Co-Housing in the Making

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The concept of co-housing seems to arouse very diverse images in people's minds, varying from ideological approaches to societies based on religious or spiritual communities as a basis for living together. Many also link it to the known historical utopian communal models for societies as presented in Thomas More's *Utopia* or Charles Fourier's *Phalanstère*; the ideal city. Others simply view it as a way to organize their everyday chores on a more social and rational basis within a community. Perhaps these different images help explain why co-housing has started to arouse a new kind of public interest, recently interpreted in various forms and processes which even the modern middle class – with middle class values – has begun to find attractive. Co-housing seems to be very much in the making from a bottom-up basis, but it is in fact, at least in the European context (e.g. Germany and Scandinavia), increasingly being helped along by the authorities in a top-down fashion. The nature of co-housing and what it has to offer to society today forms the basis of this co-housing issue. Can co-housing develop from the margins into something with the ability to challenge the prevailing ways of distributing housing and create new social practices within cities? This is the main question that the current issue of *Built Environment* aims to open to discussion.

The Concept of Co-Housing

In order to approach this question from an academic point of view, the concept of co-housing must first be more thoroughly investigated. It holds many meanings with a wide array of interpretations among academics as well as laymen. The term co-housing appears in the title of the issue mainly because it is used extensively in the English speaking world as well as in Austria, Belgium, Italy and the Czech Republic (Vestbro, 2010), and is a term with which most people are generally familiar. In their article, Dick Urban Vestbro and Liisa Horelli illuminate the concept from an historical perspective and help in building an understanding of its development. However, they also point out how multifaceted and layered the concept actually is, and in so doing mirror the focus of this issue in trying to illuminate the concept from many different angles and viewpoints.

Vestbro states that co-housing can be interpreted from collaborative, communal or collective standpoints. Co-housing is usually defined as housing with common spaces and shared facilities. Collaborative is here interpreted as housing objectives being some sort of collaboration among residents. Communal refers to housing designed to create a community and collective is used where the emphasis is on the collective organization of services (Vestbro, 2010). According to Vestbro, the term commune refers to communal living without individual apartments. Cooperative housing on the other hand refers to cooperative housing ownership which does not necessarily mean common spaces or shared facilities and cannot be understood as co-housing as such (Vestbro, 2010). On the other hand, in Finland, particularly in the last few years, projects that result from the actions of groups that build for themselves and therefore act as temporary housing developers are generally considered co-housing projects due to the collaborative nature of the process itself, even though
they sometimes lack common facilities. Also some German Baugemeinschaft are considered co-housing even though they do not necessarily have strategies to sustain the community but allow the dwellings to be sold at market prices without any demand for participation. Dorit Fromm in her research uses the concept of collaborative housing as an umbrella term to cover a wide gamut of international variations. She points out how both the spectrum of types and the variety in modes of possession and occupancy make collaborative housing a concept that defies easy categorization.

The Social Context

Social interaction, in one form or another, always forms the core of co-housing. Salla Korpela, in a case study of Casa Malta co-housing project in Helsinki, based more on her practical experience than on empirical research, states that from the point of view of social context, co-housing projects and groups tend to fall into three categories. The first is building together which refers to groups with the sole interest of pooling assets and joining efforts in gaining economic and practical benefit from the project. The second group is sharing everyday life in which the residents in addition to developing their buildings together also plan to share everyday activities while living in it. The last category is serving a common ideal. These groups not only build and live together but do so specifically in order to serve an ideology, religious commitment or specific lifestyle. These communities have existed for thousands years in the form of monasteries and religious orders. Modern versions include eco-villages, religious sect communities and kibbutzim.

In the ongoing Casa Malta project of which she is a part, Salla Korpela has seen how important, as well as challenging, it is to generate the social glue that holds together an extensive co-housing group in which people do not know each other in advance. As she points out in her case study, this involves creating organizational structures that facilitate the handling of the demanding developmental phase of the project within which the diverse aspirations of a very heterogeneous and multigenerational group run high but resources are limited. The group has a managerial board, in addition to which it is divided into smaller active working groups based on the skills and interest of prospective inhabitants. Though this work is time consuming, it becomes a platform on which a functioning basis for sharing common chores and living within a community can be created when the building phase is over.

Anne P. Glass in her article discusses co-housing for the elderly in the USA. Her findings reveal that communities that have worked together on the development phase were proud of what they have been through and created together. Their shared experience helped in forming a coherent co-housing group, in taking care of daily chores and providing help and a secure living environment for each other. Co-housing can in fact be understood as a process of social interaction created by its members. Glass states that this new co-housing initiative for the elderly, based on co-housing models originating from Denmark, encourages the formation of a deeper relationship with one’s neighbours than is typical in American housing. It is very much in contradiction to American values of complete independence, but Glass insightfully points out how the elderly in co-housing communities can actually remain independent much longer as part of these larger communities, taking their ageing into their own hands and out of those of the medicalized bureaucracy.

Even though ideology is not at the core of co-housing projects in the same way as before, an ideological vestige is apparent in co-housing even today, namely that of living together equally and democratically. Vestbro and Horelli in their article point out how, especially in Sweden, gender issues have played a pivotal role in the development of modern co-housing. They claim that co-
new housing typologies. Several co-housing projects are recreating the city as a living social construct in a piecemeal manner from the bottom up. As Dorit Fromm points out in her article, these small communities produce social contacts, services and security for their inhabitants, but unlike gated communities they do this in a living relationship with their immediate neighbourhoods.

She argues that co-housing communities can have a positive impact on a wider neighbourhood level, beyond the margins of the co-housing development itself, in the form of neighbourhood repair. She presents several international case studies supporting this argument, such as Swan’s Market collaborative housing in Oakland, USA and Goethestrasse Bremerhaven in Germany, in which common spaces are made available to outsiders as well as the inhabitants of the co-housing estate thus creating new public spaces for the local neighbourhood. This has had a great impact on the security and quality of the built environment of the wider community. Fromm also points out how the architecture and typology of these developments has challenged the established housing market and the solutions it produces. A far greater number of atypical design moves have been made in co-housing projects.

Co-housing appears to be being brought about in simultaneous top-down and bottom-up processes, often bypassing the plethora of market oriented or institutionalized players of normal housing production and opening the field to new actors. This is still a trend in the making and some of the contributors to this issue try to shed light on this development. The data available on the subject are limited, but in countries such as Germany some preliminary statistical conclusions on these developments can already be made. Ache and Fedrowitz, in their article, provide a systematic overview of co-housing projects in Germany. In recent years there has been an interest on the part of German municipalities in supporting the return to inner-
city, influenced by several factors such as price levels, lot distribution, and the actors in the property and housing markets. Ache and Fedrowitz suggest that the common denominator in these projects is to create a new form of social practice in co-housing. This is made possible by ongoing structural, legal and organizational processes in Germany. In their study, conducted at Faculty of Spatial Planning, TU Dortmund University, they found twenty-six municipalities that support co-housing projects. They argue that the central actors in these processes are the municipalities supporting co-housing. However, as Fromm points out in her article, collaborative housing is not always a smooth or quick process and so it needs support and new organizational initiatives. In Germany the national association FGV (Forum Gemeinschaftliches Wohnen) Forum of Collaborative Housing brings people together to create self-organized community housing projects.

Achieving Sustainability through Co-Housing

Besides its impacts at the neighbourhood level, co-housing can have a wider impact on society. In their study of eco-villages, Bella Markham, Kirsten Gram-Hansen and Toke Haunstrup Christensen argue that, compared to individual households, co-housing has environmental advantages. Further, co-housing can offer answers to a range problems facing modern society, including alienation, social isolation and sustainable living (among others Meltzer, 2010; Williams, 2005). In their article they address both ecological and social sustainability. Their research indicates that efficient technologies are only part of the answer to problems of sustainability, as everyday household routines are as important as the physical and technical design of buildings (Gram-Hanssen, 2011). The co-housing format also enables resource sharing in ways that are not so readily available to non-community residents. They emphasize that living in a community based on strong pro-environmental norms, as evidenced in eco-villages, serves to strengthen an individual’s commitment to sustainable practices.

Referring to research that has been conducted on co-housing and household size (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2009; Williams, 2007), they argue that it is more energy and resource efficient for more people to live together. But the main points of Markham, Gram-Hansen and Christensen’s arguments are that co-housing communities are better able and willing to implement sustainable technologies and such communities attract more one- and two-person households.

Politics, Utopias and Co-Housing

Guillermo Delgado in his article brings us back to the question of Utopia in co-housing. Based on David Harvey’s categorization of utopias of built form and utopias as social process he situates his research – squatting in Netherlands – as part of the dialectics between these two within the plethora of co-housing. David Harvey refers to utopias of spatial form for those who propose a model, and to utopias of social process for those who take existing society as their starting point and try to create possible steps in a different direction (Harvey, 2000). Delgado argues that squatting as an act presents a challenge to existing housing solutions and markets as well as being a solution for some who cannot afford housing. The Netherlands has long been an example of affordable housing production. In the mid-1990s more than 41 per cent of the country’s housing stock was considered social housing (Priemus, 1995). Since then, subsidies for the social rented sector have been drastically cut. According to Delgado there is a transformation going on in the government towards making more space for the speculative housing market and this has resulted in a conflict between economic and social interests. This development has provoked reactions, particularly
Co-housing developments can form a bypass lane that could challenge existing hierarchies of housing production within which, to a great extent, contractors and housebuilders are able to define the physical and social context of housing.

Many ideas and facets in co-housing, such as gender and equality issues and housing models for the elderly, have travelled around the world in rather a short period of time. As previously mentioned, the co-housing model in the USA was originally transported there from Denmark in the 1980s (Durrett, 2005). Japanese co-housing, since the 1980s, owes a debt to the Swedish collective housing model kollektivhus (Fromm, this issue), and even Swedish collective housing with its gender equality models can be traced also to the American radical feminist movement at the turn of twentieth century (Vestbro and Horelli, this issue). Although the interpretations of co-housing are closely related to local conditions and legislation, international connections and an active research society have had a considerable impact on the exchange of ideas and have helped put those ideas into practice. Co-housing in the making can therefore also be seen as an international movement in the making.

REFERENCES


