and differences. Besides all the bread-related learnings, such as baking with different types of ovens and different kind of people, I also learned about the importance of communication including voice and tone, my own boundaries and behaviour having nearly no space for myself spending 24/7 around people and overall the challenges and chances of community living. I leave the place a little exhausted, but mainly inspired and hopeful seeing an eco-social project like COB that has been running for years with motivated people and attracting visitors from different parts of the world.

Looking back, bread became much more than a daily food during these two months. It became a way of participating in community life, contributing to the collective, meeting people and understanding the relationships between food, land and society. My time at COB confirmed that even ordinary practices such as baking bread can become powerful tools for learning, dialogue and community building. These experiences will directly inform the next phase of Bread Complex and my Master's thesis.

