

When the social and the technical come together

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Samsøe is the center of the world! To the employees at the Energy Academy, this is a well-known “fact”, an integral part of the Academy’s “strategic storytelling”. When people hear it the first time, presented in the elaborate prezi show put together to tell the story of Samsøe’s transition to renewable energy, they tend to smile. What is this, megalomania?

As I get to know Samsøe and the Energy Academy, however, it seems that the grandiose statement might not be too far from the truth.

My PhD project and my interest in local responses to the climate change problem have taken me to Samsøe where I’m currently in the middle of my fieldwork. Recollecting Mary-Alice

Arthur’s (nomad and participant in the “From Best to Next Practice” symposium) wise words to me, “Well, you’re certainly in the field now!”, I have strategically situated myself in the middle of what I see as a (or maybe the) power centre of the green transition towards a sustainable society for the future.

Being at Samsøe allows me to gain access to people, documents and technologies whose actions create ripple effects and forge new and – hopefully, probably - more sustainable worlds.

The Energy Academy has made it its business to bring together hitherto disparate spatial and temporal dimensions of “reality”. This bringing together is a huge part of the Academy’s world-building enterprise. This is why, when Soeren Hermansen or Michael Larsen claim that Samsøe is the center

of the world, I see this as a pretty accurate description. At least, Samsøe is the center of a world. A world shaped by the Energy Academy, containing both past (the 1997 competition that set off the renewable island project), present and future (the vision of Samsøe as a fossil free island by 2030), and managing to hold both the very local and what we like to term “the global”.

Acknowledging hybrid accomplishments

Samsøe is far away. When I travel to Samsøe from Copenhagen, many vehicles of transportation and many timetables have to come together: bus-train-ferry, then bus, and some walking. It takes around six hours. At the Next Practice symposium, participants from the Danish mainland jokingly said that they had accidentally brought their passports. Samsøe is far away, and sometimes coming here feels like entering a whole other dimension. The ferry ride becomes a portal to an alternative world, and as an ethnographer it provides me with the physical feeling of entering my field, leaving my life at home behind for a time.

This alternative dimension we call Samsøe – the Samsøe that has been assembled by the Energy Academy, the Samsøe that greets us as Next Practice participants - is not only a social place. Samsøe’s success as a, let’s use Karen Blincoe’s word, lighthouse for processes of sustainability is not a purely social or human accomplishment. So let’s focus on the processes, let’s look at how the Energy Academy managed to achieve wide support for the fundamental changes the island has been through these past 15 years. Let’s try to

achieve a deeper understanding of how exactly it came to be that the islanders not only accept or tolerate but actually embrace large, imposing, challenging technologies such as windmills.

I’m interested in how heterogeneous entities come together to create worlds. I say, let’s expand our view to let technologies, nature and politics in, and let’s see which effects, which processes of profound change, this great mix produces.

The story of Samsøe’s success is, among many things, a story about technologies. But the technologies are not just fixed entities, they too have been shaped by the special Samsøe approach. Deer run between the windmills in the fields while birds fly between their huge wings without getting hurt. Potato farmers become wind farmers and windmills turn into crops or perhaps mutant trees. The distinction between nature and technology blurs and can’t be taken for granted. A cat makes up the staff at one district heating plant, at another plant goats rub their horns against the solar collectors creating heat for the nearby residents during summertime. The technologies are in place due to endless meetings, lots of coffee and the extreme efforts of a limited number of people. Along with, of course, heaps of technical and legal documents and permits and political negotiations and developments.

So let’s not talk of technologies as if they were a phase Samsøe has outgrown, let’s grant them a space in the narrative. And let’s seek to understand Samsøe’s success as the coming together of processes of social and technical character. That, at least, is my project.