

Nederland kantelpunt

Darinka Czischke about the freedom to choose your way of living in collaborative housing

Oorschot, L.M.

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Figure 1. Darinka Czischke. Source: <https://co-lab-research.net/societal-impact>.

Nederland op een kantelpunt – Darinka Czischke about the freedom to choose your way of living in collaborative housing

Leo Oorschot, 24-09-2021

There have been a number of changes going on in recent years, the housing crisis is deepening, demographic changes are underway and the narrative among urban planners and public housing providers has changed.

For a number of years there has been a housing crisis in the housing market in the Netherlands. The reasons for this are different. On the one hand there is the political

powerlessness to solve this out of control housing crisis, on the other hand there was also the political will not to solve the problems and for years people relied blindly on solutions from the market. Whether the solution to the housing crisis will come about in the coming period is the question. One of the problems is the gap between the production of houses and the demand.

Already for a number of years, the traditional family unit is gradually fallen into decay as cornerstone of the human society. According to Statistics Netherlands, many people live alone or at most as a couple. Young people, divorced people, the elderly live in small apartments (if they have been able to get hold of them) next to each other. People complain about loneliness. The CBS dataset 'key figures for neighbourhoods and neighbourhoods 2021' shows a shocking picture. In the Netherlands, only 2.1 people are present per household. This household density is somewhat evenly distributed across the country. Furthermore, the average Dutch have 65m² living space available while in Germany and other parts of Europe this is just 45m². Many people in the Netherlands living alone or in couples. Individualization seems to have gained the upper hand and people literally live next to each other without knowing each other or even wanting to know each other. Garden fences become impregnable barriers. Towers are built with small units for one person in urban areas. However, 'living alone together' become more popular the last years. Many people looking for a home are seeking for more close links with neighbours.

This interview is about project together, collaborative housing and cohousing, what exactly does it mean, does it solve the housing crisis, is cohousing inclusive, is cohousing the successor of mixing-residents-narrative from the neighbourhood-unit-ideas of the past?

Key words: collaborative housing, cohousing, housing cooperation, bofaelleskab, intergenerational communities, social architecture, project together



Figure 2. Warmoestuin Rijswijk is housing cooperative where like-minded-people found a home around a garden. Picture: Leo Oorschot.

What is collaborative housing and what is cohousing? How far does that go? Is there a definition? Is it a residential building with individual apartments that shares a roof terrace, playground or work place like the Family House in Delft? Is it a residential community on an ideological basis where everything is shared?

‘Collaborative housing is not a particular type of housing but an umbrella term, it covers a wide variety of forms of collectively self-organized and self-managed housing projects. It is a concept and not a residential building type or a legal form such as a housing cooperation. There are, for example, many forms in collaborative housing. Every country labels their initiatives in their own way. For example there is: Community Land Trust (CLT), residents’ cooperatives and CPO, self-help and self-build initiatives, experimental communities, ecological housing communities like the Groene Mient in Den Haag, Central Wonen in the Netherlands from the seventieth’s or similar projects later, where housing associations rent out the residential buildings to cooperatives; there are also professional developers who organize the residential buildings and neighbourhoods for like-minded people; cohousing is just one form of collaborative housing.

Cohousing, on the other hand, is different and a narrower and more particular model of housing with a strong link between people. It refers to the Danish bofællesskab concept, such as Fristaden Christiania-bofællesskab in Copenhagen founded in 1970 by squatters. The initiators of these projects were critical of mainstream society and of the individual way of living with separated family houses. They adopted a communal way of life. Residents form an intentional community. Which puts emphasis on sharing common areas,

making decisions in non-hierarchical processes, living and interacting socially, and doing things together. In cohousing, residents have a kind of social contract and a strong participation role in the development process and management of their community. Sharing dinner on a weekly basis is, among others, common. They start with an architect to co-design their residential buildings or dwellings. Cohousing projects gave rise to a new architectural typology, where a social way of living was the starting point.

The word cohousing was actually coined by a Californian couple of architects, Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett. In the 1980s they visited the Danish examples of this new type of housing and translated *bofællesskab* into the English word cohousing. Hence, what we know today as cohousing around the world was inspired on European examples such as the Danish *bofællesskab*. They published books like: *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* (1988) and *Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities* (2011). The Muir Commons in Davis California was there first cohousing project in North America and was completed in 1991.'

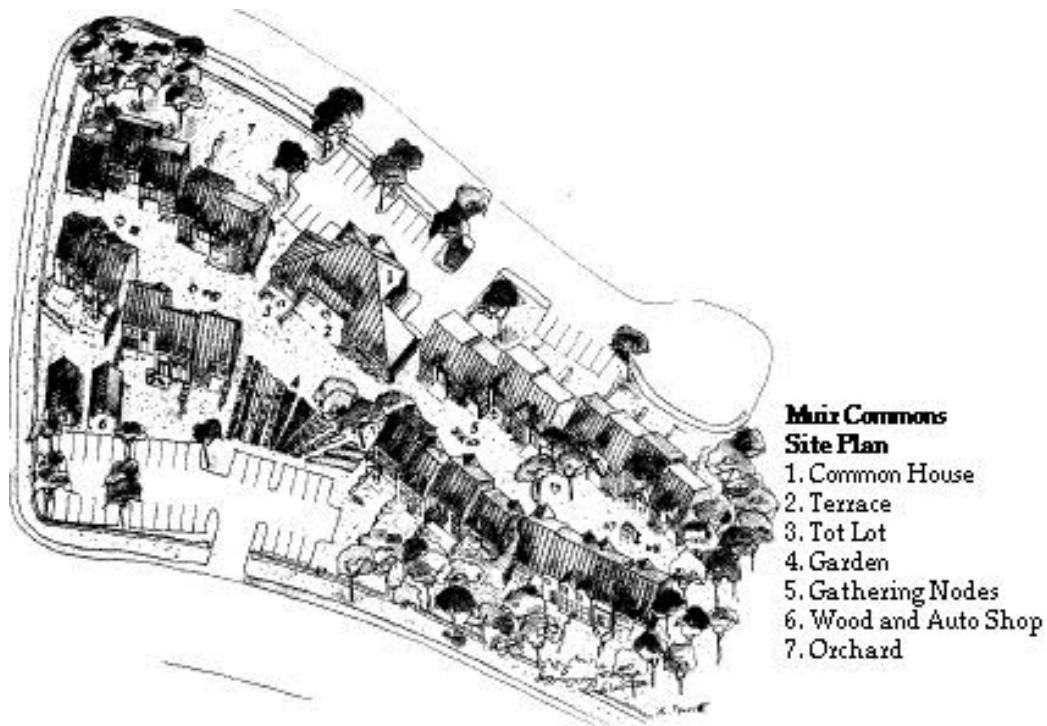


Figure 3. Muir Commons designed by McCamant & Durrett Architects. The Danish concept of *bofællesskab* was translated to cohousing by the architects. Source: *The Cohousing Company*

What is the aim of cohousing?

'The aim is to create a village context or intergenerational communities with people of different ages and different households to complement each other's needs and services and sharing and helping each other. In these housing projects there is more face-to-face-interaction between residents in contrast to the hierarchies and institutions that organize their lives. This model has been particularly popular in Northwest Europe and the US, where the concept has been adapted as a way of life also called intentional communities.'

For residents it is a free choice to live in such a community. Cohousing is not a particular type of housing but more of a way of living together. It could be a neighbourhood or a residential building or both but with the intention of a social architecture.

The English scholar Helen Jarvis defined in an article in 2015 this intentional communities with their social architecture as a living arrangement, which represents more than simply an alternative system of housing: the social dimensions reveal a setting and system that cultivates an intentional negotiated ethos of sharing. In her article, 'Towards a Deeper Understanding of the Social Architecture of Co-housing: Evidence From the UK, USA and Australia' (2015) Jarvis draws attention to the micro-social practices that self-organising resident groups engage in over the years, which are necessary to build a co-housing community.'



Figure 4. Warmoestuin Rijswijk, the private garden is the transition zone between the homes and the collective garden or common. Picture: Leo Oorschot.

What is the difference between cohousing and housing cooperatives? Is that the difference between an idea and a juridical structure? Or are there more differences?

'Cohousing is not a legal or tenure form, it is just a way of communal living. Sometimes cohousing has the legal form of a cooperative. But in a housing cooperative people can live in many different ways. For example, housing cooperatives in Nordic countries often take the shape of collectively-owned apartments with each household buying a share, which gives the right of occupancy of one of the units. In Denmark there is the andelsboliger system, where people buy a share in a residential building which is organised as a housing cooperative. Although this is a cooperative, people do not necessarily share much; it is

rather a legal form. In the 1990s, housing privatisation was stimulated due to the neoliberal policy turn in many of these Scandinavian countries, so laws were changed and inhabitants were able to capitalize on their housing situation by selling off their share or dwelling, especially in attractive urban neighbourhoods or regions. Ever since, new residents in these kind of cooperatives do not necessarily have an close relationship with the other residents.'

To what extent can cohousing be shared? Should ideas or religion or ethnic background be shared? Do additional amenities need to be shared such as car, scooters, workspace, kitchen diner, garden, extra guest room/shower?

'It varies from project to project. In every project, the group make agreements about the type and level of sharing. In the workshops to design these buildings the sharing is discussed and later formalized in an agreement. I visited many projects in the last six years. Usually, they have some basic rules. For example, like in the many Danish projects, they have a common kitchen and dining room. Cooking and eating together, at least once a week, is the foundation of the Danish cohousing model.'

Is sharing also, sharing the same religion, ethnic background or ideology? This stimulates segregation in the society. For example there is the cooperation of Chinese of Hindustan older people, they rent a building from housing associations, but only people from their own target group have access to the units. Or Dutch people with who formed a strong commune on ideological basis in some ecological villages. Or commercial projects such as the woonhotels in Den Haag were rich old people live together with all kind of amenities. When there is a unit available in a cohousing project usually like-minded-people were chosen by other inhabitants.

'There are projects where this is the case, sharing the same religion, ethnic background of ideology. However, this not really the norm; this depends on how each group organises their project. In cohousing there is always the free choice to choose it or leave it. Most Scandinavian cohousing projects have progressive values, are ecologically-oriented, are environmentalists and more recently, some groups started to adopt veganism as a norm in common dinners. But usually only in the common kitchen. As I said, there is a wide range of cohousing initiatives. They are free to do that. There the commercial projects such as woonhotels like Catsheuvel in Den Haag. Or the projects organised by the Chinese or Hindustan community to have their own houses for older people. I think the cohousing model lends itself to many different interpretations, many different ways to adapt it to the values of different groups of people who want to live in close contact with each other.'

Is there a definition of collaborative housing?

'Important elements that define collaborative housing include self-help, self-organising and self-management of the project. Increasingly, collaborative initiatives are organized by real estate developers where like-minded-people were brought together. Or sometimes like-minded-people asked an architect or real estate developer to help them with co-designing the project.'

We did a lot research in the working group ‘Collaborative Housing’ in the European Network of Housing Research ENHR on definitions. We discovered that many researchers are dealing with self-organising groups. We published in the Journal Housing Theory and Society articles about the conceptualisation of these different housing forms. In the articles ‘Collaborative Housing Research (1990–2017): A Systematic Review and Thematic Analysis of the Field’ (2018) and ‘Collaborative Housing in Europe: Conceptualizing the Field’ (2019) we discussed the definition of this phenomena. It could help us to identify the limits of these housing types.

One of the main issues is what are the boundaries of collaborative housing, what is collaborative housing and what it is not. The examples you mentioned about religious or ethnic communities are on the edge. Normally people have a free choice. No one could force you not to eat meat, for example.’



Figure 5. Warmoestuin Rijswijk, the collective orchard and kitchen garden where inhabitants are allowed to harvest fruits and vegetables. Picture: Leo Oorschot.

Does collaborative housing solve the housing crisis?

‘Many aspects of collaborative housing could play a role in helping to tackle the current housing crisis. Cooperative forms of housing can be a solution for middle income groups. For example, in Germany and Switzerland. In the Netherlands there is growing gap between social housing and privately-owned houses. The middle-income group has no chance now on the housing market. This can be a solution. However, this alone will. Not solve the housing crisis because this a political problem that goes beyond one type of housing. We need to fix the way the whole housing system operates.’

Is it better and more circular renovate large family homes for collaborative housing instead of building them new?

'That can be an interesting opportunity. It is better to renovate the existing housing stock. Instead of 'bouw bouw bouw', we have an enormous existing building stock that needs an energy efficient renovation. Many collaborative housing initiatives are dealing with that, e.g., groups of people buying an old farm, for example with the 'erfdelen' concept, or school and repurposing it into affordable housing.'

Are people forced to collaborative housing because of the housing crisis? For example migrant workers or students in university cities.

'Not in collaborative housing, but there are people forced to share. If they had the choice, some people would not share. Especially in cities with an expensive housing stock people are forced to live together in small apartments. Or cities such as London or Paris. But that is not collaborative housing, because that is something that you want to do. Many of us have shared a flat or a house with strangers when we are younger, for example. People do it, especially before the financial crisis, because we know it is a temporary situation as a student or a starter. But immigrant workers who are forced to live with ten others in a small apartment, is not collaborative housing.'

At the moment I am working on a book that deals with the meaning of collaboration and cooperation. Cooperation often takes the form of a legal form, for example farmers who work together and share machines or facilities. Cooperation in housing has an instrumental purpose, namely, self-provision. Collaboration, on the other hand, is based on a common vision shared by a group of people on the way they want to live. It has a deeper meaning and is longer lasting. This distinction is important when we talk about cooperative housing and collaborative housing.'

Is there a balance in people between the need for individuality in living on the one hand and the common on the other? Or does that differ per person or per culture?

'As explained earlier, in cohousing a degree of sharing is required. But in most collaborative housing and cohousing you have at least your own private space such as a bedroom and a bathroom. In some projects, bathrooms are shared. In most projects, you have your own little kitchen and a small living room. In fact in most countries, I visited projects where inhabitants have their own private unit, but beyond that they share all kinds of amenities. They have the option to share and sometimes not to share if you feel like that. The common space is very important for the community life.'

If you have a cohousing project, and you want to enter you private unit with guests then there are two possibilities. Firstly you enter the common and went to your private unit or secondly you enter directly the zone with the private units and you can chose to attend the common with your guest. Social control on guests.

'The projects I visited have usually an entrance hall with a circulation system leading directly to the units and one can chose to visit the common areas, which are designed separately. There are two aspects in your questions. One is to describe the collaborative

housing projects, and the second is the value judgement about them, e.g. on whether the level of privacy vs. communality is 'right' or 'wrong'. As a scientist, I try not to judge on my values but I try to describe what I see. The collaborative and cohousing communities I visited have usually a clear notion of privacy and sociability. The communes you describe seem to be very controlling of the residents behaviour and ideas, and tending to homogenise people. Inhabitants there are forced to live in the same way with the same values. These communities are in my opinion outside the boundaries of the concepts of collaborative housing or cohousing.'

Is cohousing include or exclude people? In cohousing projects in Den Haag such as De Groene Mient or de Waterspin, like-minded idealists with a macrobiotic way of life seek each other out. In the co-housing project on Hobbemanplein, only Chinese elderly people live. There is also a co-housing project for exclusively Hindu elderly people. What are precisely the boundaries of collaborative or cohousing.

'We have many discussions in our working group about these boundaries. It is important, in my view, to define more precisely the object of our study. You have to be very clear. There are boundaries on sharing, and on what values bind these groups together. People could have some instrumental motivations to get the project realized and others more idealistic motivations, for example sustainability.'

Some researchers in the working group have a broader notion what forms of housing should be included within the umbrella of collaborative housing, but I am amongst the researchers who said no, because it is important to look to what kind of cooperation is meaningful.'

Why would a person want to give up his or her individuality and to live together? Many people have paid off their large home and mortgage. Why would a person want to give up his or her like-minded group to live with others?

'Because it is the own free choice of people to live together. Each of us have their own expectations on how we want to live in relation to others. Collaborative housing is not for everyone. This way of living is a choice. At the moment people have not much choice in their way of living. Housing is organised for them by institutions and all kind of entrepreneurs. In many European countries it is still very difficult the realise shared areas or shared amenities as part of a housing project.'

This is my opinion, people should have the freedom to choose their way of living, and at the moment this is very difficult in parts of Europe. In the Netherlands it is very difficult to realise these collaborative or cohousing projects for all kinds of reasons, such as legal, financial, etc. Awareness about collaborative housing is important in the Netherlands to change and give people perspective of how they want to live in the future.'

There is the discussion in Dutch cities, housing association and tenant organisation about collaborative housing and housing cooperation's because the said that this leads to segregation in the city and society.

'I do not recognize this. Many tenants in Amsterdam want to have the option to form housing cooperatives. The discussion is different, there are tenant groups of housing associations who want to organize themselves as a cooperative association, to have more autonomy in how they want to live. And who are the tenants in the tenant organisations to say how other tenants supposed to live? Anyway, they are all already in social houses so there is no reason for social segregation. Only some of the tenants want to live in a group, what's wrong with that?

There are ways in which these tensions have been resolved in other countries. For example, in Austria, where people who are looking for a home are on a waiting list managed by the local housing agency. If there is a unit available in a cohousing project within the social housing sector, for instance, they have an interview to see if the person agrees with the agreements made by the cohousing group. The important thing is that the tenants want to live in such a community with its rules. If people don't want to live according the agreement, then they are free not to choose it. Important always is the freedom in the choice in the way you live, inside the system.'



Figure 6. Warmoestuin Rijswijk. Picture: Leo Oorschot.