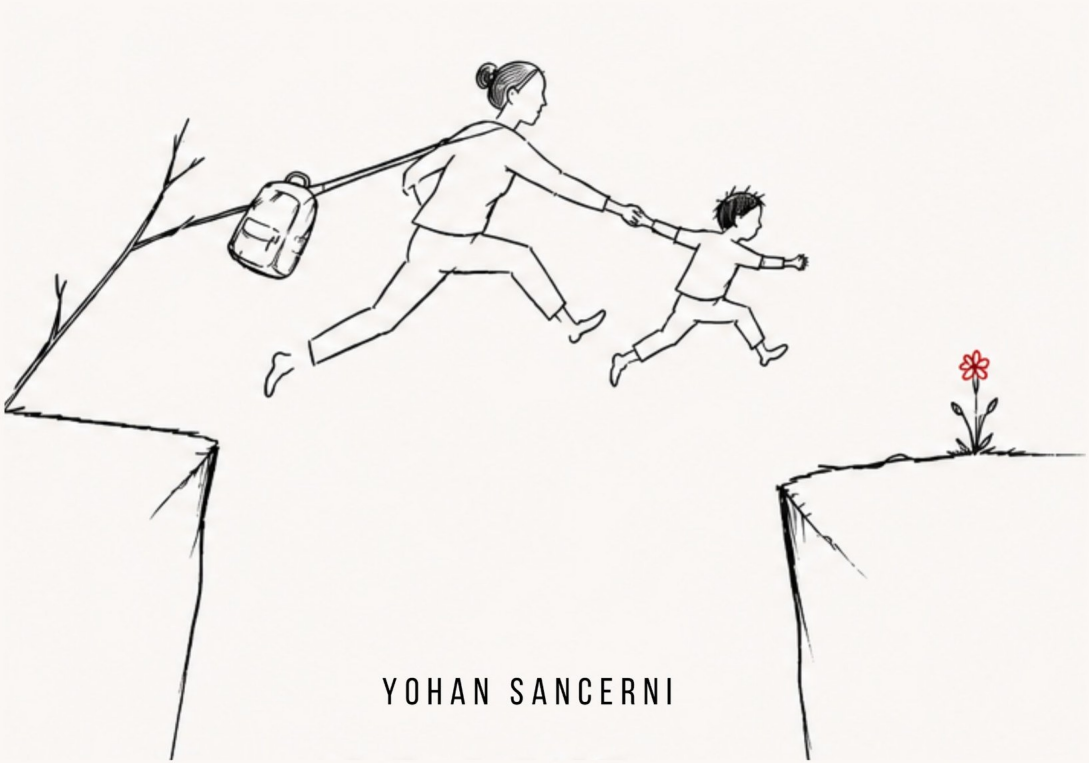
THE ECOVILLAGE TRAP

What nobody tells you
before you drop everything to
live in community



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We arrive with our eyes on the horizon and an invisible backpack on our shoulders.

The horizon, we paint together. The backpack, we carry alone.

Until the day the weight each of us carries becomes everyone's problem.

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Preface

In the early years, along with others, I carried the Pourgues ecovillage project the way you carry a child you've wanted for a long time. In meetings, faces would open up when I spoke, and when I suggested a direction, people followed me. My enthusiasm spread, I had people's support, and I sincerely believed it was because my ideas were right. At first, it was pure joy. It wasn't a need, not yet.

Members would come and tell me they were there thanks to me, that they'd thrown themselves into this adventure because my energy had swept them along. I wasn't looking for that, I simply received it, the way you receive a gift you didn't ask for. But after receiving it so often, I developed a taste for it. Slowly, that taste came to feed something in me that hadn't existed before. A place, a role, a way of being counted on. After being counted on in that spot for so long, I ended up needing to be there.

Then, quietly, over the years, things started to creak. First one voice asking questions. Then two. Then awkward silences where there used to be nods. Objections almost on principle, people avoiding each other's eyes, tensions simmering. At first I thought it was the group getting tired, that people were on edge, that the stakes were rising. All of those explanations may have been true. But underneath them there was another one, which I didn't dare put into words. When the group stopped following me, I was scared, physically scared. I wanted to run away, to hide. Something terrified

me. It took me a long time to understand what that terror was saying. It wasn't saying that I was someone who had always needed to be followed. It was saying that the project, having been built partly around my drive for so long, had created a need in me that I hadn't known before. As long as that need was fed, I held up, but when it stopped being fed, the project faltered, and so did I. The day I started losing that place, I stopped fighting for the project. Without putting it into words, I started getting ready to leave. Not because the mission no longer made sense, but because I no longer had one of my own.

This book begins there.

In 2017, I left Paris. I was 31, and I had a first collective adventure behind me. With Ramïn Farhangi, Marjorie Bautista and four others, I co-founded the École Dynamique in Paris, a democratic school inspired by the Sudbury Valley model. Ramïn was the one who had started it. The school had opened two years earlier, and it was alive. But something, in me and in several of us, wanted to go further. Not just a place for children to learn: a whole place to live.

That intuition is what led to the Pourgues ecovillage. So, with Ramïn and Marjorie, we set off for Ariège, in the French Pyrenees. The project fell within the definition put forward by the Global Ecovillage Network: an intentional community consciously designed through local participatory processes. It was meant to regenerate social and natural environments in their four dimensions: social, cultural, ecological and economic. What set us apart,

following on from our first adventure, was the dimension of democratic education. We wanted a village built on the same model as our school in Paris. There was no classroom on site, and the children weren't enrolled anywhere. Their parents took on legal responsibility for their education, under what's known in France as *instruction en famille*, or homeschooling. Governance was organized around the same principles as at the École Dynamique. Decisions were shared, authority was distributed, and children were given a real place in community life. I had this certainty, this fire: it was possible to live differently, not just to talk about it in cafés or freak out about the state of the world. But to do it, for real. On its fifty hectares, the Pourgues ecovillage was home to houses, gardens, and workshops. About thirty people were actively involved. They came to the meetings, made the decisions, and lived the project from the inside. All around that core, several thousand people followed us from a distance, supported our fundraising campaigns, shared our posts, and organized their lives around the idea that one day, maybe, they would join us. Pourgues didn't stay under the radar. Several documentaries were made about us, adding up to hundreds of thousands of views, and one TV report in particular was seen more than eight million times. There were national press articles, TV appearances, stories in the local paper, as well as in bigger magazines. Without quite deciding to, we had become one of the French faces of the desire for a different way of living together. People came from all over to meet us, to train with us or to ask for our advice.

That success, which we hadn't exactly planned for on that scale, did something to us. We set the bar very high, and our enthusiasm matched it.

Today I can see that this massive recognition worked like an anesthetic. The more the outside world applauded us, the less we saw what was rotting on the inside. We thought we were being carried by something bigger than us, almost all-powerful at times, and protected, but we weren't. It was beautiful, that early euphoria. We felt like we were building the new world with our bare hands, and that we weren't the only ones who believed in it.

And then, on February 4, 2025, everything stopped. The end didn't come from outside. The government didn't shut us down, the bank didn't foreclose on us, the weather didn't fry our crops. The end came from us, from the inside, from everything we hadn't been able, or hadn't wanted, to face. When the news got around, a lot of people were surprised. Some had never seen it coming. Others, on the contrary, wrote to tell me they'd always sensed something without being able to name it. Cracks that we ourselves, from the inside, couldn't see. It's partly for them that I'm writing this book, for those who admired, followed, dreamed, for those who didn't understand, and for the few who had sensed it coming.

This book was born out of that rupture. I'm not here to complain or to find culprits (there aren't any, or else we all are, a little). I'm here because I came to understand, in the silence of the months that followed, that our story wasn't an exception. It was the rule.

Ecovillages collapse. Almost all the ones I've seen come and go, anyway. They collapse because we all show up with invisible baggage we've never bothered to unpack. They also collapse because, on top of that baggage, we build structures that can't withstand the forced closeness between modern humans. We arrive to repair something broken in us, with bodies worn out by years of struggle, of metro rides, of compromise. We arrive with defensive reflexes that cling to us like a second skin, and we call it "doing community."

This book isn't going to give you the method for making your ecovillage work, for a simple reason: I no longer claim to know how you make an ecovillage work. I've only seen, from the inside, what brings them down. What I'm offering you here is what nobody tells you before you commit your savings, your relationship, sometimes your children, to a project with other people. What really happens when the dream meets human reality, when what you carry without knowing it meets what the others carry too, and all of that ends up making the thing that was supposed to save us unlivable.

I was in it up to my neck: I made the mistakes I describe, I carried the illusions I tear apart, I played the part I criticize. Today, I refuse to dress that reality up in trendy concepts; I'd rather have the raw truth, even if it stings, than a nicely packaged illusion.

One last thing, before we dive in... This book is about ecovillages, but a lot of what it describes doesn't stop there. The mechanisms I'm going to describe, the dilution of individuals in a *we* that's too

big, how hard it is to stay yourself under the gaze of others, bodies worn down by prolonged closeness, the roles and characters we project onto each other without naming them, the way we sculpt each other, for better or for worse, these aren't mechanisms specific to ecovillages, they're the mechanisms of living with other people.

The first collective is the couple. Before there are thirty of us, there are two, and most of the things that bring an ecovillage down are already at work, in a smaller, denser form: in the kitchen of any couple that lasts, the things left unsaid that pile up, the roles that settle in without anyone having chosen them, the expectations we never put into words, the parental positions we replay in spite of ourselves, the fatigue of closeness, the masks we wear to hold on.

If you have no intention of joining a collective, you can still read what follows. You'll find in it, I think, some useful things about what it means to try to live, for the long haul, alongside another human being. And if you're in a relationship and you're also thinking of joining a collective, then read it twice. What doesn't hold up with two won't hold up with thirty. A lot of books about community living offer methods, tools, frameworks for building, but this one does something else. It points a flashlight into the cellar, at what we'd rather not look at. And in ecovillages, as in most collective projects, the cellar is often pretty full.

If you're reading this book looking for confirmation that your project is going to work, you might close it angry. But if you're reading it to see what you've preferred not to see, we can begin.

Pourgues, before the autopsy

Before I open up the body, I need to show it to you alive. The readers of the French edition already knew the Pourgues ecovillage, at least from a distance, through a TV report, an article, a video a friend had shared. You probably don't. So let me tell you about the place, the people, the money and the rules, in the order we met them. The rest of the book will read better if you know what I mean when I say "at home."

A school first

It all starts in a school, not in a field. In September 2015, in Paris, in the fourteenth arrondissement, Ramïn Farhangi opens the École Dynamique, one of the first democratic schools in France, inspired by the Sudbury Valley School founded in the United States in 1968. In a school like that, there are no classes, no curriculum, no grades. The children, from five to nineteen, decide what they do with their days, and the school is run by an assembly where every child and every adult has one vote. I co-founded it with Marjorie Bautista and a few others. I'm part of the staff, and my job, first and foremost, is the children themselves: woodworking, sport, video, a YouTube channel we built together, and whatever my years as an entrepreneur had taught me, passed on in a form they could use.

The school is alive, it draws people in, it gets talked about. Within a year, some thirty similar school projects open across France in our wake. And very quickly, something in us asks for more. If children can learn freely and govern themselves, why not adults? Why not a whole village? In early 2016 the idea is said out loud between us: apply the school's principles to an entire place to live. Not a school in the countryside, a village where we'd live, where we'd work, where children would grow up without being shut away somewhere from nine to four.

In the spring of 2016 we hold a first information meeting. Within a few months, twenty-two adults and eight children gather around the project. Parents from the school, friends, people we'd met in the world of alternative education. A teacher, a consultant, a heating engineer, an entomologist, a mother who had just stopped working after a burnout. People between twenty-eight and fifty-two, with careers, apartments, Parisian lives they were getting ready to take apart.

The place

We were looking for land with a house already on it, fairly big, somewhere in the south, with water, woods, a livable climate, and a building we could move into right away rather than having to build everything first. We visited a single place, the first one on the list: Pourgues.

It's a hamlet above Le Fossat, a village in Ariège, in the Lèze valley, an hour south of Toulouse, where the hills start to rise before the Pyrenees. Fifty hectares of meadows, woods and slopes, with a pond. In the middle, a big nineteenth-century house, eight hundred square meters, which until then had been rented out for wellness retreats and yoga courses: dozens of rooms, a communal kitchen, room to sleep a crowd, and even a swimming pool, inherited with the rest, that we kept while promising ourselves we'd do better one day. Next to it, two cottages of about sixty square meters each, a small house, an old farm building. I remember the love at first sight, and I also remember that love at first sight isn't an argument. We signed anyway.

The price: about a million euros. Of the twenty-two adults, eight couldn't contribute anything. Fourteen people put together six hundred and thirty thousand euros in equity. Ramïn alone put in four hundred and seventy thousand. One person put in forty thousand, two others twenty thousand between them, and ten people between five and ten thousand each. The rest, four hundred thousand euros, came from loans: three hundred thousand lent by the seller himself, repayable over fifteen years, and a hundred thousand lent by two people close to us, to be paid back before 2022. I'm giving you these figures because they say something it took us years to face up to: the place existed thanks to one man's money, and we had decided, on principle, that this money would give him no particular power. A housing cooperative, one person

one vote, whatever you'd put in. It was beautiful. We'll see later what it cost us.

In March 2017, the first residents arrive. I'm one of them. I'm thirty-one, I come alone, and I land with my boxes in a room of the big house, in the middle of an Ariège winter, with the very clear feeling of starting my real life. We're all crammed in there, in bedrooms, with children running up and down the corridors. Sharing a house with that many kids is hard going. A year later I build my tiny house, and I find out what a door that closes is worth.

Who lived there

At the start, there were about twenty of us on site. About thirty a year later. The numbers moved all the time, and that's one of the things you have to understand about an ecovillage: it isn't a population, it's a flow. In 2020 there were twenty-five of us, the same number as at the start, after five departures and five arrivals. In 2022 a TV crew would count forty-two people, eighteen of them children. And in 2023 we lost eleven people at once, four of them children.

The housing multiplied with the people. An apartment upstairs in the big house, the two small houses for two families, a caravan for Ramïn, Marjorie and their child, yurts, trailers, tiny houses, a dome built up among the trees out of salvaged materials. Then, for visitors, six safari tents, and a planning permit granted in early 2020

for fourteen more light dwellings, which we started building ourselves.

Each family had its own home, but life happened on the ground floor of the big house: the communal kitchen, where you could eat together or on your own schedule, no set hours, except for the trainees and holidaymakers whose meals were more structured. Upstairs, a library and guest rooms. Under the roof, the converted attic for the training courses. Outside, a six-hundred-square-meter vegetable garden that fed everyone a little over the summer, a workshop for repairs, the pond, the woods, and the collective work days for the hay, the potatoes, the firewood, which often ended in a party.

The children, for their part, didn't go to school. That was the heart of the project, the non-negotiable pillar, at least at the beginning. The older ones had tried the public school in Le Fossat at their own request, the parents had negotiated with the teachers, and after a few weeks the children didn't want to go back. So the families declared homeschooling, with the inspections by the national education authority that come with it. The children moved between the houses, the vegetable garden, the greenhouse, the pond, and whichever adults were available. Ramïn and Marjorie went further, publicly, by refusing to ask for permission to educate their child at home, an open act of civil disobedience that other families in France joined.

How we made decisions

I know that for many of my English-speaking readers, the word that comes to mind is "sociocracy." That wasn't it. We were a democracy, in the most direct sense: we had taken the Sudbury school system, as we practiced it at the École Dynamique, and transposed it to the village, adapting it to collective life. One assembly, and one vote per person.

The main body was called the Village Council, the CoVi. It met on Thursdays from ten to eleven thirty. A proposal was discussed at a first reading, then voted on the following week at a second reading, after amendments. Decisions were taken by majority, not by consensus, with a quorum of five voting members. The CoVi decided everything that touched collective life and amended the internal rules, which were rewritten nonstop for nine years. Two elected roles guaranteed the framework: a secretary and a guardian of the democratic process. Attending assemblies wasn't compulsory, and some people, less comfortable speaking up, still weighed on decisions in other ways, in the corridors. You'll meet that mechanism again later, in the part about power.

Alongside the CoVi there was the Investigation and Arbitration Committee, the CEA, our internal justice system. Three elected arbitrators, a daily session at two thirty, and one simple rule: the committee only dealt with disputes a villager brought to it. Then, over time, the tools we imported from elsewhere: decision by advice process, "tension" meetings for day-to-day operations, restorative

circles for conflicts, and on Monday mornings, something that wasn't planned at the start and became indispensable, the tension-regulation meeting. That's where you said what was wrong, with yourself and with other people, while a secretary took notes on a laptop. You'll see in this book that this Monday hour was both what held us together the longest and the place where we got best at hurting each other.

The way in changed a lot over the years, in waves. Roughly: a one-week trial, then a month, then a year, before becoming a full member. In recruitment, one point was pushed above all others: take care of yourself, psychologically, be willing to look at yourself, accept the circles and the mediation. Everybody said yes. We never found a way to check that yes, and we probably didn't insist enough. Getting out was simpler, on paper: you handed back your housing, and your equity was reimbursed within five years.

What we lived on

In the early years there were no clear rules. Each person paid what they liked into the common pot, according to their income, with no checks. The pot paid for the bills and the food. It took about nine thousand euros a month to keep the place running. In 2018, personal contributions were still needed to make ends meet. Some people lived on site with an almost zero contribution, helping out now and then, others paid for everyone, and the unfairness that created had no name, since no rule said what was owed. The day we

set a minimum amount to cover the needs, some people dug in and started preparing to leave. Others launched activities and created wealth. I should have made that clear on day one.

What changed the economics of the place was the stays. In 2018 we experimented with a few weeks of hosting. From June 2019 we opened the immersive stays: families, couples, single people came to spend a week with us, paid between seven and nine hundred euros depending on the season, and freely chose whether or not to take part in collective life. About ten weeks of stays a year, once we'd found our rhythm. In the first season, two hundred and fifty people came through. Eighty more took training courses on democratic education and the ecovillage model. That year, turnover reached a hundred and fifteen thousand euros, enough to cover every expense. We wrote, proudly, "we're reaching economic self-sufficiency."

Around the stays, everything else: training courses in permaculture, education, light housing, democracy, yoga, a cultural café, a shop, therapists set up on site, the online courses launched in 2020. Very few of us worked outside. Ramïn had a half-time job elsewhere, three therapists and massage practitioners had a small part-time practice, one other person went off on assignments now and then. Some only lived in the village part of the year and went to work in Switzerland the rest of the time, others were retired, or lived on private income. Toward the end, the collective paid the cooks, the marketing, the building work, done by the villagers themselves, and the trainers. The rest was volunteer work, and volunteer work, in a place like that, has no end.

When the world was watching us

Pourgues was never discreet. As early as 2018, a filmmaker, Alex Ferrini, was shooting a documentary about us. Slate gave us a long article, the regional daily La Dépêche came back regularly, and the YouTube channels that matter in this world came through, L'ArchiPelle, Demos Kratos, others too, to film our assemblies, our domes, our kitchens. Researchers, educators, journalists came, and we told everything, our successes and our doubts, in real time, on social media, which was rare. Then, one morning in June 2022, Brut, an online video outlet, published four minutes about the village's children, "in this ecovillage, school is nature." The next day the counter passed a million. It would go past eight million. You'll read in Part 4 what that morning did to us.

Thousands of people followed us from a distance. Thousands came: visitors, trainees, people who stayed a summer or several years. Pourgues became, without our ever really deciding it, one of the French faces of the desire to live differently. And in 2025, when the inside was already giving way, we received the social and solidarity tourism prize at the Résilient competition, awarded by the Occitanie region. We were still being applauded. The building, meanwhile, no longer met the standards.

How it ends

On February 4, 2025, in the middle of a training week, eight officials walked into our home on the public prosecutor's orders. A few months later, an inspection of public-hosting standards concluded that our old house could no longer take anyone in without more than eighty thousand euros of work and exemptions nobody would grant us. Ramïn left in April 2025, Marjorie with him. The remaining team held on until the autumn, canceled the All Saints' holiday stays, and the administrative closure of the stays came down in the days that followed. No stays, no income. No income, no project. On December 17, 2025, Ramïn wrote a letter of ending, and of beginning again: a new collective project, very different from ours, Bloom Hills, smaller, more sober, centered on families who educate their children at home, with short and medium stays rather than permanent residents, would take over the place.

There it is. Nine years, fifty hectares, a million euros, a few thousand people who passed through and about thirty who really lived there. Now that you know what it looked like, we can open it up.

This is where the excerpt ends

You've just read the preface and the chapter about the Pourgues ecovillage, the way it was before everything came apart. The rest of *The Ecovillage Trap*, seven parts, the letters and the compasses, is where it goes deeper: why ecovillages draw us in, what we carry into a collective without knowing it, how a group tears itself apart, what happened at Pourgues from the inside, and what I'd do differently today.

The Ecovillage Trap is the English edition of *Le Piège des Écolieux*, which more than a thousand people in France have read since July 2026. The English edition is coming out in the next few weeks. If you're on the waitlist, you'll be the first to know. If you aren't yet, you can join it at www.en-transition.com/the-ecovillage-trap.

And if something in these pages stirred you, write to me. Just reply to the email that brought you this excerpt. I read everything, and I answer.

Yohan

What readers in France are saying

The Ecovillage Trap came out in French in July 2026, under the title *Le Piège des Écolieux*. More than a thousand people have read it since. Here is some of what they wrote, translated from the French.

"It made me cry to see the difficulties and the challenges recognized, the ones that are so often kept quiet in the face of the ideal, so beautiful, of the ecovillage. This book helped me see clearly what I'm living through."

Sophie V.

"Before I opened the book, I was afraid I'd find an ego trip, someone cobbling together a story so he wouldn't have to face a sense of failure. Instead I found an open-hearted account by someone who learns from what he's lived through."

Suburân

"I lived eight years in a collective myself. This book lets you step back from the idyllic picture people have of ecovillages. Better to be warned before you walk naively into the lion's den."

Myriam G.

"One of the co-founders of Pourgues tells his story with rigor and simplicity. The analysis captures the games and the stakes that led

the members to split apart, in a group that had every conflict-resolution tool at its disposal."

Odile H.

"In every line, every chapter, I find my own path, my own questions, my own disillusions. A book to read urgently if you want to join an ecovillage knowing what you're getting into."

Diane J.

"I personally have no wish to live in an ecovillage, but this book gave me a lot, because it describes human dynamics in any collective, whatever its structure. It resonated with my own experiences, which in my case were professional."

Ariane L.

"A real gem of lucidity. This book is of course for people who want to join or found an ecovillage, but not only. It brings to light what hides in each of us, and what we carry with us, without knowing it, wherever we go."

dolly62

Before you visit a place

If this excerpt has stirred up a wish to join or start a community, I'd like to leave you with something to take along. When I left the Pourgues ecovillage, I tried to gather what I wish I had known before going in. It came down to six questions. I turned them into REVEAL, a one-page map you can print and keep with you when you visit a place or have a decision to make.

It's free. You'll find it by scanning the code below, or at www.en-transition.com/reveal. Leave me your email there and I'll send it to you right away.

Yohan



Yohan Sancerni



The Pourgues ecovillage, Ariège