

# **P4 Reflection**

November 2018

# 1 Personal background & thematic interest

My graduation project began in September 2017 as the finale of five years of full-time study and two years of full-time work on the journey to becoming an architect. On that journey, I have discovered that my true calling as an architect is to pursue progressive housing of a social nature with a particular interest in the benefits of sharing, which in the recent past has led me to:

- Graduate from my BA (University of Liverpool) by proposing a re-invention of the UK terraced housing typology by sharing a large collective internal courtyard rather than individual small walled yards
- Get a job at one of the UK's leading design firms (Mole Architects) and assist on the design of a pioneering project for one of the country's first new-build cohousing schemes in Cambridge, also looking at ideas for collective landscapes as well as collective rooms and including co-creation sessions with the resident/client group.

While the first year at TU Delft had enabled me to investigate different ways of thinking, as the last student design project that I would undertake I felt it necessary to return to my core professional concern. Furthermore, I felt this should make a logical progression from my previous experience and thereby perhaps lay the foundations for becoming an expert in the field of cohousing.

The major shortcoming that I felt both projects shared was that by adhering to the pre-defined patterns of streets of low-rise housing, there was a lack of conviction in maximising the advantages of space sharing<sup>1</sup>. In other words, I felt that an interesting design proposal would be for a single building which could incorporate all the functions of cohousing, enabling an even greater potential for collective spaces and a more potent condensation of social activity.

Thus, in my research proposal I set out to find an example of such a typology, understanding the role that the architect had taken in its development. Limiting my search to the European context, I discovered possible avenues of study mainly in relatively-prosperous Germanic-speaking countries such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Sweden. Of these examples, I chose to focus on Sweden – and in particular Stockholm – due to its particularly long and largely uninterrupted tradition of collective housing, spanning the entirety of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and all of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so far. Therefore, my research question was phrased as follows:

**What has been the contribution of the architect within the historical evolution of Swedish cohousing (*kollektivhus*)?**

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<sup>1</sup> Which is not to say that I feel continued proposals for conventional streets and typologies is not valuable, just that there is more that can be achieved beyond these constraints



**Figure 1:** BA3 graduation project for terraced housing (University of Liverpool, UK)



**Figure 2:** Cohousing around a common green for a group of people in Cambridge (Mole Architects, UK)

## 2 Research process, outcomes & implications for design

### 2.1 Field work

The research for the project involved a visit to Stockholm in December 2017 with field work encompassing case study visits and interviews with residents and protagonists of the kollektivhus movement.

My pre-selection of case studies had been limited to the information available online, which was largely restricted to the first generation of professionally-serviced kollektivhus<sup>2</sup> (1931-1970), and largely in Swedish language. Meeting Kerstin Karnekull – the head of the national Kollektivhus association – she was able to refer me to more recent examples, although adapting my plans at the last moment was far from ideal, and contact to a local source at an earlier stage would have been greatly beneficial.

Nonetheless, **it was revealing to visit a variety of schemes that adapted a set of basic principles**, and study how they had been made relevant to a multitude of contexts, **dealing with landscape and notions of defensible space** to varying degrees of success.

Given the time of year and location, the climate was punishing and hours of daylight limited, making the visit and photographic survey of so many precedents a challenging task. Removing gloves for even just a few seconds at a time became painful, and the operation of a touchscreen almost impossible!

Thankfully the interviews with residents and protagonists were conducted inside, and provided welcome respite from the conditions outside. Without any real idea of what to expect, I met some of the kindest, most inspiring and driven people I have ever met.

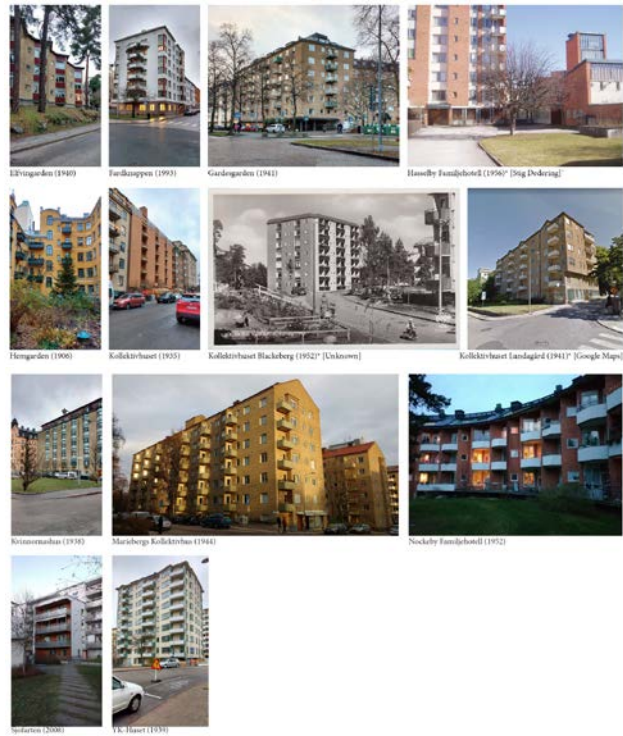
I met Stig Dederling at Hasselby Family Hotel, a member of the oldest kollektivhus community, in operation as a community with communal meals since 1955. Despite the end of professionalised collective services in 1976, a small but hardy group have continued the practice of cooking and eating communally in re-purposed spaces for the past 43 years. Speaking to him helped me to realise that while specific and efficient architectural design can enable in the short-term, **spatial generosity (in the right places) is necessary to allow for change in the long term.**

My interview with Karnekull imparted many nuggets of wisdom, but the one that stuck with me the most was her observation that of the second generation of kollektivhus, only the ones that had not involved the future residents in the design process had failed. In her words: **“You can’t build houses like this if you don’t build communities at the same time...”** As a result, it became clear that it was **imperative for me to include people in the design of my building.**

All in all, if I could conduct the field trip again, I would visit more contemporary examples, and make a greater effort to make contact with the architects of the buildings. I did email three architects for comment, but received only one response: to decline.

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<sup>2</sup> As opposed to second-generation of collectively-maintained kollektivhus (1971-present)



**Figure 3:** 13 visited examples of Stockholm kollektivhus



**Figure 4:** Interview of Gunilla Lundahl over afternoon tea at her apartment in Mariebergs Kollektivhus, Stockholm



**Figure 5:** Collective workshop at Fardknappen Kollektivhus, Stockholm

## 2 Research process, outcomes & implications for design

### 2.1 Analysis & historical account

To gain a deeper understanding of my case studies and pinpoint the principles behind them that could really inform the specific design of my building, I conducted a drawn analysis of three key examples. While I made a number of observations based on my evaluation of a number of criteria and scales, **my clearest output was to derive a set of organisational principles specific to kollektivhus.** These are:

1. Collective facilities are centralised and generally located on the ground floor.
2. The dining room in particular is always located close to the main entrance.
3. The kitchen and laundry are seen as important collaborative spaces and as such have prominent, connected, and visible locations.
4. Crucially, the threshold between dining room and kitchen always allows for connection.
5. Circulation systems have a variable level of connectedness which allows for hierarchy and clustering, but always have an identifiable main entrance.
6. Personal spaces are condensed to a minimum: bedroom, bathroom, living/dining/kitchen.

What gives these observations such weight is that they are **derived from design decisions made democratically with the participation of residents that have actually lived in these buildings over several decades**, constituting a strongly-defined and identifiable movement; namely the second generation of kollektivhus.

In addition to the drawn analysis, I also conducted an extensive written account and commentary touching on the much broader political, social and technological (amongst other) contexts of the movement. I was quite taken with Bernard Tschumi's notion of 'form following fiction', and I wrote the paper with this in mind, seeing each architect, resident, painter, thinker, builder and so on as a potential author in a collective narrative.

In retrospect the weaving along this theme proved a little difficult, although in the end I think **the main accomplishment of the written paper was to successfully trace the evolution of domestic beauty in Sweden throughout the century, describing the transition from an ideal of effortless serviced bourgeois elegance (a la *sprezzatura*<sup>3</sup>) to a more grounded ideal based on the ownership of domestic tasks and their hallmarks, placing priority on spaces once seen as functional and undesirable i.e. the kitchen and the laundry** (see p31 of the research paper for a more complete elaboration). In studying on such a broad basis, I understood how cohousing based on collective work had become desirable as the result of years of thinking, writing, painting, designing and class struggle – as opposed to a basic appreciation that cohousing might be desirable only because it offered a pragmatic solution to a practical problem.

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<sup>3</sup> The Italian term *sprezzatura* refers to the effortless elegance with which a swan appears to move as it glides across a lake or river, whilst webbed feet powerfully propel forwards, unseen under the water's surface.

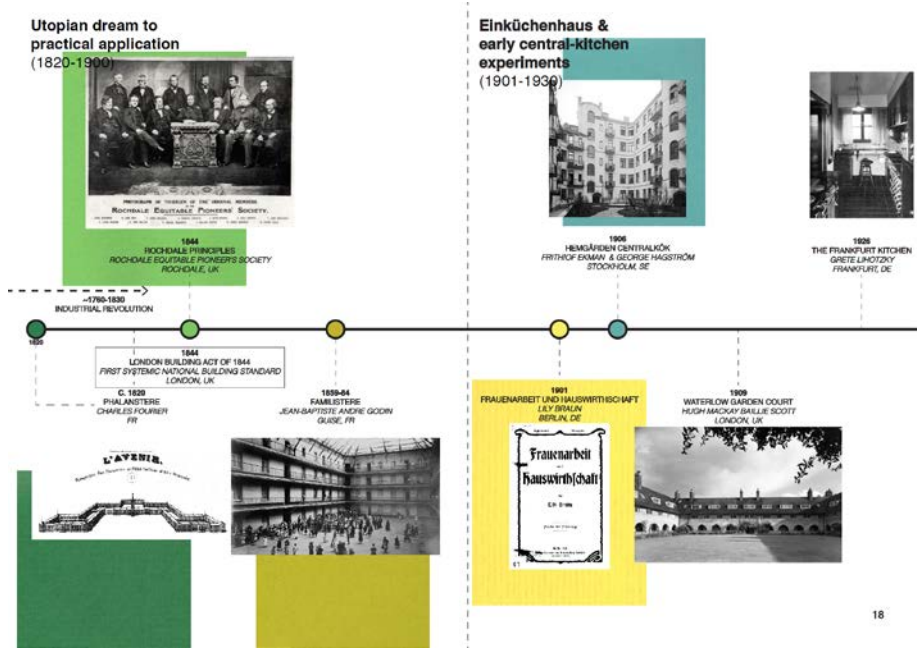


Figure 6: First half of a timeline for kollektivhus

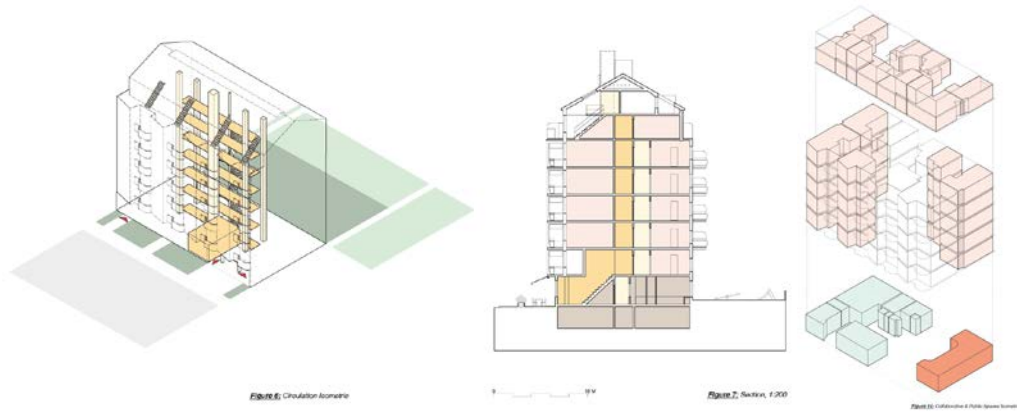


Figure 7: Typical analytical diagrams produced for one of the case studies: *Kollektivhuset* by Sven Markelius (1935)

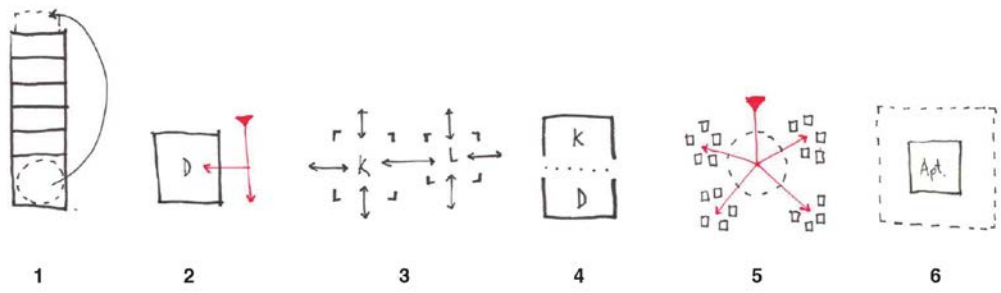


Figure 8: Set of diagrams illustrating the derived design principles

## 3 Design process

### 3.1 Workshops

As the basis of my design process, I conducted a series of workshops with a surrogate client group based in Leicester, UK – where my site is located (Soar Island).

Based around shared meals, the workshops were pre-planned with a high degree of structure, setting out desired outcomes, methods, and exercises with time constraints (**see codesign workshop booklet**). Nonetheless, improvisation was often necessary, making for slightly clunky transitions between exercises, or perhaps ungainly solutions to gaining the information that I needed.

In the end though, the basic desired outcomes were mostly met, giving me:

- General consensus that the kollektivhus typology could work in Leicester
- Collectively-agreed adaptations to make it work (**design principle adaptations**)
- Defined limits of what people were willing to share & a ranked list of desirable shared spaces (**a programme**)
- A tangible co-designed object (**a set of bowls**)
- An understanding of the groups characters and their daily lives (**a vision for everyday life in their collective house**)

We also produced a map of atmospheres based on a technique developed by Susanne Hofmann in her Berlin-based practice Baupiloten.

However, with just 3 workshops of 3 hours each there was a lot to fit in to each workshop, and the planned use of the atmospheres as a key design tool proved too challenging to incorporate. While promising, it remains a technique that I will have to return to with a future project.

Furthermore, my programming had not allowed for sufficient time between the workshops, making the planned sessional re-evaluation of my design progress a practical impossibility. Doing them again, I would allow a much greater amount of time both for the workshops themselves and for the periods between.

Despite the general success, there remained a feeling that a lot more could have been achieved if the structure had been slightly different, and more time had been allowed.

### 3.2 Design development

Leaving the workshops behind, I conducted a deeper analysis of the site through reviewing historical maps, extracting key points from the regional planning document and visiting the site multiple times. Using the products from the workshops as the basis for the next phase of the design, I went through an intensive period of model making and sketching. to work out an urban strategy for the site, followed by a democratic selection between building options by the group.

All things considered, my main criticism of this otherwise conventional element of the design approach was that it did not better integrate the potentially valuable evaluations of the surrogate client group.





## 4 Reflections

To begin with, it's worth mentioning that in graduating in Explore Lab - and therefore not relying on the pre-existing structures of conventional design studios – I have had much greater control over the entire process. While the freedom has sometimes been liberating, the associated increase in responsibility and expectation has also been terrifying: when something has gone wrong, there has often been nobody to blame except myself! And indeed the process of the project has been far from flawless, leaving plenty of room for improvement in future attempts:

Despite – or perhaps because of – these challenges, I feel that the entire process has been hugely valuable in helping me to further define certain values I find to be important in architecture, and therefore what position I want to take as an architect (**see conclusions of the research paper**). In short, I see my duty as an architect to enable the most positive qualities of society, doing this not as a genius working in isolation, but rather as one agent of change in a network of many: a *scenius*.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, I see my personal path towards fulfilling this responsibility as working within the field of housing, with a particular focus on typologies that encourage social activity and sharing. While my expertise has been UK based up until now, this research project has exponentially broadened my horizons, allowing me to see possibilities for action within my grasp that I could not have imagined otherwise.

In parallel with this research project I have been reading a book called *Why We Make Things and Why It Matters* by the master furniture maker Peter Korn, and I think he puts it best when he says:

“It is a given that, individually and collectively, we think our world into being. The question is: How do we choose to go about it? Do we passively assemble our narratives from a cultural smorgasbord? Or do we test the recipes of others in our own kitchens? Do we take responsibility for some small portion of the world as we create it? My experience is that...making the effort to think for myself has been the wellspring of a good life”

**Has the process been agonisingly difficult? Definitely. Has everything gone entirely to plan? Absolutely not. But knowing what I know now, would I not embark on the journey at all? Of course not.**

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<sup>4</sup> “I came up with this word “scenius” – and scenius is the intelligence of a whole... operation or group of people. And I think that’s a more useful way to think about culture, actually. I think that – let’s forget the idea of “genius” for a little while, let’s think about the whole ecology of ideas that give rise to good new thoughts and good new work.” *Brian Eno*