

# Intentional communities: methods for reviewing the rise of citizens' housing initiatives in a European perspective.

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## ABSTRACT

*Intentional communities, Cooperatives de logement, Genossenschaften or Co-housing are types of collaborative housing in which residents actively participate in the design and operation of their own neighbourhoods. Cohousing residents are consciously committed to living as a community, and to managing the accommodation by themselves. The physical design to combine both social contact and individual space requires a gradual range of semi-public/-private spaces. Collective investment opens opportunities for renewable energy networks and sustainable innovative building. Many initiators as well as scholars therefore see a potential in the projects as experiments for the transition toward sustainable production and collaborative governance. Housing politicians and executive institutes tend to be more sceptical and perceive cooperative self-steered housing as peripheral solutions for a small minority of dwellers. This paper approaches the field from an architectural point of view. It applies criteria from gender-theory to investigate in how far the intentional communities represent a model for inclusive, ecological housing.*

KEYWORDS: co-housing, self-managed housing, gender and architecture

## 1. Co-housing and self-managed housing

In search for the essential qualities of co-housing that can serve as a model for future housing strategies and for planning criteria and procedures, another way of analysing is needed.

This paper proposes to look at the architectural characteristics of co-housing as an alternative way of understanding the internal logic of the communities. Architectural analysis can make use of criteria developed in international gendered planning approaches. The paper also argues that this needs to be done in the context of the planning system under which the projects were created.

Intentional communities demonstrate a variety of goals, principles and organizational forms [Vestbro 2010]. Yet common characteristics such as community building, ecological lifestyle or –sustainable building, and economy of solidarity appear in most publications (whether online or on paper). In recent studies [see list of references] authors point to the 'large variety' in which each of these features is present in the community's orientation or project ideas.

Despite an overlap in the definitions of the co-housing- self-managed- or alternative housing initiatives, there is no uniformity in the terminology used. Sometimes names or notions are used together within one text, at other instances different authors use different names for similar case-studies.

For example in the increasing number of housing initiatives (*Baugruppen* or *CPO*) the primary goal is building the project, shared spaces are secondary and are sometimes included. In other instances

### Box 1: examples of terminology

FR: Eco-quartiers; Eco-villages; Habitat alternative; Habitat groupé; Habitat autogeré; Auto-promotion; coop de logement; ..

ENG: Intentional communities; Self-help housing; Self-managed housing; Self-build housing (accommodation); Housing Coop ≠ housing association; Cohousing

GERMAN: Genossenschaften; Baugruppen; Wohngemeinschaft ≠ Gemeinschaftliches wohnen

NL/Flemish: Samenhuizen; Woongroepen; Zelfbeheer; collectief partikulier opdrachtgeverschap, ...

cooperative housing projects do include shared spaces but the role for dwellers participation is not decisive.

Lejeune concludes that at present alternative housing initiatives are ‘still halfway between utopia, experiment innovation and social transformation’ (*il semble que ces initiatives se situent encore à mi chemin entre utopie, expérimentation, innovation et transformation sociale*, my translation) [Lejeune 2009: 108]

In order to further understand the direction co-housing is taking, several classifications have be used, according to different sets of criteria such as:

#### 1) The degree of participation and self-management

Kläser makes a distinction according to levels of self-organisation: from professional interest via life-situation and plural generation to community building (Kläser 2006). In their own definitions, networks of the intentional communities put an emphasis on self-organisation, independence and grass-root initiated, for example:

‘Cohousing is a type of collaborative housing in which residents actively participate in the design and operation of their own neighbourhoods. Cohousing residents are consciously committed to living as a community. The physical design encourages both social contact and individual space.’

([http://www.cohousing.org/what\\_is\\_cohousing](http://www.cohousing.org/what_is_cohousing) 24 august 2010)

#### 2) The approach to Ecology /concept of sustainability

A variable prominently figuring in the self-definition of different networks, such as the Global Eco-villages Network [Dawson 2010] or the Dutch network for change ‘Omslag’: ‘Ecology, collectivity and community, self-management and autonomy, social sustainability, ecological living. The Netwerk focuses on projects in the Netherlands that grew from the basis (grassroots)’ (*ecologie, collectiviteit en gemeenschapszin, zelfbeheer en autonomie, zelfwerkzaamheid, sociale duurzaamheid, interculturele wijkontwikkeling, ecologisch leven en duurzaam bouwen. De focus ligt bij projecten in Nederland, die zijn ontstaan vanuit de basis.*) (<http://www.omslag.nl/wonen/>)

Sustainability is a fluid concept, which makes systematic classification difficult.

#### 3) The distance to society (alternative to mainstream)

‘Cooperative movement is an attempt to counter outside forces (oppression) with internal organisation and –solidarity’ (*Das Genossenschaftsprojekt ist der Versuch, äußere Zwänge durch innerorganisatorische cooperation un Solidarität zu ersetzen*) [Novy 1983: 5] This is expressed for example in the announcement of the Dreamers and Diggers ‘guide to communal living’ as ‘together we are creating a world’ (<http://www.diggersanddreamers.org.uk/>)

‘Intentional communities can be identified by a deliberate attempt to realize a common, alternative way of life outside mainstream society’ [Poldervaart 2002: ..]

Meijering et al (2006) performed a survey with response of almost 500 ‘intentional communities’ in rural areas. Their aim was to establish the degree of withdrawl from ‘the mainstream’ and the variety that exists amongst the communities. As the existing typologies they found date from the 1970s, the researchers designed a new typology of 4 categories with different criteria: locational, ideological, economic and social. Intentional communities ‘aspire to set things right in a more intimate setting’ [Brown 2002: 6 quoted in Meijering et al 2006: 44]

#### 4) Time and historical context

Also relevant is the period of creation and existence of the collective. Community projects have existed all through history, and in all continents [Poldervaart 1987, Hayden 1997, Bürgerburo 2009]. Their spatial logic needs to be placed in the dominant housing patterns of their time, for example the post-war reconstruction period when the urgency of construction gave room for initiative (*Les Castors*) and architectural models for clustered housing were developed, amongst others by Le Corbusier [Denefle et al 2006]. Present initiatives rise out of a period where the single-household, owner-occupied (semi-) detached house with private garden was the ideal in most European countries.

## 2. weaknesses of classifications

Co-housing projects attempt to bring into practise a discourse of diversity, solidarity and inclusion, rather than of homogeneity and excluding. It is this discourse that interests not only inhabitants but also researchers and politicians as a desired model for future housing provision [Maury/Bernard 2009]. If this practise is to be generalized, it is necessary to develop planning criteria and adapt planning processes. For the mapping and engineering of the potential of co-housing from an urban/spatial planning point of view, or to formulate architectural design criteria, the above listed categories are not operable enough.

Fedrowitz/Gailing make an essential addition to the definition of co-housing: ‘to organize housing conditions as a group whereby the social/organizational unit/community overlaps the spatial unit/community [Fedrowitz/Gailing 2010: 33, emphasis mine] This could include elitist ‘gated’ communities with a large ecological footprint. However, like many studies, the authors explicitly relate ‘community housing’ to societal trends such as emancipation, individualization, sustainability, energy-transition and new forms of governance. Is that justified or a biased selection of case-studies?

The Dutch VROMraad (former advisory board for former Ministry of Housing) signals a trend for people to seek communities with shared backgrounds, such as ethnic, age, ecological -, artistic -, luxury lifestyle (golf-resort) and so on [VROMraad 2009]. According to the study, people are looking for ‘identity’ and ‘safety’, which is expressed in intentional communities for ‘self-catering with kindred spirits’ [ibid.] This definition brings golf-resorts and gated communities almost in line with eco-villages and co-housing despite significant differences in social codes and ecological performance, which have implications for architectural typology.

The criteria listed above may be useful to map the motivation & everyday practices of communities, however they do not take into account the spatial (urban and architectural) typologies of the accommodation. The architecture and design of co-housing is not ‘security driven’ with gate and guard but rather the opposite, facilitating sharing and meeting. This requires an orchestration of semi-public space that can be understood by its users. In the planning process, this collides with building regulations that are based on a clear separation of public and private; and that need to be met in order to acquire building permission. For example: In all types of co-housing there exist shared spaces. Regardless of the differences in their (ideologically steered) uses projects would encounter similar difficulties applying for building permission. One aspect is the application of fire-regulations; where to locate the separation walls, when the boundaries between one dwelling and the next are diffused by space for communal rooms, services and workshops mixed with residential?

Another example is the assessment of energy performance. Many EU countries have adopted ‘energy-labels’ for housing. The calculation methods are nationally standardized, which means local circumstances to deal with climate conditions are sometimes lost. This is making it difficult to assess energy-use already in itself. Furthermore, the environmental ‘extra’s’ offered by co-housing, such as children’s rooms that replace kindergarten, raise the question to which standard of energy use co-housing can be compared with.

Many collectives start to produce their own energy in order to apply ‘clean’ or ‘renewable’ sources (solar, heat-pump, etc). In the ventilation- and energy-calculation methods, mandatory to obtain building permission, the single-family house is taken as standard model. Next to this, the calculation models contain assumptions on user-patterns and appropriate temperatures or installations. For example absence of breadwinner(s) during the day, forced ventilation in bathrooms and so on. Designs that include for example shared TV-rooms, launderettes or community kitchens, studios or multi-purpose rooms are difficult to fit into the calculation. In practise such design options may lead to more efficient use of heating and daylight, thus reduce energy consumption despite a larger urban footprint.

In their moving away from standard models of housing, co-housing projects share a process begun by feminist critiques on housing as an element in reproducing fixed gender roles [Heynen/Baydar 2005]. This makes it interesting to look at gender-theory of architecture and learn from the experiments and methods developed in the last decades.

### 3. Using gendered theory of architecture

From the planners point of view, the dwellers concerned may be looking for an alternative for society and invest in accommodation as a tool. They are looking for something that the (housing) market does not provide: this can be low-cost, sustainable, collective, or any other motive. The environmental qualities of co-housing projects (both realized as well as projected) are remarkably close to demands women's groups and feminist theorists have directed at urban planning, such as: safe and accessible outdoors, adequate conditions for domestic labour, flexible space to allow for changed use during the life-cycle, mixed use providing jobs as well as round the clock activity. [Schröder/Zibell 2004, Roberts 1991, Paravicini 1990, Matrix 1984].

Women-lead or women-oriented pilot projects also demonstrate shifts in private-public boundaries (.). These experiences can be applied to co-housing to investigate the similarities especially regarding the acceptance in 'mainstream' planning of 'alternative' housing proposals.

Being grass-root initiated instead of top-down planning models is another common feature of co-housing and feminist housing projects. This self-organization exists in various degrees of participation: from participating in the design process to being the client or self-building. Consequently the planning and design process produce models different from the predominant typologies, both in the layout of housing and urban/community [Andrews 2007]. Based on equal relations between participants, the logic of space is perceived differently. However, during realization often compromises need to be made to fit into regulations and feasibility of building components. In the use and management phase, new boundaries need to be defined to share or divide responsibilities.

Besides socio-cultural analyses, application of architectural (design-) spatial (planning-) and technical (energy-, engineering-) measurement instruments is relevant. To verify the potential of the self-organized housing initiatives to meet present changes in society, the analyses of housing plans with gender criteria is a useful tool. How innovative is the housing typology, and the urban clustering of intentional communities?

### 4. Combining architectural-social data

The research of Meijering et all, as well as other studies or compendia of intentional communities (Peters 2005, Bunker 2009, Dawson 2010, Vestbro 2010) reveal that fragmented initiatives from a variety of ideological backgrounds has lead to a substantial existence of 'self-managed accommodation'. Although in number this may not represent a large percentage of the housing stock there are clear indications that the percentage of yearly production is increasing. In terms of urban/rural spatial quality the impact of single projects can be significant. On the local scale, small numbers can have considerable impact and as a whole the 'alternative' models of housing respond to many of the politically expressed interests: energy transition, social cohesion, self-reliance of citizens (post welfare-state), accessibility of the housing market.

However, official statistics about housing (both national and European: Espon) do not record co-housing, as (so far) it is too small in numbers. Invisibility is also a cultural issue, pointing at the blind spots of planning culture –for example the hegemony of nuclear family model and urban concepts that separate home from industry analysed by feminist theorists (Sandercock 1998). The Dutch bureau for statistics CBS for example only categorizes two forms of tenure: rental or owner-occupation, and two forms of garden: 'none' or 'private' ([www.cbs.nl](http://www.cbs.nl) 13 June 2011).

To support the sociological evidence of a societal trend, technical research can help to get an understanding of the extent to which co-housing exist, or at what pace it is expanding. On the other hand, social data help to interpret 'hard figures' for example in clarifying that some communities do not want to network nor to be visible, or fall outside the scope of the study, whereas others cease to exist, split into several projects or finally come into being after a long planning trajectory. Besides there co-exist different generations of projects: pre-war; post-war; 1980s; which by now are part of the housing stock and may not be recorded whereas in the 21st century new initiatives can be counted as part of the (annual) housing production.

Once the larger scope of project is defined, ‘mapping and measuring’ the initiatives can provide useful information. For example: What is average number of dwellings? Which kind of urban or sub-urban areas do they occupy? How does the m<sup>2</sup>/person compare to average housing conditions? What is the ecological footprint in relation to average dwellings? Such data could reveal to what extent the intentional communities represent alternative planning solutions and in how far the spatial layout of urban environments allows or restricts the building of alternative communities and economies. This leads to the fundamental question of the relations between spatial and social dynamic: do intentional communities require new environments or rather a change in attitude and communication? Such questions are profoundly trans-disciplinary. Analysis from an engineering (urbanist/architectural) point of view produces data such as the following:

- Location: centrality/suburban/medium size towns/peripheral/rural (urban analyses)
- Insertion: in the urban tissue, the neighbourhood, mobility networks
- Tenureship: property/coop/decision-making/lease/social agent (contract analyses)
- Housing typology: individual space/household definition/intergenerational/ (Plan analyses)
- Mixed use: share spaces/other than housing –workshop, business, courses, guestrooms (Plan analyses)
- Energy: saving/efficient installations/innovations/renewable sources/smart grid (technical briefings)
- Water: source/saving/differentiation/recycling/purification (technical briefings and plan analyses)

The interpretation of such data with criteria from gendered planning approaches implies going beyond technical features or figures. Relating diverse patterns of use to the spatial models sheds light on the practise of the optimistic discourse of co-housing as a (generic) form of sustainable co-habitation. However before even collecting the figures from different countries, the question is justified if these conclusions can be drawn on the same basis for all countries.

## 5. international comparison

Several European countries have recently developed policies to support or promote co-housing: amongst others Germany [Fedrovitz/Gailing 2009], the Netherlands [SEV 2006], Belgium [Van Herk/De meulder 2009] and France [Lejeune 2009].

Nations have different driving forces to promote self-managed co-housing, for example: Belgium has a tradition of self-build single houses. Land for urbanization is becoming scarce, and the support for co-housing is embedded in a discourse of higher densities and better quality of public space and architecture [Herck/de meulder 2009].

In Germany demographic change has produced a policy directed at senior citizens [Bundesministerium 2010, Labit 2010]. At the same time the younger generations continue the tradition of *Genossenschaften* nowadays in *Baugruppen*, which implies both overtures in the planning system as well as a shift in the economic/cultural background of residents involved [Novy 1983/**Droste**...].

The Netherlands parliament in 2000 forced government to accept a new policy aiming for 30% of housing production to be self-managed, unprecedented in the Dutch history of provision by housing associations. While at first the results were slow to emerge, today there exist not only manifold initiatives for collective housing and projects but also new types of professionals such as ‘co-housing coaches’ [[www.woongroepencoach.nl](http://www.woongroepencoach.nl), 16 June 2011]

France is seeing an explosion of grassroots initiatives after re-installing the legal possibilities for cooperative property in 2003 [Denefle 2009]. The concept of *eco-quartiers*, implemented ‘top-down’ by local authorities as part of sustainability strategies, gives room for such initiatives [<http://www.ecoquartier-strasbourg.net> 12 October 2010].

Comparing cases from different countries means comparing different planning- and housing systems embedded in historically developed institutions and relations. What does the word ‘participation’ mean for example: are residents taken serious as planning partners?

The goal of international knowledge transfer is to understand (how) can solutions from one country be transferred to another. This needs to be contextualized; for example:

What is the standard of housing typology? How do the co-housing models relate to the predominant housing typologies in the respective countries?

Is housing provision dominated by public or by social agents, and what forms of tenure and home-ownership exist?

What is the nature of Building law and housing regulations, and do these address public, private professional or private client sectors?

And finally: how to assess not only the quantity but also the sources of energy? In a country where Photovoltaic panels are subsidized and widely available, the electricity production of a project may be very visible. Yet in other situations a connection to the energy network provided with 'white (hydroelectric) power' may in fact be a more sustainable solution.

## 6. Conclusions

Interpreting co-housing initiatives as relevant experiments to select future strategies for housing needs to go beyond the discourse of social cohesion and sustainability. The, often implicit, desire to upscale the qualities of the projects to new housing strategies is a legitimate motive that should not suffer undue bias. What is the essence of difference between cooperative, self-managed housing projects and other housing provision? Co-housing initiators anticipate that the housing market is not going to provide their needs, be it for typology (lay-out, mixed use) finance or ecology. Moreover they expect developments in technology (sustainable energy for example or support for the elderly) and want to implement them directly instead of waiting for general distribution. Their interest lies firstly in satisfying the dwellers needs but secondly also in the regional development. Further professional enquiry is needed into the conditions of making space for initiatives and prevent them turning into the opposite: elitist & exclusive enclaves in segregating societies.

So far, the supportive evidence for the supposed urban qualities has been subject of social studies rather than the engineering and design disciplines. There do not need to be doubts about the lived evidence recorded by inhabitants themselves in directories, websites and publications and publications, or even in the case-studies of academics. However as precisely these experiences raise expectations to 'create a better world' (or at least a less wasteful build environment) there is a need to assess more systematically in how this works in practice. Yet whereas co-housing or self-managed housing is increasingly present in the housing discourse, there is little insight in the quantitative performances.

Architectural mapping of co-housing typology is relevant for five major reasons:

1. to verify if the hypothesis of the qualitative impact is sustainable (tenable);
2. to measure (estimate) what is / or can be the real impact of the initiatives in terms of ecology/energy transition;
3. which contribution/effects can be expected on the long term to the quality of urban environment and social cohesion;
4. what is the emancipation potential for the individual participants and which groups can benefit most.
5. What is the impact of co-housing on the structure of the housing market, planning and building to embed this alternative besides individual ownership or (public) rental provision.

The 21st century is indeed showing a revival of community building and –living, and the question is now how to embed these initiatives in housing and planning systems.

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