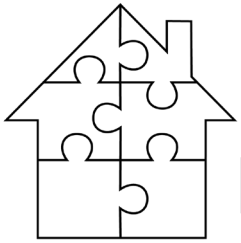

Exploring “Home”

Design for cohabitating local and refugee students

Danique Hoekstra
MSc Design for Interaction
Delft University of Technology

Master thesis
Msc Design for Interaction
Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering
Delft University of Technology

In collaboration with Stichting Herontwikkeling tot Studentenhuisvesting Delft

Supervisory Team
Chair: S. Celik, TU Delft
Mentor: Ir. T. van Arkel, TU Delft
Company mentor: Fleur Daalderop, SHS Delft

Summary

In recent years, mixed co-housing has been proposed as a solution to address two interconnected challenges in The Netherlands: providing housing for young starters, students and statusholders—refugees granted a residency permit—and fostering the integration of newcomers. Despite its potential, such projects often encounter significant obstacles, including navigating cultural differences, managing integration, and addressing the psychological needs of residents. These challenges test not only the tenants but also the organizations that support these initiatives.

This research and design project was set out to explore how Dutch students and newcomers could live together in ways that enable both groups to thrive. The aim was to foster mutual understanding and create an equitable exchange, using a combination of social and systemic design methods. A literature review on design, integration and mixed co-housing uncovered several key insights, which formed the lens in which subsequent research was viewed and developed. Integration, for example, is not a one-way process: while newcomers are expected to adapt to the local culture, it is equally important for locals to adapt to their new neighbors. Social capital, widely recognized in literature as a critical element in integration, is often overlooked in Dutch policies that prioritize measurable, tangible outcomes. Moreover, while mixed co-housing has the potential to create social connections, the reality often falls short of its idealistic vision, with barriers such as limited tenant autonomy hindering cohesion. Furthermore, tensions - rather than being obstacles - were put forth as valuable entry points for design.

Next, contextual research was conducted to delve into the experiences of mixed co-housing tenants and the perspectives of key stakeholders. Field interviews with housing organizations and tenants revealed a recurring tension: tenants have desire for greater autonomy while simultaneously having a desire for more support. This tension became the focal point for further exploration, prompting the design of a participatory session to uncover opportunities for intervention. Based on the analysis of this session, communication emerged as a critical area for improvement. A closer examination of previous research through the lens of communication further guided the development of an effective intervention.

Finally, through iterative development guided by, pilot testing, and evaluation, the final concept —Workshop Exploring ‘Home’— was designed. This workshop provides a platform for housemates to build shared understanding between groups and individuals, by exploring and communicating expectations around living together.

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Terminology

COA	Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers or "Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers"
Refugee	A person who has fled their countries to escape conflict, violence, or persecution and have sought safety in another country.
Asylum seeker	A refugee who has reached the central reception centre in Ter Apel and has applied for asylum [within the context of The Netherlands] .
Status holder (statushouder)	An asylum seeker who has been granted a permit to live in The Netherlands for 5 years, during which time they must undergo the Civic Integration program in order to become Dutch citizens.
Newcomer	This term can be used to denote any person who has recently arrived in a country (from asylum seekers to other migrants), but for this project, is mostly used interchangeably for "status holder." "Newcomer" is preferred over "status holder" as it has a more humane perspective, focusing on the individual rather than their legal status.
Mixed co-housing	This term generally refers to the shared housing of multiple groups of people, such as co-housing of "regular tenants" and individuals with social care needs. While broadly applicable, this report uses the term specifically to denote the shared living arrangement of newcomers and locals

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

This section provides the foundational introductory basis for the project, setting the stage for the chapters that follow. It begins with the background information, offering context to understand the origins and significance of the study. The initial problem statement is outlined, highlighting the key challenges and motivations driving the project. This is followed by the initial and final assignment, which shows the evolution of the project's scope. The client is also introduced, along with their most recent project - which serves as the central context of the project. Finally, the methodology is detailed, explaining the general approach that was taken during the project.

Background

Worldwide, millions of people flee their homes due to war, armed conflicts, famine and human rights violations. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an estimated 117.2 million people will be forcibly displaced or stateless worldwide in 2023 (UNHCR, 2023). The number of refugees worldwide escalated in 2015, largely due to unrest and wars in countries such as Libya, Syria and Iraq, and again in 2022 due to the war in Ukraine. Many of these people fled to countries in Europe seeking safety and protection, risking an uncertain and often dangerous journey. After having braved this stressful experience and once having arrived in this new place, many refugees face a plethora of new obstacles. Besides the navigation of an unfamiliar asylum procedure, along with the challenges this brings with it, people are forced to live in overcrowded shelters or settle in urban areas where they face challenges such as inadequate housing, limited access to healthcare and education, and discrimination (Amnesty International).

The housing crisis is another global issue that has become increasingly acute in recent years. In many parts of the world, there is a shortage of suitable housing to accommodate its demand (Coupe, 2021). This has led to skyrocketing housing costs, making it difficult for people to afford safe and secure housing. This has resulted in homelessness, overcrowding and substandard living conditions.

Despite the Netherlands being one of the most prosperous countries in the world (Legatum Prosperity Index, 2023), its housing market has made it difficult for many residents to find suitable housing. The high cost of housing and long waiting lists for social housing has made it difficult for low-income individuals such as students and starters to find affordable housing (NOS, 2020). Besides this, an increasing number of employed people are homeless, living between accommodations, on couches of friends and relatives or other make-shift accommodations (NOS, 2023). The challenges faced by these people in finding housing also apply to the refugees that come to the Netherlands to seek safe housing. Despite efforts by the government and NGOs to provide assistance, many refugees are left in limbo, unable to secure permanent housing and forced to rely on temporary accommodations.

Stichting Herontwikkeling tot Studentenhuisvesting (SHS) Delft is an organisation that renovates vacant buildings into temporary student housing, addressing the housing crisis among students that is currently prevalent in The Netherlands. They have a new development on the Polakweg in Rijswijk, consisting of 3 adjacent buildings with 300+ rooms. After having successful projects in Delft housing students, here they wish to create housing for not only Dutch students, as they have done in the past, but also refugees who have gained a living permit in the Netherlands (known as “statushouders” or status holders). Through the co-housing of these two groups, SHS Delft aims to address both the housing crisis as well as the refugee crisis with their new project in Rijswijk.

SHS Delft has formulated a profile for the candidates with a refugee background, which includes: students - now, or to be within one year - between the ages of 18 and 28, and basic Dutch language proficiency, among other requirements. The difference in background and lifestyle between the Dutch students and the newcomers can create tensions as well as, I believe, opportunities.

Problem statement

Within the building complexes in Rijswijk, SHS Delft would like to create a cooperative living situation with Dutch students and the newcomers. Initially, the organisation aimed for a situation in which “the Dutch students help the newcomers integrate” with Dutch society. When worded as such, this is framed as a rather one-sided exchange. The Dutch students offer help, and the newcomers receive. It overlooks the fact that the newcomers also have value to offer. Therefore my research work proposes like to reframe this and aim for an equitable exchange.

Nevertheless, these two groups can potentially clash with respect to culture, values, norms and lifestyles. In addition to this, it’s understandable that newcomers may hold trauma - either from war experiences in their country of origin, or their journey to Europe (such as the appalling conditions in which refugees end up in mass camps Libya or the boat trip across the Mediterranean) or even from the stressful asylum seeking experience within the Netherlands. The other prospective residents within the building will need to be prepared to willingly deal with this.

Similar housing projects have received mixed coverage in the media. Stek Oost is a project in Amsterdam with 50% starters and 50% newcomers which was negatively covered in Dutch news in 2022 due to complaints of nuisance and unsafe situations including sexual intimidation and property damage [AT5]. SHS Delft has found in their own research that a way to prevent these problems and to increase livability is to have a lower percentage of newcomers to students, which is why they have chosen to place two to four newcomers per living group of roughly 10 to 12 people. However, this situation could create a power dynamic that favours the Dutch students and may “other” the newcomer. Therefore, I wish to explore living situations in which the power dynamic is as equal as possible in order to support understanding between these two groups.

Initial assignment

The initial assignment was stated as follows:

“Using a combination of design research methods, from social design and systemic design - I aim to explore how Dutch students and newcomers can live together in a way in which both groups can thrive. How can we best create an understanding and equitable exchange between the students and the newcomers?

Since a systemic approach is aimed for, I believe the final result will not necessarily be a “solution” - but more likely a probe to the system. To further pre-define what this probe w no ill be would not be advantageous to the project, I believe, because it would limit the design freedom and therefore potentially the impact on the system. The result can range in abstraction - from interventions on an interaction-level to interventions on a higher, more abstract level - meaning the product can be anything from a physical object to a game to a service or legislation. It could perhaps even be a combination of these, as long as it has been deduced from my research.”

Client & context

SHS Delft

The project was done in collaboration with Stichting Herontwikkeling tot Studentenhuisvesting (SHS) Delft. This is a Delft-based foundation that renovates vacant buildings into temporary student housing. Since they are a non-profit organisation consisting of roughly 5 students, they are able to offer property owners more attractive alternatives to vacancy, than other development companies. For vacant buildings in which renovations have had little chance of being realised, renovations become a lot more viable, due to the foundation's temporary and low-cost proposals. In this way, they have situated themselves as a solution at the intersection of two issues: vacancy in real estate and the high demand for (affordable) student housing.

Since the beginning of 2011 until writing, SHS Delft has completed the renovations of three vacant buildings to student accommodation, which each account for between 110 and 150 rooms. These temporary renovations are made possible by the Dutch spatial planning regulation called the 'Kruimelregeling', which allows for specific deviations from the established zoning plan.

One of the organisation's goals is to connect various groups of people through co-housing. A good example of this is Abtswoude Bloeit, a joint initiative of SHS Delft together with an elderly care organisation and another care organisation directed towards the care of other vulnerable people, such as the homeless and people who cannot live independently due to psychiatric or social problems. In this building, various demographics live under the same roof, including Ukrainian refugees since recently. The building also houses the Woonkamer van de Wijk (EN: "Neighbourhood Living Room") - a space where residents and neighbours can come together through casual coffees or the regular activities organised there.

Figure 1: Google Street View still of Polakweg 20/23

Polakweg, Rijkswijk

The context that this project designs for is SHS Delft's new development in Rijswijk on the Polakweg. It consists of 3 adjacent buildings with a total of 357 accommodations - including 343 shared living accommodations, 6 apartments and 8 studios. After having successful projects in Delft housing students, here they wish to create housing for not only Dutch students, as they have done in the past, but also refugees who have gained a living permit in the Netherlands. In this way, SHS Delft positions themselves in the intersection not only of real estate vacancy and the housing shortage, but also of an additional dimension - namely the housing and integration of newcomers with a refugee background (Figure 2).

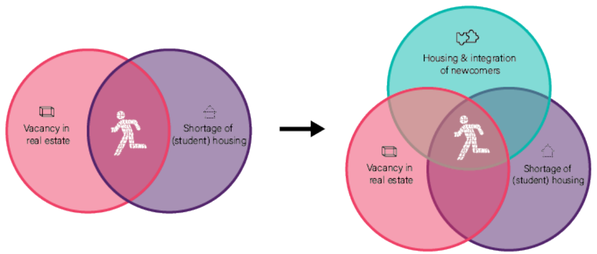

Figure 2: Positioning SHS before and after Polakweg

Project properties & stakeholders

The development is located on Polakweg, a street in the Plaspoelpolder, a business area in Rijswijk with a high vacancy rate. Through their own initiative and via their connections at the Municipality of Rijswijk, SHS Delft came into contact with the owners of the three buildings on Polakweg, ordered from south to north: Polakweg 13/Volmerlaan 20, Polakweg 14-15 and Polakweg 20-23.

PW 13/VL 20
Polakweg 13/Volmerlaan 20 is a building from 1979 with a living area of 4,204 m². The former office building has a parking deck and semi-submerged parking space at the rear. The building is owned by Berkley Rijswijk B.V., and Rosewood Investment Group is responsible for the transformation on behalf of Berkley Rijswijk.

PW 14/15
Polakweg 14/15 is a building from 1961 with an area of 3,546 m². The building is characterised by the gate in the middle of the building, which leads to the parking lot at the rear of the building. The owner and investor of the building is Swanenberg Vastgoed, which is a part of the Swanenberg IJzer Groep, which is located in Schaijk and owns various properties in the Netherlands and Germany.

PW 20/23
Polakweg 20/23 dates from 1980 and has an area of 4,220 m². The building consists of two parts: a high-rise, which has six floors, and a low-rise of 2 floors. Polakweg Beheer B.V. bought the building a decade ago and now has the ambition to renovate it. In the high-rise of this building is where the newcomers will be placed.

Figure 3 presents an organogram illustrating the key parties involved in the SHS and Polakweg project, along with their network of relationships. Here, technical management pertains to the oversight and maintenance of facilities. Social management entails the oversight of residents, organizing social activities to foster social capital and supporting newcomers and local residents with integration into society. The contractors are responsible for the renovation of the office buildings into housing.

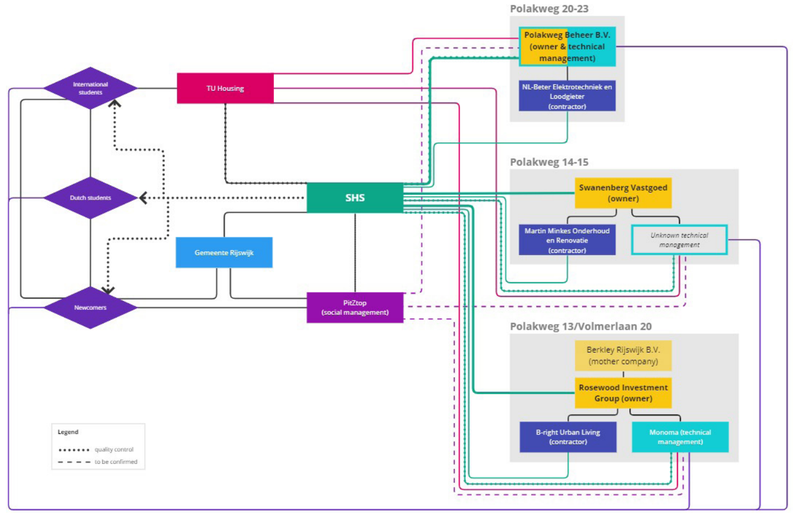

Figure 3: SHS Organogram: relevant parties to Polakweg as of the start of the project

Together with the three building owners, SHS Delft and the Municipality of Rijswijk, a vision for the street was developed. The vision included the creation of shared student rooms for Dutch and international students, as well as newcomers that are (or will soon start) studying. The ground floors of the buildings will house various functions that enhance the living/working area, including: small-scale catering establishments, flexible workplaces for students, common areas for students, and spaces for offices and small startups. Besides the functions inside of the building, the exterior space is also taken into consideration - with regards to making the surrounding area pleasant and livable.

The project poses new challenges for the foundation, including the renovation of an office building instead of care buildings, a new municipality, handling multiple owners and the largest project to date.

Figure 4: Envisioned target groups and space functions of the three Polakweg buildings

Methodology

A mixed approach

The process is divided into five main steps: Introduction, Forming a Lens, Listening to Stories, Envisioning & Creating, and Evaluation & Reflection. While rooted in a human-centered design approach, it also draws from social design and systemic design perspectives, recognizing that the context of this project—fostering thriving co-habitation between newcomers and Dutch students in mixed co-housing—is inherently complex (Snowden & Boone, 2007). This complexity arises from the large number of interconnected agents and factors that influence each other, meaning there is no straightforward, linear relationship between causes and outcomes. Consequently, achieving the goal of thriving co-habitation requires more than a single, one-size-fits-all solution.

The process emphasizes understanding diverse experiences, identifying shared values and tensions within this context, in order to design an intervention that creates opportunities for improvement. Together, these steps form a process that is both empathetic and dynamic. An overview of the steps and their descriptions follows:

1 | Introduction
This step focuses on laying the foundation for the project by defining its scope and objectives. Initial information is gathered from relevant parties, including key stakeholders, to understand their needs and expectations. Based on this input, an assignment brief is created to guide the project and ensure alignment among all involved.

2 | Forming a lens
A literature review is conducted to explore the broader context of the project, including existing theories, frameworks, and case studies. This helps in identifying key concepts and patterns relevant to the challenge. The insights gained are form the “lens” that shapes how the context and its complexities are analyzed moving forward.

3 | Listening to stories
This step involves engaging directly with stakeholders to capture their perspectives and lived experiences. Using the lens developed earlier, methods like interviews with tenants, conversations with dwelling organisations, and participatory sessions are employed to uncover values, tensions, and opportunities for intervention. This step provides a nuanced, deeper understanding of the context from multiple viewpoints.

4 | Envisioning & Creating
Based on the values, tensions, and opportunities identified, the focus shifts to synthesis: envisioning desired outcomes and designing interventions. Prototypes or interventions are developed to address specific needs and foster positive change. Interaction Vision is used to define meaningful, desired interactions and inform design decisions.

5 | Evaluation & Reflection
Finally, both the proposed final intervention and the process are assessed to determine their effectiveness and impact. This includes gathering feedback from stakeholders and reflecting on the process to identify areas for improvement. The insights from this step are used to refine the solutions and inform future iterations or similar projects.

Cultural & positional sensitivity

Due to the nature of the topic, it is imperative to adopt a (culturally) sensitive and inclusive approach throughout the entirety of the project. It is crucial to learn and try to comprehend the perspectives and values of the stakeholders involved. Besides this, it is essential for me, in my capacity as a designer, to remain introspective about my positionality within this context, acknowledging that my perceptions are invariably influenced by my own frame of reference as a privileged, cis-gendered, able-bodied BIPOC woman.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the social structures, which including norms and beliefs, the stakeholders involved are invisible to those who have internalised them - and need careful reflection to be (partially) uncovered (Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2021).

PART 2: FORMING A LENS

This section describes the theoretical underpinnings of the project, divided in three chapters: Designing with Tensions, Understanding Asylum & Integration and Understanding Mixed Cohabitation. The insights form the “lens” with which the context was viewed in the rest of the project.

Designing with Tensions

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundations that shaped the project's design perspective. It begins by discussing the evolving role of design in a complex world and the subsequent developments of social and systemic design. It then introduces the concept of tension as a meaningful and productive starting point for design.

Design in a complex world

In an era defined by globalization, we live in an increasingly complex and dynamic world. The challenges we face today—from climate change and public health crises to economic inequality and digital transformation—are deeply interconnected and can no longer be truly understood without considering the broader sociotechnical systems that underpin them (Tromp & Hekkert, 2019).

Over the past decade, design scholars have increasingly recognized this complexity of the context in design operates. Traditionally, design has been understood as a discipline focused on crafting discrete products or services. However, this perspective has and continues to shift. More recent design paradigms increasingly view design as an "engine for wider societal transformations" and a "catalyst for change" (van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2022).

This shift reflects a response to a changing world, which calls for approaches that move beyond isolated interventions and engage with the complex nature of contemporary problems.

Like most schools of thought, traditional design practice has been critiqued for decades. Victor Papanek, in his seminal work Design for the Real World (1971), famously argued that "There are few professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them." He warned of the field's complicity in perpetuating commercialism, at the expense of addressing humanity's "true needs." Papanek's work foreshadowed the current emphasis on socially responsible and systems-oriented design. More recently, Tromp and Hekkert (2019) concurred, stating that "in designing our man-made world, we have designed our problems too," underscoring the unintended consequences of design practices.

These critiques highlight the need for a more reflective and systemic approach to design, one that acknowledges and embraces the complexities of the modern world. Social design and systemic design represent two significant yet distinct approaches which have emerged within the broader field of design, both of which aim to address complex societal challenges but through different lenses and methodologies. By understanding their complementary principles and goals, a more comprehensive perspective on socially impactful design can emerge.

Social design: addressing societal needs

Social design is a development in the field of design which has been gaining momentum in the past two decades, although some of its roots trace back several decades, with Papanek often regarded as one of its key pioneers (Chen et al, 2016; Tromp & Hekkert, 2019). As outlined by Tromp and Hekkert (2019), social design can be characterized by three core approaches:

1. Improving the conditions of the underrepresented
This approach adapts traditional user-centered design methodologies to address socially significant issues. Its goal is to create products, services, and systems that respond to the needs of disadvantaged groups within society. The underlying principle is that by prioritizing and improving the circumstances of marginalized individuals, society as a whole can benefit.

2. Enhancing public sector performancte
In this approach, efforts are explicitly directed towards helping organisations concerned with societal objectives to rethink their challenges and adopt more human-centered practices. The aim of this approach is to drive transformative change within the political core of society by fostering a working culture that better aligns with and fulfills societal goals. This approach is seen as being more stakeholder-centered than strictly human-centered.

3. Building social capital
This approach focuses on fostering well-being and resilience of local communities when faced with social and environmental challenges. Designers collaborate with communities rather than for them, employing participatory design methods. The aim is to build social capital by reimagining how people interact with one another and engage with their local environment.

Systemic design: navigating complexity

Systemic design is another school of thought that originated as a response to the increasing complexity of modern issues. It integrates principles from systems thinking and design thinking, and offers a powerful approach to understanding and addressing complex problems. The methodology emphasizes the importance of analyzing the relationships between elements within a system, as well as the emergent behaviors that arise from these interactions. It encourages designers to identify leverage points, areas where targeted interventions can lead to significant and sustainable change. (Jones & Van Ael, 2022).

Van der Bijl-Brouwer and Malcolm (2020) outline five principles that are particularly relevant to contemporary systemic design practice:

1. Opening up and acknowledging interrelatedness:
Besides recognition of complexity of the problem, explicit problem framing where the perspective chosen to take on the problem is actively considered.

2. Developing empathy with the system:
Exploring the problem situation through stakeholder perspectives, with a focus on relationships between stakeholders.

3. Strengthening human relationships:
Enabling learning and creativity by fostering meaningful connections between people.

4. Influencing mental models to enable:
Addressing deeply ingrained ways of thinking to facilitate systemic transformation.

5. Adopting an evolutionary design approach:
Taking multiple small steps to shift the problem situations in a desired direction, and diverging not only in ideation but continually during prototyping, varying the problem framing.

Bridging social and systemic design

While social design and systemic design have distinct origins and methodologies, they share a commitment to addressing societal challenges. Social design's focus on marginalized groups, public sector transformation, and community well-being aligns with systemic design's principles of interrelatedness, empathy, and iterative change. Both approaches emphasize the importance of collaboration, whether through participatory methods in social design or through stakeholder engagement and relationship-building in systemic design.

Moreover, systemic design's emphasis on understanding systems and their leverage points can provide valuable frameworks for scaling the impact of social design initiatives. Conversely, social design's grounded, community-focused strategies can serve as practical applications within broader systemic interventions. Together, these approaches can offer designers a rich toolkit for addressing the complex, interconnected challenges of today's world, fostering both localized and systemic transformations.

Tension as a starting point in design

Design research and practice have traditionally focused on addressing user needs as a foundational starting point. However, an emerging body of work highlights the value of conflict—and related concepts such as dilemmas and tensions—as a productive basis for design (Ozkaramanli, 2021). This perspective emphasizes that conflicts can uncover deeper insights and drive more transformative outcomes in the design process.

Dilemma-Driven Design
Ozkaramanli et al. (2017) introduce the concept of "dilemma-driven design," which positions personal dilemmas as a starting point for user-centered design. This approach recognizes that people face internal tensions when navigating conflicting personal goals, values, or desires. By identifying and addressing these dilemmas, designers can create solutions that resonate more deeply with users' lived experiences. Ozkaramali et al (2016) further show the productive potential of dilemma's by presenting 3 design opportunities for addressing concern conflicts: resolving (conflicting concerns are simultaneously fulfilled), moderating (one concern is prioritized over the other) and triggering (drawing attention of the concerns of the dilemma, creating awareness without necessarily fulfilling any of the concerns).

Vision in Product Design (ViP)
The Vision in Product Design (ViP) framework (Hekkert & van Dijk, 2011) emphasizes the importance of analyzing contextual data to surface conflicts that can serve as starting points for formulating a vision. These conflicts—whether between stakeholders, values, or expectations—are viewed as valuable opportunities to drive innovation and shape the direction of design projects.

Social Implication Design
Building on the ViP framework, Tromp and Hekkert's Social Implication Design (2014) conceptualizes conflicts between individual and societal goals as social dilemmas. By examining these dilemmas, this approach offers a lens for studying the broader social implications of design interventions, particularly in the context of behavior change. It highlights how addressing such conflicts can lead to designs that balance personal and collective interests.

Systemic Design
The productive potential of conflicts is also evident in systemic design, where complexity, ambiguity, and value conflicts are inherent to the systems being addressed. Systemic design leverages these conflicts to explore the interconnections between elements within a system, fostering solutions that are more holistic and adaptable to dynamic

contexts. (Van der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020)

These approaches demonstrate that conflicts, dilemmas, and tensions are not obstacles to be avoided but rather opportunities to uncover deeper insights and drive meaningful design solutions. By embracing these elements as starting points, designers have the potential to create more nuanced, impactful, and socially

Understanding Asylum & Integration

This chapter explores asylum and integration in the Netherlands. It begins by outlining the journey of a newcomer in Dutch society, followed by an introduction to integration theory. Subsequently, this theoretical framework is compared with the country's policies and practices.

Journey of a newcomer

Needless to say, newcomers - or "statushouders" in the official Dutch governmental term - have gone through a lot. Receiving a residence permit entitling them to stay in the Netherlands, marks the end of an uncertain asylum seeking process, which has likely already taken years. However, the journey doesn't end there. Receiving this residence permit also marks the start of a new chapter, and along with its new hurdles of bureaucracy and integration.

The following section details the journey concerning housing and civic integration which a person undergoes once they receive an asylum residence permit in The Netherlands.

Housing process

According to the Dutch government, from the moment refugees have been granted a residence permit in the Netherlands, they go from being "asylum seekers" to being "status holders" (Rijksoverheid). From this point, they are officially part of Dutch society and have the same rights and duties as any other Dutch resident. One of these rights is access to living accomodation.

Step 1: COA links them to a municipality
The Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (also referred to as COA) connects status holders to municipalities within 2 weeks of them receiving the residential permit, after which the municipalities are responsible for offering suitable housing. The COA collects the newcomer's information through interviews and chooses the municipality with the best chance of their integration, based on factors such as their country of origin, language, educational level, work experience and plans for the future. Status holders may not choose the municipality in which they will live, but may under special circumstances give a preference if there is a good reasoning behind this.

Taakstelling
Municipalities are assigned quotas of status holders for whom they need to provide housing every six months, the national government determines this amount in the "Taakstelling voor Huisvesting Vergunninghouders". The distribution across municipalities is determined by the population size of the municipality: larger municipalities must take on more status holders than smaller municipalities.

Step 2: Waiting... while municipality looks for a home
Once the newcomers are connected to a municipality, municipalities then have 10 weeks to find them an accommodation - although currently this takes months on average because of the current housing shortage (RefugeeHelp). In the meantime, newcomers can stay in the COA's asylum reception centre and may start their civic integration, which is covered in the next section.

Municipalities determine what kind of housing they offer - for instance an independent rental home or a shared home with other people. Shared homes are usually for young newcomers who are alone in the Netherlands without a family, or whose family is not yet in the Netherlands after having applied for family reunification. In any case, the accommodation is social housing - cheaper homes that are affordable for people with lower incomes. Alternatively, newcomers may also look for accommodation themselves - however, this is a challenging route for status holders without roots in the Netherlands.

Step 3: Municipality offers a home! And newcomers must accept
When the municipality finds a home, newcomers receive a letter indicating the practicalities of rent. It is important to note that the municipality offers newcomers only one home - they cannot choose between homes and if they refuse the accommodation, they will not be offered a new one. For this project, we assume that the newcomers have accepted the social housing.

After signing the rental agreement, newcomers have 2 weeks to move into their new home. In this phase, they must make quite some arrangements - such as registering in the Dutch population register (BRP) of their municipality and signing the additional contracts for their new home, letting the COA know they are leaving the reception centre, as well as, if needed, applying for financial aid and applying for a loan for furnishings. After these arrangements have been made, they can officially reside in their new home.

Civic integration program

Status holders between the ages of 18 and 67 years are required to learn the Dutch language and get to know Dutch society - this is called "inburgering" or civic integration. Newcomers receive a letter inviting them to start their civic integration procedure within 8 weeks of receiving their asylum residence permit.

A New Civic Integration Act

The Netherlands has two civic integration systems - one that has applied for newcomers from 2013 until February 2022, and another that applies from February 2022 onward (Government of the Netherlands). This new system is a result of the New Civic Integration Act of 2021, which had the aim for participants of the civic integration program "to be able to participate and find work in the Netherlands as quickly as possible". The most important changes were as follows:

Personalisation: Civic integration is now more tailored to the needs of the person, with three different possible learning paths
A shift in responsibility: The municipality will now guide newcomers in their integration, as opposed to the newcomer having to arrange most things themselves
Subsidisation: The national government pays for the classes of asylum status holders
Focus on language and participation: The required Dutch language level is increased and active participation in Dutch society is part of the program, for instance through work or volunteering

For this project, the focus lies on the new civic integration system. The three learning paths that it offers are:

The B1 route: a route for language learning while doing (volunteer) work. People following this route must be able to speak and write in Dutch to a B1 level within 3 years.
The education route: a route mainly for young people, to prepare for and do alongside an MBO, HBO or university course. They learn the language at a B1 level or higher.
The "self-reliance" route: a route aimed at people for which the first two routes are too difficult. They learn Dutch at a lower level and are prepared to participate in Dutch society in a simple way.

As this project focuses on student newcomers, the educational route is assumed, which is described in the following steps:

Step 1: Interviews with the municipality
Newcomers are invited to come to the municipality for an interview, during which an assessment will be made as to which civic integration route will best suit them. A mandatory test is taken as a part of this assessment.

Step 2: Personal plan
Together with the municipality, the newcomer creates a plan for civic integration called the Plan Inburgering en Participatie (EN: "Civic Integration and Participation Plan") or PIP. In this plan agreements are made for instance on the learning route, the amount of time needed and the guidance they will need to complete the program.

Step 3a: Learning and exams
Newcomers take classes on the Dutch language as well as Kennis van de Nederlandse Maatschappij (EN: Knowledge of Dutch Society) or KNM, classes. These classes are paid for by the municipality. For the educational civic integration route, one needs to get a passing mark for reading, listening, writing and speaking at a B1 or B2 level, as well as a passing mark for the KNM exam.

Step 3b: Participation statement path
As part of the civic integration process, newcomers must participate in the Participatieverklaringstraject (EN: “Participation Statement Path”) or PVT. During this module, Dutch norms and values are explained and topics are covered such as the Dutch Constitution, and the meanings of freedom, equality, solidarity and participation in the Netherlands. The module lasts a minimum of 12 hours and must be completed within 3 years - concluding with a “declaration of participation”.

Step 4: Passing civic integration
Once these exams are passed and the PVT declaration has been signed, civic integration is passed and a diploma is issued. This is necessary for a permanent residence permit in The Netherlands, which newcomers may apply for after 5 years.

Integration Theory & Policy

Having explored a newcomers journey through integration, let’s delve into its related theory. Over the past decades, immigrant integration has become a prominent policy aim in most European countries (Damen et al, 2022). However, it remains a contested concept. Governance of asylum and migration policy is a highly disputed topic worldwide - disagreement over it was even the cause of the collapse of the Dutch government in the summer of 2023 (NOS, 2023). In this section, conceptualisations of integration are compared with policy and practice in The Netherlands.

Conceptualisation

Integration is a complex concept which is hard to conceptualise and measure. Although there is no agreed-upon definition, most scholars understand integration as a dynamic, multi-dimensional, and multi-directional process, shaped within time, place and context (Damen et al., 2022).

Ager & Strang (2008) developed a conceptual framework for refugee integration based on dimensions frequently associated with the term integration (see figure 5). The framework has been widely used in academia related to refugee integration and highlights the importance of social connections, or social capital, as an enabler of integration. They emphasise that these factors should not be treated as goals, but rather as topics with which to facilitate discussions on integration.

Social capital

Social capital is “the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively” (Oxford Languages). Ager & Strang’s framework uses the language of social capital to distinguish three types of social connection:

Bonds: connections with members of the same family, co-ethnic, co-national, co-religious or other forms of groups.
Bridges: connections with members of other communities.
Links: connections with the structures of the state.

Integration as a two-way process

Scholars like Klarenbeek (2019) advocate for a conceptualisation of integration as a two-way process. While many authors acknowledge this idea, Klarenbeek argues wwthat dominant frameworks often fall short of overcoming the “one-wayness” they aim to address. Klarenbeek contends that conceptualizations should move away from framing integration as a distinction between “those who integrate” and “those who do not,” which effectively excludes insiders from the process. Instead, two-way integration should be understood as a process involving both insiders and outsiders, each playing distinct roles.

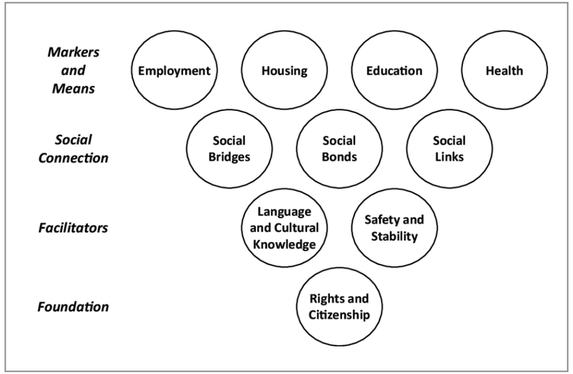

Figure 5: Ager & Strang’s framework for integration

Comparing policy to theory

Social capital overlooked?

Comparing Dutch policies to the conceptualisation of integration, scholars have noted that current Dutch refugee integration policies focus mainly on tangible outcomes such as housing, work and education - or in “makers and means” in Ager & Stang’s framework. However, scholars such as Czischke & Huisman (2018), argue that a less tangible aspect of integration may be one of the missing links in more successful refugee integration, namely: social connection.

Damen et al. (2022) found that refugees’ understanding of integration both align with and diverge from the objectives of Dutch integration policy. Their findings indicate alignment on functional aspects of integration, such as language acquisition, employment, and cultural knowledge transfer. However, consistent with Czischke & Huisman (2018), they highlight that refugees place significant importance on the social dimensions of resettlement and being accepted as equal citizens—an aspect which is largely overlooked in policy. This emphasis on equality aligns with the understanding of integration as a non-unidirectional process, recognizing the shared responsibility of both newcomers and the host society, rather than framing adaptation solely as the refugees’ obligation.

Asylum support systems and well-being

Bakker et al. (2016) explored the connection between asylum support systems and refugee integration in the UK and the Netherlands. Their study revealed that Dutch integration courses improved both refugees’ health and Dutch language skills, which in turn facilitated the development of their social networks. However, they also found that asylum accommodations, such as the AZC, were linked to negative health outcomes for refugees. Specifically, they highlighted a connection between the conditions in asylum centers and mental health issues, suggesting that the lack of privacy and autonomy in these centers could be harmful to refugees’ mental well-being.

Their research underscores the significant role that asylum and integration support systems play in shaping refugees’ social networks and health—both of which are crucial factors influencing employment outcomes. Employment is often seen as the primary indicator of successful integration by politicians and policymakers. Related policies, therefore, determine the extent to which refugees can integrate, either within the specific functional areas prioritized by policymakers or in the broader domains emphasized by integration theorists.

Understanding Mixed Cohabitation

This chapter explores the concept of mixed cohabitation. It begins with an overview of the phenomenon and its various forms, followed by an examination of its impact on integration. Finally, it delves into specific factors that either facilitate or hinder social interaction.

Cohabitation

Many terms have been used in research to denote the phenomena of housing with common spaces and shared facilities. Vestbro (2010) defined co-housing as a universal term for housing with common spaces and shared facilities, and conceptualised various more specific typologies that fall within the concept of co-housing:

Collaborative housing: co-housing which is specifically oriented towards collaboration between residents and usually incorporates a shared vision.
Collective housing: co-housing in which facilities are shared, but households are separated and do not necessarily establish a community.
Communal housing: co-housing which is designed to create community, in which residents actively participate and manage housing facilities

Mixed co-housing: housing newcomers and locals

Now that we have defined co-housing from a broad perspective, we turn our focus to mixed co-housing for newcomers and locals to better understand the context we aim to design for. While research on this specific form of co-housing remains limited, this section highlights key findings from studies that examine its social impact.

“Mixed co-housing”

The term *mixed co-housing* generally refers to the shared housing of multiple groups of people: for instance the co-housing of “regular tenants’’ with people from specialised social care backgrounds, such as those who have been homeless, have a mild intellectual disability or are dealing with psychological vulnerabilities (Woonin). Although the term “mixed co-housing” can be broadly applied, for the purposes of this report the term will mainly be used, for reasons of clarity and simplicity, to denote the shared living arrangement of newcomers and locals.

Emergence of mixed co-housing

In recent years, mixed housing complexes have gained traction as a response to growing demands for affordable housing among young starters and urgent housing needs for various groups, including status holders - which saw an influx in the years following the migration crisis of 2015. At the same time, municipalities often face challenges such as the vacancy of properties suitable for conversion into temporary housing and unused plots ideal for prefabricated homes. These conditions have driven the development of mixed co-housing projects, which besides aiming to address housing shortages, often also promote broader social objectives such as the participation and integration of status holders (Tinnemans et al., 2019).

Target residents

Mixed co-housing is considered a suitable housing solution mainly for a specific group of status holders: young single men, who primarily come from Syria and Eritrea. Due to the allocation system, they are assigned housing units by the municipal office in collaboration with the housing association managing the project, leaving them with no choice in where to settle (Druta et al., n.d.). In contrast, Dutch residents—mostly students and young professionals—apply to live in specific projects and typically go through an interview process before being accepted. Potential Dutch residents may also be offered reduced rent if they take on designated community-building roles within the projects

Project typologies

Since the launch of the pilot project in Amsterdam in 2016, mixed housing projects, combining status holders and Dutch residents, have been established in cities across the Netherlands. While certain “best practices” are commonly adopted—such as providing shared spaces and prioritizing social programs to foster connections between Dutch residents and status holders—there remains significant variation in how these projects are structured and organized (Druta el al., n.d.; Tinnemans et al. 2019). Although large variations can be found in spacial organisation of the housing (size, location, layout) as well as the social organization of daily life (including the mix of resident groups and objectives of the project) - two dominant types of mixed housing were identified by Druta et al (n.d.).

Modular projects in marginal locations

A common typology is the mixed housing project consisting of modular units, typically arranged as simple blocks of flats. These projects are generally large is scale, often accommodating over 100 residents. Units are often grouped into clusters based on hallway subdivisions, with each cluster featuring a predefined social organisation, such as the implementation a community manager or specific committees which residents can join.

Shared spaces like living rooms, kitchens, study areas, or launderettes are provided for communal use, along with additional facilities such as a translator’s office in some cases. These developments are typically located in marginal urban areas, often distant from city amenities and, at times, from public transportation. Some projects are closer to residential neighbourhoods, in which case local residents are often invited to engage with the project, for instance through use of the common areas.

All modular projects are built with temporary building permits, usually valid for 10–15 years, after which the structures are intended to be dismantled. Due to the temporary nature of these developments, tenants are cross-cultural interactions. These projects also often operate under temporary permits, as the buildings used are typically nearing the end of their functional lifespan. Similarly, tenants are usually offered short-term contracts of two to five years.

Repurposed projects in residential areas

Another common typology is the project achieved through renovation and repurposing existing buildings, such as former care facilities or office buildings. Typically smaller in scale, they may offer a mix of self-contained units and shared accommodations, depending on the building’s layout. In shared setups, rooms are usually clustered around communal facilities like a kitchen, bathroom, and living room, which are shared among a small group of residents. These projects also include shared communal spaces, such as large common rooms.

Unlike modular projects, these initiatives generally lack predetermined social structures, with resident interaction shaped by other arrangements. For instance, rooms with shared facilities may be allocated equally to status holders and Dutch residents to encourage

Facilitating integration in mixed co-housing

The housing situation of status holders in the Netherlands plays a crucial role in their integration (Druta et al., n.d.). Mixed co-housing projects often aim to advance broader social objectives, such as promoting the participation and integration of status holders. These objectives are typically refined to include fostering social interactions, supporting language development, building social networks, and enhancing societal acceptance (Tinnemans et al., 2019).

Mixed co-housing as a facilitator of social connections

Czischke & Huisman (2018) studied the formation of social capital in a collaborative housing project in Amsterdam and found that, in line with project objectives, social connections were indeed being formed between newcomers and locals. Social bonding happens across ethnic and cultural backgrounds through belonging to the same age group and household type (lifestyle), as well as through common cultural and/or ethnic backgrounds. They found that having a relatively even amount of newcomers to locals may lead to the creation of social bridges, and that accessibility affords the creation of social links.

Mixed co-housing as a facilitator of support and mutual learning

Mahieu & Caudenberg (2020) conducted a similar study, investigating a similar communal living community with young newcomers and locals in Antwerp, Belgium. They took a broader perspective on integration as a multi-layered process: while Czischke & Huisman focused on the formation of social connections, Mahieu & Caudenberg highlighted multiple other elements of integration, such as acquisition of language and cultural skills. Their findings suggest that although there may be challenges, such as those with regard to communication, intercultural communal living can create integration opportunities: as it can provide an informal supportive environment to the refugee and may support mutual learning for refugees and buddies. As such, they found that such communal living communities are more than just an environment where one can “get to know new people” - they have the ability to address some basic needs of young refugees in terms of learning and support related to integration.

Integration still not guaranteed

Although mixed co-housing can be a facilitator of social connections and support and mutual learning, the integration of residents is of course not guaranteed when implementing such a project. In their concept paper, Druta et al. (n.d.) examined how housing and individual characteristics influence the social outcomes of status holders, including levels of social cohesion, perceived integration, and life satisfaction. Their findings reveal that factors such as housing characteristics significantly impact the experiences of status holders in mixed co-housing environments, leading to either improved or diminished social outcomes. In particular, Druta et al. (n.d.) highlight that limited accessibility to neighborhood and urban amenities undermines the potential of these spaces to act as the “springboard for integration” they aspire to be.

Social capital in mixed co-housing

Now that we have established that integration can be facilitated in mixed co-housing projects—but is not guaranteed and may be hindered by factors such as housing characteristics—let’s delve into the specific elements that can promote or impede social interaction in these settings.

In their research on integration within mixed co-housing for refugees and locals in the Netherlands, Halverhout (n.d.) identifies key factorsthat act as facilitators or barriers to building social capital. This section explores these factors, as they are crucial for understanding how to foster a thriving and cohesive living environment.

Facilitators of social connection

Accessibility

In line with Druta et al. (n.d.), accessibility is a key factor in strengthening social capital. Accessibility refers to the ease with which social capital can be cultivated within a co-housing facility—a concept the Dutch term “laagdrempeligheid.” It emphasizes creating an environment where individuals can easily connect and engage not only with one another but also with the wider community.

Physical environments

The physical environments of mixed co-housing projects, and in particular their shared spaces, play a crucial role in guiding daily social interaction. As Jaspers et al. (n.d.) states in their study on the housing characteristics of mixed co-housing: “Spatial characteristics can open or close possibilities for interaction, and the dynamics between residents can enable or foreclose these possibilities.”

Social organisation: Initiators & activities

Naturally, the social organisation implemented in mixed co-housing has a significant effect on social interaction. Community leaders, often referred to as “gangmakers,” are instrumental in fostering connections among residents and organizing activities that promote engagement. These activities serve as platforms for bringing people together, cultivating a sense of community and shared purpose, and driving social cohesion.

Safety & stability
Finally, an atmosphere of safety and stability is paramount, laying the foundation for facilitating and assessing social networks. A crucial concern for both refugees and locals, yet from different viewpoints: on the one hand, refugees were found to seek a peaceful environment to make their home and stay for an extended period of time. On the other hand, locals were found to be aspiring for a living space free from unrest and inconveniences.

This is also highlighted by Ager & Strang (2008), who emphasize the physical aspects of safety, but remain limited in how this can be facilitated. Halvermout's research found that inhabitants of co-housing facilities saw much added value in professional guidance to this end.

Inhibitors of social connection

Absence of essential facilitators
An absence of essential facilitators was also identified as an inhibitor of social connection, particularly concerning safety and wellbeing. The security of an environment directly impacts the ease with which residents form connections; without it, many are hesitant to establish and nurture relationships.

Lack of autonomy
A notable challenge is the lack of autonomy. Local residents often find their choices limited regarding housing, primarily due to the housing crisis. This constraint can make them feel coerced into such environments, potentially affecting their openness to forming connections. For refugees, this lack of autonomy is even more pronounced. They are frequently placed in co-housing arrangements without any say in the matter, which can affect their sense of belonging and willingness to engage.

Language barrier
Language too poses a significant barrier. Without a shared language, forging connections becomes exceedingly challenging. However, on a positive note, some residents have turned this obstacle into an opportunity: for them, the process of learning a new language becomes a communal endeavour, creating new points of contact and shared experiences.

Cultural differences
Diverse backgrounds, while enriching in many ways, can also act as barriers. While mutual cultural knowledge can act as a catalyst for forming bonds, its absence can make establishing social networks a great task, a point underscored by Ager & Strang in 2008. The richness of cultural backgrounds, if not understood or celebrated, can lead to misunderstandings or unintentional insensitivities. In light of this, many respondents emphasised the importance of active management. Proactive measures, they argue, are vital to address the challenges that arise from cultural differences. Unfortunately, several participants noted a glaring lack of such active management in their facilities.

Lack of time
Lastly, the simple lack of time for maintaining social connections within one's cohousing projects is a universal barrier, although this mainly applies to local residents. Due to factors such as studies, working a side job, or maintaining a social network outside the building, these residents often find it challenging to allocate time for communal activities within their co-housing accommodations, leading to missed opportunities to nurture bonds with fellow tenants.

Part 2: Forming a Lens Key Takeaways

Integration is a complex and not uni-directional, meaning newcomers must adapt to local culture but locals must also adapt to newcomers.

Social capital is an important factor in integration theory, but it seems to be largely missing from Dutch policy, which focuses more and measures by the tangible aspects of integration.

Co-housing helps stimulate social connection, but haven't always panned out as their romantic plans. Inhibitors of social cohesion in mixed co-housing include a lack of autonomy

Tensions can serve as a valuable framing tool and starting point for design

PART 3:
LISTENING TO STORIES

This section delves into the world of mixed co-housing in the Netherlands, exploring the context through the perspectives of various relevant stakeholders, including various relevant dwelling organisations, but with a focus on the experience of tenants of mixed co-housing projects.

The section starts with exploratory field interviews with key dwelling organisations (Chapter 8), followed by interviews with tenants of mixed co-housing communities (Chapter 9). Based on tensions that emerged from these interviews, a participatory session was conducted to uncover opportunities for intervention (Chapter 10). Finally, the selected opportunity is further defined (Chapter 11).

Interviewing dwelling organisations

Four locations were visited to explore the context of a newcomer's journey and experience in the Netherlands. The findings are presented in chronological order of when a refugee would come into contact with the locations, after having left the central reception centre in Ter Apel: first an asylum seekers centre (COA Delft), then a flex-living location (Lange Kleiweg 80, Rijswijk) and finally two social housing projects (SoZa, Den Haag and Place2BU, Utrecht). At each location, an organisational figure was interviewed using a semi-structured interview, offering insights into the journey of newcomers from an organisational perspective. Besides this, some residents at these locations were spoken with in a more casual manner.

Figure 6: COA Delft . Picture by Marjolein van der Veldt (Delta)

COA Delft

Refugee shelter

Interview with C. Batenburg, Director of Shelter & Guidance

COA location in Delft was visited to sensitise the researcher to what life looks like for a person when they are still considered to be an "asylum seeker" by the state. This is before they obtain a permit to reside in the country and become a "status holder." This location is one of the COA's many locations around the country, where a person might be placed after having applied for asylum in Ter Apel.

I wanted to find out: What are their daily activities? What are their main concerns? (How) are they preparing for life after receiving the permit to live here in The Netherlands? My assumption was that asylum seekers are mainly worried about surviving the asylum procedure and the day-to-day, because of the possibility of their request being denied and them being sent back.

Findings

A waiting game
A recurring theme in this location is waiting. This location houses a wide variety of refugees at different stages of the asylum seeking process: people who have applied for asylum and are waiting for the outcome, people who have been denied asylum and are waiting to depart the country, as well as “status holders” who are waiting for housing and must start their civic integration. Although officially the municipality is given 10 weeks to find an accommodation, many status holders here wait 7 months to a year.

Daily activities and preparation for life after depends on own proactiveness
The daily activities of the people staying at the location varies greatly. Some people stay on location all day, killing time and waiting to hear news on their asylum procedure. Others who may be more proactive, tend to go out and explore the surrounding city and region. [Of the people that go out, she sees that some turn day and night around: going to discos at night and sleeping during the day.]

In general, individuals do prepare for life after getting out of the shelter. However, the extent to which this happens varies largely. While some people already have a clear idea of the job they want, many are still uncertain. For instance, Batenburg spoke of a man who had previously owned a food truck and wishes to operate one again, and another man who was a lawyer and has a strong drive to resume his profession. These two had a clear goal in mind and were therefore more proactive, while others may still need to figure out what they want.

Getting by financially
At the start, people are given a one-time payment of €70, referred to as “pots & pans money,” to set up their accommodation. Following this, €60 is allocated for food and other living expenses every week. This amount is transferred to their Moneycard, which is a collaboration with Rabobank and functions like a debit card. Additionally, €10 per month can be requested for leisure activities. Travel costs for appointments with the IND (Immigration and Naturalisation Service) and similar entities are also covered.

Frictions: alpha males, close quarters & differing norms
According to the COA employee, there are many “alpha males” that reside at the location, which can create friction. They live in cramped quarters, with four people sharing a small room. Often, they are placed with individuals they don’t know, and the levels of personal hygiene can vary widely. The COA does make an effort to house individuals with similar backgrounds together in one room.

Although conflicts don’t arise frequently and “are so rare that they can be counted on one hand”, when conflicts do happen, they are usually due to differing norms and values. Religious beliefs and practices, like praying in the night when someone else wants to sleep, can also be a source of tension.

Figure 7: Flexwoonlocatie, Lange Kleiweg, Rijswijk.

Lange Kleiweg

Flex-dwelling

Speaking with G. van Thol (Location Manager, Rijswijk Wonen) & A. de Ruiter (Beleidsmedewerker Wonen, Rijswijk Wonen)

Located down the street from SHS Delft’s location on Polakweg, is Lange Kleiweg 80. It was previously an asylum seekers centre but had been turned into a flexwoonlocatie or “flex-dwelling location”. It is intended for newcomers and local spoedzoekers (EN: “emergency seekers”), who are in urgent need of housing due to reasons such as such domestic abuse. At the time of writing, this location had recently been in the media due to the newcomers who filed a lawsuit against COA because they didn’t want to go back to their previous asylum seekers centre.

I spoke to one of the managers of the location, referred to as wijkbeheerder or “neighbourhood manager,” as well as another member of the organisation running the location. Unfortunately, I was not permitted to speak to any of the residents at this location.

The purpose of the visit was to get a better understanding of what goes on in a project that houses newcomers.

Findings

Desire for certainty & security
Newcomers often face frequent relocations. It’s not uncommon for some to be shuffled between as many as seven locations within a span of just four years. One notable instance was of an individual who had claimed to have been moved to an astounding 13 locations within a single year. Adding to the uncertainty, many times they’re only informed the evening before that they are to leave the next morning at 9:30. What they truly desire is a sense of certainty and security in their living situations.

Harsh transition between guidance and self-reliance
A designated organisation helps guide the newcomers for 5 months, after which they are left to navigate life in The Netherlands by themselves. However, according to the neighbourhood manager I spoke to, the newcomers are usually not sufficiently equipped for this: “They’re actually not ready for real life here.” During the collaboration with the organisation they have always had someone to turn to for questions and help, but this is suddenly cut off and - therefore there is a need for a better transition into independence.

Figure 8: SoZa, Den Haag

SoZa Den Haag

Mixed co-housing

Speaking with L. Brand, PitZtop Project manager

SoZa Den Haag was a housing project in the old building of the Ministry of Social Affairs (in Dutch: Ministerie van Sociale Zaken, or SoZa for short.) Here, they housed a variety of people, including newcomers and young locals, between 2017 and 2024. The co-housing units consist of 8 rooms that share a living room, kitchen, bathroom and toilet facilities. This had a strong similarity to the housing conditions of SHS Delft's project, which made it valuable to explore this context.

I spoke to the project manager of PitZtop, the organisation responsible for the social management of the project. Before working at PitZtop, he had done his thesis on mixed co-housing, having used SoZa as a case study. In my talk with him, I wanted to find out: How does it work? What works well? What are areas that could be improved? What are points of tension? Why do these things work well or not?

Findings

Social connection
According to Brand's research, the SoZa project was successful in fostering social capital among its residents. He identified that social interaction was facilitated by multiple initiatives within the building, particularly through the efforts of PitZtop, the organisation responsible for social management. Their primary focus was cultivating social capital, both bridging and bonding connections. They achieved this largely through organizing events that brought people together and encouraged interaction, helping to build a sense of community within the building.

Lack of autonomy among newcomers
A notable issue was the lack of autonomy or "ownership" experienced by the status holders that resided at SoZa. This stemmed largely from the fact that they have little say in where they live, since they are allocated a house by the municipality and cannot deny it, otherwise they have to arrange housing themselves, which often is enough of a challenge for locals.

Facility issues, language and culture
Issues stemming from the building's conversion from an office to residential use added further strain. One notable incident involved the sunshades for the entire building being lowered, leaving tenants unable to control the natural light in their bedrooms. Additionally, language barriers and cultural differences were mentioned as a cause of friction between housemates. For instance, while some tenants enjoyed cooking for others as a cultural expression, it occasionally resulted in monopolization of shared kitchen spaces.

Conflicts and safety concerns
Despite the successes in fostering community, conflicts occasionally arose, sometimes escalating into serious issues. Altercations and even violent incidents occurred among Dutch residents, leading to concerns about safety for some individuals. Sexual intimidation was also mentioned, and attributed to the male-heavy demographic in the building. Besides this, a problematic mix of tenants in a specific flat led to persistent issues, underscoring the importance of thoughtful composition in shared housing arrangements. These incidents highlight the complexity of creating harmonious co-living spaces.

Figure 9: Place2BU, Utrecht

Place2BU Utrecht

Mixed co-housing

Speaking with P. van den Berg, All-round Management employee

SoZa Den Haag was a housing project in the old building of the Ministry of Social Affairs (in Dutch: Ministerie van Sociale Zaken, or SoZa for short.) Here, they housed a variety of people, including newcomers and young locals, between 2017 and 2024. The co-housing units consist of 8 rooms that share a living room, kitchen, bathroom and toilet facilities. This had a strong similarity to the housing conditions of SHS Delft's project, which made it valuable to explore this context.

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Findings

Facilitators of community building
Place2BU has implemented several strategies to foster a sense of community among its residents. One key initiative is the role of “hallway makers,” with two designated individuals per hallway responsible for maintaining contact with organisations within the building and promoting social cohesion among residents in their hallway. This role helps create a stronger sense of belonging within smaller clusters of the community. Additionally, residents can join various committees focused on gardening, culture, and sports, which provide meaningful opportunities for engagement. These committees organize regular activities such as sports events, biweekly movie nights, music evenings, and other social gatherings. A particularly popular initiative is the weekly community cooking night, where residents can enjoy a shared meal for just €1.50, fostering connections through the universal language of food.

Inhibitors of community building
Despite these initiatives, there are some inhibiting factors in the creation and sustain of a cohesive community. Many residents perceive the project as temporary, which can limit their willingness to invest in long-term relationships. The high turnover of tenants further disrupts continuity, making it difficult to maintain stable community dynamics. Additionally, there is a clear need for more structured guidance for residents. organisations such as COA and VluchtelingenWerk are criticized for placing people at

Interviewing tenants

Besides visits to relevant sites in the newcomer trajectory, exploratory interviews were conducted with tenants of mixed co-housing projects. Seven participants from three housing projects were interviewed to obtain initial insights into their lived experiences. The main research question which was posed was:

What are the key experiences of newcomers and locals in co-living situations in The Netherlands?

The sub-questions were as follows:
- What works well? What are points of friction?
- What are the opportunities for improvement?
- What are key values which underlie the lived experiences?

Method

A semi-structured interview approach was adopted. This methodology was chosen due to its flexibility in allowing participants to share in-depth perspectives while still adhering to key areas of interest defined by the researcher. The sample consisted of seven participants drawn from three different co-housing projects - SoZa in The Hague, de Woondiversiteit in Delft and Riekerhaven in Amsterdam. Out of these, six participants had resided in their respective projects for at least two years before recently relocating elsewhere within the past six months. This was to gather perspectives from individuals who had a substantial tenure within the co-housing environment. In contrast, one participant had just moved into a project, offering a fresh perspective. To ensure a varied understanding of experiences and cultural assimilation, both locals and newcomers were interviewed - locals, accustomed to the regional lifestyle and traditions, and newcomers, bringing in their own lens to the community dynamics.

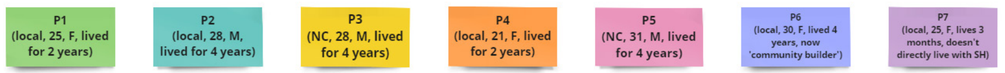


Figure 10: Overview of the participants of tenant interviews.

Findings Map:
Key experiences of mixed co-housing

The findings of the interviews were clustered and mapped into four domains. The first domain regards the relation between housemates and tenants - as this was the focus of the interviews, this domain is consequently the largest and includes the quality of these relationships and how these connections were formed and what strengthened them. This domain also includes insights on what strained these relationships. The second domain regards the relationship that tenants have with the organisation. The third domain illuminates other factors that influenced the lived experience of tenants in the mixed co-housing environment.

Although they are separated in domains, the factors within these domains can be interrelated and influence the other domains. In this chapter, I will elaborate on each of these four domains. A more detailed map may be found in Appendix D.

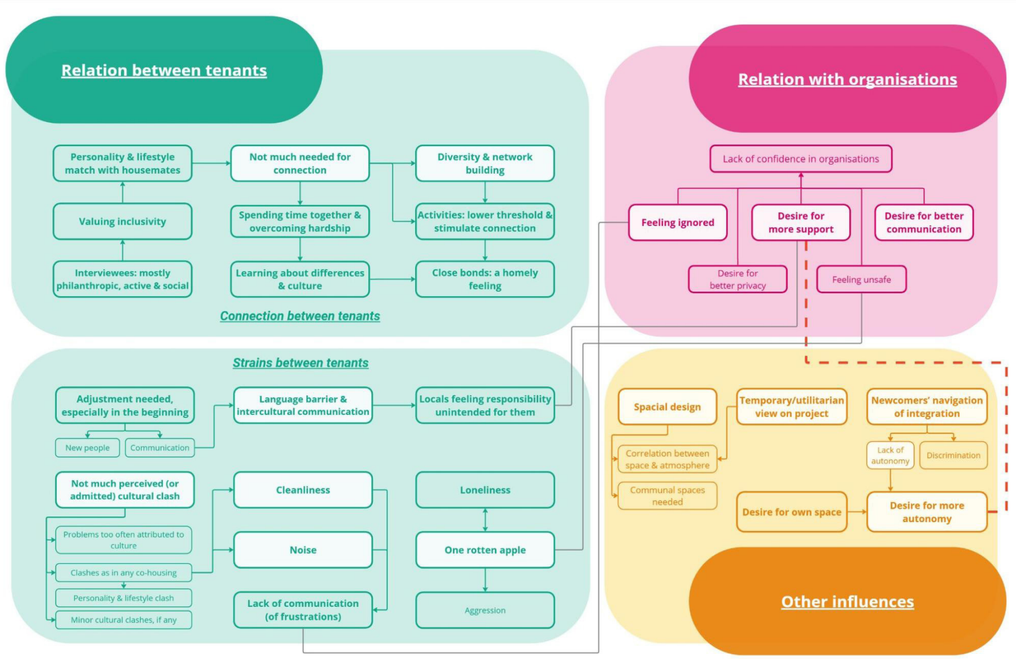


Figure 11: Interview Findings Map: key experiences of mixed co-housing

Domain 1: Connection between tenants

This domain relates to the nature of the relationships among tenants, exploring the dynamics of how these connections were initially forged, the factors that facilitated their formation, and the elements that further solidified and strengthened them over time.

Building a diverse network and close bonds

A recurring theme in the interviews was the efficacy of the co-housing projects in forging connections with a diverse set of individuals. All participants reported an expansion in their social networks within their respective buildings.

Besides solely expanding their networks, half of the interviewees spoke of their connections with housemates into more profound, intimate bonds. While first associations with the project were mixed, predominant sentiments associated with it were overwhelmingly positive. Participants frequently described feelings of cosiness, affection, safety, and familiarity, likening their community to the warmth and unity of a family or the comfort of a true home. One participant from a project on the Van Bleijswijkstraat said of this:

> "We indeed had certain relationships with each other, where we'd say, 'We're kind of like siblings.' [...] And that was also a goal that we had collectively come up with... Some might not have any family left to turn to, so we wanted to create one together, on a smaller scale. We even called ourselves the 'Bleyswijk Family.'" - p1, local

Little needed for creating new connections

Although the language barrier and the effort of talking to strangers may be inhibiting factors, it was found that often not much was needed to make a connection.

Three participants mentioned that not much language is needed - a bit of small talk or a "how are you?" can make one feel seen. Another mentioned the impact of simply seeing a familiar face on making one feel grounded.

A recurring theme in the interviews was sharing food as a way of stimulating connection - 5 participants mentioned the act of cooking and/or eating together working as a way to connect with people. It was mentioned to lessen the discomfort that may come with being around new people, as well as bringing people together to spend time together in a communal way without needing much language.

> "Because of the [social organisation], at one point I pretty much knew everyone in the entire building. Almost everyone came by the barbeque, and then we'd just ask "Want a beer or a piece of meat-y?" or whatever, and then often they stuck around. So that really helped." - p4, local

In addition to cooking, activities - both unplanned activities within households and organised activities for the tenants of the building - were found to immensely help stimulate the creation of new connections and getting to know other people in the building. The organised activities were usually organised by the project's social management team, and served as a way to make connections with people outside of one's residential group. One participant mentioned how one invitation could lead to more:

> "There is someone I know now - he told me he initially wasn't planning on really getting to know people. [He was] a status holder. And then his hallmaker was really like, "No, no, you have to." And then he met some people. And then he was like, "Okay, I'll come to one thing -- Okay, I'll come to one more thing." So you see, it works." - p6, local

Strengthening connections: time, hardship & cultural differences

Once the initial connections were made, these were found to be strengthened by multiple factors.

The first factor that was mentioned was through simply spending a lot of time together, for instance by eating together, studying or simply hanging out in a common space. The majority of the participants were living in the co-housing project during the COVID-19 lockdowns - and thus were forced to stay inside their homes during this time. This was a challenging and trying time for many people in the world, including the newcomers who could not escape to their families' homes as many of their local housemates did. However, one participant had a memorable quote illuminating how this increased time spent together had a positive side:

> "It may sound a bit crazy, but it actually only became fun [in the residential group] when corona came, because it created a lot of fraternisation in the group. We pulled together and suddenly everyone was at home, and we were all, you know, in the same boat. And then we really got to know each other really well. So, especially with that first lockdown, I kind of, a little bit, look back on it with a weird nostalgic feeling." - p2, local

The previous quote not only speaks of time spent together and getting to know each other, it also touches on another factor that was found to strengthen connection between tenants: going through hardship together. This was mentioned by three of the participants and refers to a range of sources: from small-scale day-to-day obstacles within the residential group, such as a language barrier, to poor communication with the project's organisational structure, to navigating the bureaucratic procedures of the national integration program together. Although these strained the relationship between housemates, if they were able to overcome these, they ultimately strengthened them.

> "There's a saying we have, 'Don't take a friend until you have a fight.' That means: after a fight, we become enemies or become good friends." - p5, newcomer

The final factor that emerged from the interviews is through learning about each other's differences and culture. Cultural differences were seen as more of a point of connection than a point of tension by four of the participants.

One way of connecting through cultural differences was by sharing traditions and festivities, such as Ramadan and Sinterklaas. Two participants recalled Ramadan to have brought people people together, one saying:

> "No, there wasn't really [cultural clash]. Culture kind of... Made it more personal or something. For example, during Ramadan we all, almost every night, had dinner together. So for almost a month. That little bit... Well, that really made it more 'gezellig'. For everyone." - p3, newcomer

Another way of connecting with cultural differences was by sharing stories. Two participants mentioned that the diversity of people and backgrounds of the tenants lead to interesting conversations. They talked about being intrigued by these new perspectives and stories that contrast strongly with their own lives, despite that they may have taken more effort to uncover due to a language barrier, as depicted in the following quote:

> "We'd just talk using Google Translate, and also with some gestures. [It takes] a lot of time, and patience too - but I probably enjoyed the contact with them [Eritrean housemates] the most. Because in general it's a community that draws together quite a bit. [...] So, yes, that makes it quite special to have such close contact with them. And also because I found all their stories so fascinating. They really come from a completely different world. For example, a roommate of mine lived in a monastery in Eritrea until he was sixteen, as a sheepherder. He had never had the internet, no electricity, he got his water from the river - those kinds of things. [...] [It was] just quite primitive. And normally I'm not quick to say that, because it holds some kind of prejudice. But in their case it really was." - p2, local

Domain 2: Strains on connection between tenants

Although mixed co-housing indeed proved to foster and strengthen connections, consistent with existing literature on the subject, certain factors were identified that exerted pressure on these relationships. These factors are elaborated upon in this section.

Not much perceived (or admitted) cultural clash
When asked about the main clashes within the residential group, the majority of the participants refuted these to be cultural ones.

Three participants talked about how clashes that happened in their projects could have happened in any student house or co-living group. Two participants said that a mismatch of personalities was more likely to be the cause of clashes between housemNoisates than culture.

> "You just have normal problems. The washing machine or something, cleaning. You have that everywhere." - p3, newcomer

According to three participants, there may have been some minor clashes due cultural differences, but these were said to be ones which could be discussed and solved quite easily. These included extensive loud talking on the phone, as one local participant recalled, or playing loud Arabic music, as another local recalled.

> "In terms of cultural differences, I can't really think of much. Again, maybe little things. For example, those Eritrean guys. They tend to spend hours speaking loudly on the phone. Or, you know, things like that. But it's something you can just say something about as well. So I think it's mainly small things." - p2, local

Two participants said that they believe people are too quick to blame cultural differences on problems. One spoke of how xenophobia may play a role when judging clashes. For instance, when referring to talking about a situation in which a tenant from another residential group in the building was stealing food, they said:

> "I don't know, I'm always a little hesitant about it [talking about the stealing incident], because the guy was a Syrian guy. Because you know how it always is. Suppose it was a Dutch person, then they'd say, "Oh yeah, that guy was just... He was just..." - then it's attributed to the person. But if it is a Syrian boy who is stealing, then it's like, "Yeah, you know, I mean he is an Arab..." or something. Then it's more kind of cultural. That always bothers me." - p2, local

Another participant highlighted the similarities between themself and their newcomer housemates, when talking about their own prejudices about refugees:

> “At first I thought: they have their own culture and that can probably clash sometimes. And even if you watch documentaries about other countries, it will only show people in robes and such... But if you lived there, you’d see that everyone wears normal clothes and is on TikTok, like here.” - p1, local

Both of these quotes point to a valuing of inclusivity and seeing people with different backgrounds as equals, a sentiment that was shared by the participants.

Cleanliness

All seven participants talked about cleanliness being one of the main sources of conflict. The main problems mentioned about this were: disagreement over cleaning schedules and different standards of hygiene.

There was discord over cleaning schedules. Some tenants were in favour of a cleaning schedule, as a structured and ideally equal approach to house upkeep. However, others were opposed to a cleaning schedule due to the fact that it can lead to people redirecting the responsibility of cleaning towards the scheduled cleaner:

> “The problem is not about me being clean or being dirty, or someone else. It’s about the responsibility. When I make two eggs only and I want to flip it and something goes wrong and half of it goes on the ground - this is my problem. I made it, I have to clean it. But most of the people know, “okay, there is this someone who always cleans - he will clean it.” So they put the responsibility on someone else.” - p5, newcomer

However, this can also be seen as different expectations towards responsibility, and therefore can be framed as an issue of poor communication - such a situation could likely be prevented by communicating and aligning expectations beforehand, and can be mediated by constructive communication of frustrations.

Besides cleaning schedules, another source of conflict participants identified was different standards of hygiene. This could be within a culture as well as between cultures - as one participant told an anecdote about the use of toilets by another culture:

> “I remember, the Eritreans are very unhygienic with the toilets. I think they squatted on the toilet. And that didn’t go very well.” - p4, local

It is however important to note that one’s frame of reference plays an important role in one’s perception of hygiene. The previous quote may be an oversimplified assessment when one considers that Eritrea is one of the poorest countries in the world, where only 3.5% of the rural population has access to a latrine*. This means that diseases can easily spread - and in these situations, crouching may even be more hygienic.

Noise

When talking about the biggest sources of conflict, noise nuisance was often mentioned in the same breath as cleanliness and was mentioned by five participants. One participant, who besides having been a resident also held an organisational role in the social management of their project, concurred and said that the majority of the complaints they received over email concerned noise.

Noise nuisance can be caused by a mismatch in lifestyle or daily rhythm, as described by two participants. One of these participants spoke of noise disturbance from the perspective of “the disturbed” due to having to sleep earlier than his neighbour:

> “If you really have to work, you also go to sleep earlier. But someone who does nothing just stays up until three or four o’clock at night. And this bothers you. [...] For example, my room is close to the border of another house, and my neighbour who lives in the other house simply does nothing - he was still learning the language or something. [...] He has to go to school for three hours a day or so. And yeah, so he just stays up really late and plays games or something. And then I just have to do this [*imitates knocking on wall*] once a night, ‘Yo, I have to sleep.’” - p3, newcomer

The other participant spoke from the perspective of the “the disturber.” Note that he speaks of a dual-sided nature of noise nuisance, as consideration is needed from both the disturbed and the disturber:

> “In the other residential group which I often visited there was a woman, a Dutch woman. And yeah, it’s not very soundproof. And she often had to get up quite early for work, that woman. And I often chilled with people until late at night. And at a certain point it became quite heated. She freaked out at every sound, I have to say, but it came from both sides - I’m the kind of person who will forget and just go my own way. [...] Yeah, they really had some confrontations, where she would really cuss me out. So I think that mainly has to do with noise nuisance. Yes, that is a real source of conflict” - p2, local

Language barrier & intercultural communication

Four participants emphasised needing to adjust to their home at the beginning. Two of these said the main adjustment was towards living with new people - one of these mentioned feeling less at ease because they didn’t know their housemates enough to trust them, and the other talked about having to get used to their housemate’s habits. The other two participants referred to communication being the main source of adjustment.

Although three participants talked about not needing much language to make an initial connection, four participants still spoke of language barriers and intercultural communication as inhibiting factors:

> “If you don’t have a common language, either Dutch or English, it becomes quite difficult. Many Syrians I met here already spoke fairly good English before they came to the Netherlands, and then you notice that communication just goes much easier. And with the people from Eritrea that was often difficult.” - p2, local

One rotten apple
Another theme that emerged from the interviews, with five participants mentioning this, was the significant negative impact that one or a few people can have on the atmosphere within a residential group and even the entire building. Usually they were referring to people with psychological problems or people who in their opinion were bigoted. These often go hand-in-hand: one participant spoke of a person from another residential group, who according to this participant had their own mental issues (amongst which anger issues) and was prejudiced against newcomers:

> "Especially when that really racist guy came along, a lot of solidarity really kind of disappeared. Or cohesion. So then there were more clashes. Because when you are new in a country, and all they say is that you lie and break things... Then there really were a lot of clashes. [...] Just really shouting, head-to-head." - p1, local

Such an altercation can have an effect on the rest of the group. When speaking of the atmosphere between housemates in residential groups of their building, one participant said:

> "It varies a lot per group. They [social management] also have to keep a close eye on how it all works and, yeah, who the 'culprit' is, because sometimes it was just a few people in entire groups who ruined it all." - p4, local

Two participants who had lived in the same project both spoke of the fire incident that had happened a half year prior, which was likely ignited by a resident and "shook people to their core" according to one. The other concurred with this:

> "Half a year ago, in the first building over there, there was someone who was psychologically not well and had a lot of PTSD apparently, and just lit a match, just dropped it and the whole building went up in flames. And that left like a really big mark, because a lot of people lost their house that day. I think, like, 24 people lost everything in the fire – clothes, pictures, phones, computers, everything." - p7, local

The participant who was part of the social management of this project stressed the importance of being prepared to deal with people with psychological issues:

> "There have been people who were not fit to live here - because they just needed more support than just, you know, like some other young people around them. [...] Just be prepared, you know, make sure that you know who people can contact or how you can support people that need more." - p6, local

Domain 3: Relation with organisation

When asked about clashes that they faced while living in the mixed co-housing projects, it was found that, particularly for the newcomers, many of these clashes were perceived to be not within the residential group, but with the organisations related to their housing projects.

> "The people who live there are always fine. [...] But, on the other hand, how is it actually arranged and all that, that was a bit difficult. [...] How the owners of the building and the municipality, and so on, made agreements and such. That was a bit tricky for us. That's what bothers us the most. Not each other." - p3, newcomer

For three of the participants, there was a significant lack of confidence in the organisation. One of the participants' first associations with living in their project was "stress, because the project wasn't set up well." This lack of confidence in the organisation among these participants was due to a number of factors, which are described next.

Feeling ignored
The most significant source of problems with the organisation was the feeling of being ignored or not listened to, having been mentioned by three participants. This feeling of being ignored related mainly to the filing of complaints, but spanned from complaints about the facilities to calls for support for problematic housemates.

One participant spoke about how he felt surpassed by the organisation after having complained 'too much', following an instance where a security guard was unexpectedly inside his home which felt like an invasion of privacy:

> "Then we had really had a lot of conversations with the owners and organisations there. [...] So what happens is ... since me and two or three other people who are a bit active, start complaining about this - then they no longer come to our groups, but then they do go to the others. I'm like, why are you guys so annoying? So yeah, that was a thing too." - p3, newcomer

A participant from the same project warned about the consequences of being ignored, particularly how it can - and in their case did - lead people to "lose faith" and take things into their own hands:

> "For example, I have a problem in my apartment and I have to come to you, but you are not the one with the decision. So, you're just an employee who has been put in behind the desk and I have to come to you and you say, like, "I can't do anything". And me, I also complain - I can't do anything. So, we both look at each other, nothing changed and we turn back. This is what's happening. So, they put someone to face you who can't do anything. That's the ignoration. When this happens, people will lose their faith that things will be changed and then they will start to change it themselves. And then you will have the bigger issues and bigger issues." - p5, newcomer

Tenants taking matters into their own hands can then lead to dangerous situations. The previous participant went on to elaborate about these "bigger issues", which included placing a wooden block on his bedroom door following an invasion of privacy by the security, or tenants removing smoke detectors due to being denied the right to smoke on the balconies:

> "[There are] a lot of people who smoke. Also me, one of them. At the beginning, they say you have to smoke outside. That means if I want to have a cigarette, I need to leave my fourth floor on the stairs to take a cigarette down and go upstairs again. This is really crazy. No one listened. And everybody removed the sensors of smoke, and started to smoke inside. And there's when we have the problem of the fire. There are sensors that can deal with the cigarette smoke and with the fire smoke. So they won't go on with cigarettes. But this is like no one cares. 'They're just a couple of kids, a couple of refugees.' No one cares." - p5, newcomer

Another participant, from a different project, spoke of having repeatedly warned the organisation about tenants in the building that needed support and nothing being done about it, which in one case lead to a disappearance:

> "We really warned about a lot of things in advance. And nothing was solved. At one point, one boy disappeared from the Netherlands. He wanted to buy a scooter and he never went to school. It was just a typical 17-year-old boy - but I think he was about 15 - so sometimes things go wrong... Yeah, just a really difficult kid. And then you say, "yeah, he's not doing well." And a lot of care goes into that, it also affects a lot of people. And then you kind of always have to intervene and say, "okay, let's find another project for this boy." But that didn't happen. And then things escalate for such a boy and then at a certain point he disappears." - p1, local

This participant also gave another example in which their calls for help were being ignored, which had ultimately lead to a violent incident:

> "Like I said with that boy from the stabbing and domestic violence, we had really been calling about that for three quarters of a year. And it was already known: that he no longer has a house, he has no passport. It was clear, even outside this house where he doesn't even live, care needs to be provided here. And that doesn't happen. And it's definitely difficult and it's definitely a problem. But within such a building it also creates so much pressure that Dutch people also get a bit of burnout and leave. Certainly within such a project, you just want to solve it as quickly as possible." - p1, local

From their organisational role, participant six also mentioned the value of listening to people in a conflict, saying that sometimes it's enough for someone to just feel like they're being heard:

> "It seems like when we [community builders] do get involved that it gets better eventually, because a lot of times people just need mediation, you know. Like de-escalation, mediation - feeling like they're being heard. Also, if they're the instigator, you know, at least they could do their story. You can make some rules maybe, or come to a compromise." - p6, local

Desire for better communication & transparency

The second theme of issues with the organisation was a need for better communication and was deduced from four interviews.

Two participants mentioned that they did not know where to turn for questions, one of them having said:

> "I also think the communication was a bit lacking. Between the residents and the other organisations. Because it was a bit like... We really don't understand who we should go to, if we have a point. And very often you just get passed from one place to another. 'It's not my responsibility.' It's here and it's there. And then you'll never get it resolved." - p3, newcomer

This touches on the next perceived point which could be improved relating to communication - which was not the communication between residents and the organisation, but rather between and within the involved organisations. Three participants felt like they were being constantly redirected when they asked for help. According to participant 5 this was a result of insufficient correspondence between and within the involved parties, which lead to them get in each other's way:

> "Lots of organisations [had] no leader. There has to be a leader, even if there is a lot of organisations. Leader of the building, for example, because the organisation started to fight each other now indirectly. You know [...] like I dig the ground under your feet without you knowing, or I take people to my side." - p5, newcomer

The final communicational improvement point was transparency - which was described in different aspects. For instance, one participant mentioned that how the building was shown at the beginning was very different from the reality of living there, which led to a mismatch between his expectations and the reality. Finally, a desire for more transparency in costs was described by two participants. One spoke of wanting a more transparent budget to use for activities, because they were supposed to have one from the project owners, but this budget was "super vague and not clear." Another participant spoke about not knowing what certain expenses are being used for:

> “We pay service costs - 140 or 150 [euro] services. For what? And that’s the question. And they say that includes the cleaning of the stairs, for example. But believe me, the stairs stinks like hell. No one does this. And after a certain amount of time, people started to not pay the service cost anymore, because they can see.” - p5, newcomer

Desire for more support: in both locals & newcomers

A desire for more support could also be deduced from the majority of the interviews, both from a local perspective as well as a newcomer perspective.

> “I can’t do everything, but there are plenty of things I can do myself. But if you let me learn how to do it, I won’t come [ask for help] next time.” - p3, newcomer

> “We had just been through a lot together. And carried quite a lot. It really felt – certainly in the end – like carrying. [It was] as if I was a social worker 20 hours a week. And that was a shame.” - p1, local

One local participant, who lived in a residential group with four locals and six teen newcomers, spoke about how living there with that ratio put a lot of pressure on the locals:

> “We were four young people - and students - with six traumatised boys who did not speak the language. That doesn’t work. That ratio just didn’t work well. So we had too much responsibility, which was not meant for us. And we were all a bit left-wing do-gooders, who thought, ‘alright, I guess we’ll do it.’” - p1, local

She described that they did have a social worker for the project, but that this was not was sufficient for the needs of the tenants:

> “She was present more than necessary... Because she had to stop when someone turned 18, but when we had questions or something went wrong, then she went beyond her scheduled time to help people over 18. Because it was needed. So she wasn’t always present, but she was often - and more than she was paid for. [...] But this isn’t something you want to depend on, having someone want to work overtime like that. It must be included in the project.” - p1, local

Besides this, she described wanting more tools to herself be able to handle issues like intercultural communication as well as possible traumas:

> “Once last year, because we had requested it a lot, we received training for the Dutch people. Because we actually didn’t get that at all, it was just, “just go live there.” And here they explained: this is why some cultures clump together; this is how you can have conversations with some people; these are traumas that people can struggle with. And that’s actually something good that you would like to experience more often than once every half year or four months.” - p1, local

Both of the interviewed newcomers spoke about wanting to be independent. One of them spoke about how he would have liked guidance focussed on this - where instead of having people doing things for him, people teach him how to do things by himself:

> “The residents should be given the space to actually arrange things themselves... Especially the refugees, so that they can simply arrange things themselves. Or that they just learn how to do it. And not that it is done for them.” - p3, newcomer

He went on to explain a situation in which one person guided him in a way in which he felt he learned to become more independent - and how it would be helpful to implement this mindset to guidance:

> “For instance someone from [social organisation]. His name is Ahmed. I say I have to make an appointment with the doctor. Well, because I could speak a little Dutch, he just calls and tells me, “okay, make an appointment. And I’m here if necessary.” So that was a bit like, then you dare to do more, speak Dutch and that. So if this [approach] is also implemented a bit broader - also put into the process of those residents, then it gets even better. Then they actually receive better guidance.” - p3, newcomer

He added that additional support should be given to people who may have more difficulty taking initiative and asking for help themselves:

> “If I dare, I will come and say, “I want to learn something.” Then I’ll learn it. But if someone is sitting upstairs in his room and no one is actually pulling him... Then it’s not going to happen. I mean paying more attention to people who don’t take the initiative themselves.” - p3, newcomer

Domain 4: Other influences on lived experience

There were a few other recurring themes that were deduced from the interviews to have an impact on the lived experience in the mixed co-housing projects. These included: the spatial design of the buildings, a perceived transient mindset and the newcomers’ navigation of integration.

Spatial design

Four participants talked about a relation between the spatial design of their home and the general atmosphere.

Two participants, who lived in a project which was converted from an office building, talked about how this space was not ideal for living and took some getting used to. One said:

> “I actually think that what took the most getting used to, was that this is an office where we came to live - suddenly I found myself in a concrete space. It’s not necessarily a warm building, or a cosy building. Although in some residential groups it was, because they had invested a lot in making it a really nice place.” - p2, local

He went on to describe how the appearance of the house may affect the atmosphere in the house:

> “It really was a bit of a man cave. We lived there with eight men, so the atmosphere was chill, but also, if I’m being honest, a bit gloomy. Because the design of your space really has a lot of influence on the general atmosphere - really quite a lot. And I think I’ve really become very aware of that here. So I eventually put some effort into dressing up the place. I once put a plant in the living room - a really big one, you know - or bought a new kitchen table, or furnished the hallway with some furniture, and put some things in the kitchen that others could also use. Then it becomes a bit homely.” - p2, local

Another participant viewed it from the reverse, as she talked about how the atmosphere between housemates of the residential groups can be reflected in the appearance and decoration of their houses:

> “We did crafts every house-evening, so we had posters with our faces and names and all the languages. And in that [other] hallway everything was just straight and rigid and bare. So then you really get those big contrasts between a lively house – a bit messy and cosy - and then a sleek, bare house where everyone is quite withdrawn.” - p1, local

Finally, three participants talked about how common spaces can help stimulate connection between tenants:

> “The fact that we have common spaces in the first place of course is very important. Even places where there isn’t an organisational layout, people walk around, meet each other. They have this need to come together. So as long as there is some place to hang out, they’ll do something with it.” - p6, local

Transient mindset

As most of these projects were located in buildings that were to be demolished within a few years, a temporary mindset was reflected in a few of the interviews. This mindset was not only evident among tenants but was also perceived within the overseeing organisations.

> “It’s a ‘start block’ - this is not your end house.” - p7, local

The transient nature of certain co-housing projects often evokes a sense of temporariness among the residents, which is reflected in their attitudes and investments towards their living spaces. A temporary mindset was observed in some of the interviewees. One participant, for instance, expressed reluctance in deeply personalising or financially investing in their space, given its impermanent nature. They stated:

> “Honestly, I don’t want to spend too much on this apartment because I know it’s going to be demolished” - p7, local.

Such sentiments highlight an underlying issue of attachment and belonging. When residents perceive their stay as temporary, it can lead to a lack of emotional investment, impacting community ties and social cohesion. These attitudes towards impermanence can significantly affect the lived experience in the house. The physical environment and personalization of a space play pivotal roles in establishing a sense of ‘home’ and community. Thus, the transient mindset, coupled with design elements, can determine whether residents view their spaces merely as a passing shelter or as a true home.”

Two interviewees specifically highlighted perceiving a temporary mindset by the overseeing organisations towards the project. One participant expressed frustration at the apparent lack of support for tenants, suggesting an organisational ambivalence stemming from the temporary nature of the project setup:

> “But we got no help. There is a lot of rules that have been broken and this and that - and no one takes care of it. No one does anything for it. So, some places you feel like there are rules here. [But here] there are no rules and no one cares after all. Because they all got the idea of a couple of years and then we’re leaving. Everybody is leaving. They felt like, ‘They’re leaving anyway.’” - p5, newcomer

Another participant also felt like there was a temporary mindset in the organisation that allocated the status holders to the co-living projects, saying:

> “Sometimes it was a bit like, “Well, they just came from the AZC. We hope that they can learn a bit of Dutch there within three to twelve months, and then they can move on to their own home.” - p1, local

This perspective appeared to influence the high turnover of status holders in the project. Such rapid transitions posed challenges for tenants, who formed deep connections with individuals who then departed sooner than anticipated. Reflecting on this, one participant said:

> “We had a large flow through of status holders. And that was kind of strange and unfortunate. Because there was little guidance on the project, and often this was the first house in five or six years that they were able to settle down. […] But you just really get attached to each other. And those boys sometimes just don’t have anyone anymore. So yeah, that really sucked.” - p1, local

Newcomers’ navigation of integration: discrimination & lack of autonomy

When discussing their experiences living in the mixed co-housing projects, the newcomers often also shared insights about the challenges they faced in their journey to integrate and establish a home in a new country. A number of hurdles were highlighted by these individuals, shedding light on the complex tapestry of their adaptation process.

The feeling of a lack of autonomy emerged as a dominant theme. One participant expressed a feeling of not knowing enough about the process to navigate the new environment effectively, particularly in the beginning. This feeling of powerlessness was aggravated in the other newcomer participant by the realisation that their educational certificates, which represented years of hard work and accomplishment, held no value in The Netherlands. Further compounding this sentiment was the lack of choice in housing. When newcomers are assigned to an accommodation, they effectively have no choice but to take it, since otherwise they must find accommodation on their own. As one newcomer described the process:

> “So when you move from the AZC, they offered most of us this place, and they say “you take it or the streets”. And so you accept it.” - p5, newcomer

Emphasising this lack of autonomy, he later even described the co-housing project as follows:

> “We are not in prison, but we were in a prison. It was a big, big prison.” - p5, newcomer

In addition to these challenges, instances of discrimination in varying degrees of severity also tainted their experiences. For instance, one participant recalled condescending jokes which were made by the members of their sports club. However, this prejudice was not limited to social interactions but extended to more formal institutions as well - another participant recounted feeling discriminated against by a housing company. He attributed this unfair treatment to racial biases and the stereotypes associated with their name:

> “And every time I communicate with them, I go. There is no office. There is nothing. I called, no one could help. But when I got help from someone who is Dutch and they saw the Dutch name, suddenly they are more able to communicate and find the problem.” - p5, newcomer

Interviewing tenants & organisations: Key takeaway

Tension: autonomy & support
Many tenants of mixed co-housing experience the feeling of a lack of support. Tenants have often felt ignored by organisations (within the building but also beyond, such as the municipality). A desire for more support is experienced by both locals and newcomers, but come from slightly different angles. For locals, this desire mainly regards guidance relating towards the navigation of intercultural communication. For newcomers, the guidance relates more to becoming independent within Dutch society. However, the desire for being autonomous was a prevalent theme throughout the interviews, both with locals and newcomers. This raises the questions: What is the optimum balance between autonomy and support? What does it look like?

Participatory session: Exploring autonomy & support

Because the interviews discussed in the previous chapter were conducted without full immersion in the participants' context, the findings are based on their recounted experiences, rather than my direct observations. This approach may overlook nuanced, real-time interactions or non-verbal cues that can be vital to understanding the lived experiences of the participants - which is why a further study was done to try to uncover latent experiences.

As part of this effort, a participatory session was held to further investigate the tension between autonomy and support within the mixed co-housing experience. During this session, these two concepts were explored in-depth with tenants of such projects. Key questions that guided the exploration were: What do autonomy and support mean to these tenants? In what ways do they manifest in their lives? (How) might the concepts be related? By developing a better understanding of these questions, three opportunity points were deduced.

Method

Six tenants of co-housing projects participated, from projects in three different cities in the Netherlands. Five of the participants had previously participated in an interview.

Two days before the session, a sensitising booklet was sent to the participants. The booklet included 3 activities to get the participants in the mindset of thinking about their experiences in co-housing. The first activity was about their first associations with living in co-housing; the second was a guided mind map on "autonomy," which for accessibility purposes was subdivided into the concepts of independence and control, and the third activity was a guided mind map on "support". These activities subsequently served as the basis for the structure of the participatory session. The full plan of the session can be found in Appendix F.

The session was audio recorded with consent to allow for later referral and a verbatim transcription. Two additional interviews were conducted during the analysis of the findings to clarify certain ambiguities.

Thematic analysis

The audio recording of the session was transcribed and a thematic analysis was subsequently conducted. First the transcription was coded, then the codes and their corresponding quotes were exported to Miro, where these were thematically clustered. The clusters were iteratively re-organised in order to achieve one coherent and comprehensive map.

Findings: Connecting understandings of autonomy and support with lived experience

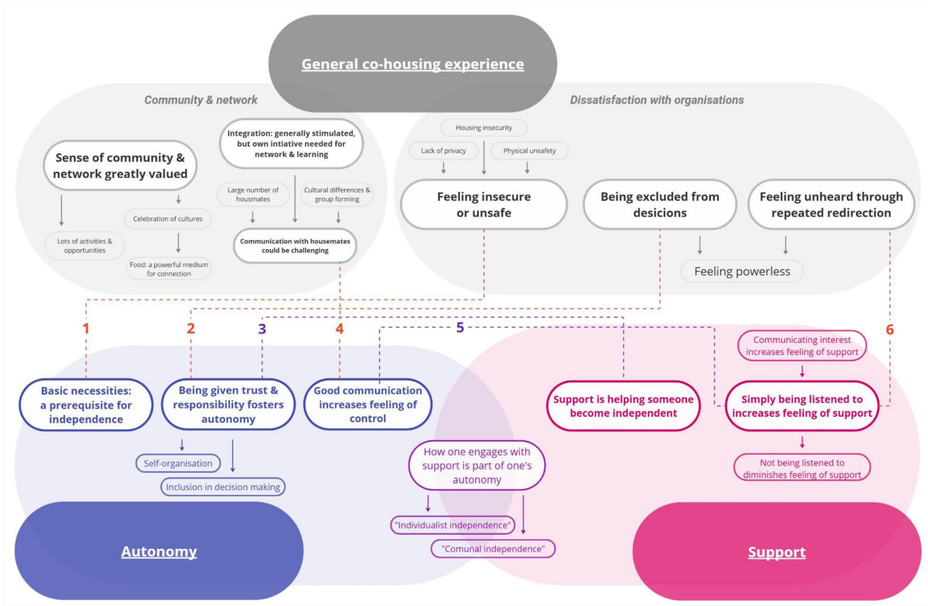


Figure 12: Participatory session findings map

Interpretation of findings

The map is divided in three domains: general experience, autonomy and support. These domains consist of themes and subthemes, which are connected by blue lines. Six connections, three purple and three red, connect themes that are in different domains - we'll call them "bridges". Let us zoom in on these. The red bridges represent tensions between lived experiences and the understandings of either autonomy or support. The purple bridges link aspects of the two concepts of autonomy and support. Using these bridges, sometimes in a combination of multiple, key insights were formed, which will be explained in this section.

Tip: I suggest keeping the findings map handy to support reading this section.

Safety and security are prerequisites for autonomy, but are not always experienced

Bridge 1

When we view the domain of autonomy, we see that resources are the building blocks for independence. Moreover, basic necessities are a prerequisite for it. This manifests in multiple ways, such as sufficient income, knowledge, and social environment. Besides this, having a safe place to live is seen as an important aspect of independence, as mentioned by three participants.

When regarding the domain of general experience, a prominent theme was feeling insecure or unsafe within their co-housing conditions. This feeling was due to three main causes: an insecure housing situation, physical unsafety and a lack of privacy. This theme of unsafety and insecurity conflicts with the need for a safe place to live as a prerequisite for independence.

Comparing these themes, an opportunity can be deduced: through improving the sense of safety and security, the sense of autonomy may be improved.

Conflict

Experience: Feeling insecure or unsafe	Autonomy: Basics necessities are a prerequisite for independence

To support is to help another become autonomous

Bridge 3

Within the domain of support, an prominent theme was support is helping someone become independent. This means that the supporter does not take over the obligations of the other, but instead helps them in a way that they learn to do the task independently. This can manifest in allowing the other to do the task while simply being there to assist if needed, such as in the two examples of calling an institution.

This act of allowing someone to do a task themselves instead of taking over this task, can be seen as a hand-over of trust and responsibility from the supporter to the supporter. In this way it may be connected with the theme within the domain of autonomy: being given trust & responsibility fosters autonomy.

Autonomy was harmed by exclusion from decision making and feeling unheard

Bridge 2

Continuing with this theme of giving trust and responsibility fosters autonomy, we see that this is further specified with two sub-themes: being able to organise oneself and being included in decision making. Organising oneself and therefore being allowed to carry the responsibility of creating one's own rules and conditions, without having to include others to ask for help or justify actions, is seen as an important way to feel autonomous. Besides this, being included in decision making and conversations pertaining oneself was found as another crucial aspect to feel autonomous.

Within the domain of general experience, feeling powerless was a prominent theme. This was also specified in two sub-themes, which can directly be related to the previously mentioned sub-themes in the autonomy domain. The first aspect of powerlessness was feeling unheard through repeated redirection by the organisations related to the projects. Four people used the analogy of "being tossed like a ball" - which accentuates a lack of control over their own circumstances. When we compare this to their understanding of autonomy, this conflicts with the aspect of being able to organise oneself. The second experienced aspect of powerlessness was being excluded from decisions, which clearly contradicts the inclusion in decision making aspect of autonomy.

When we compare these themes, an opportunity to increase the sense of autonomy presents itself, through inclusion in decision making and making tenants feel heard.

Conflicts

Experience: Being excluded from decisions	Autonomy: Being included in the conversation
Experience: Feeling unheard through repeated redirection	Autonomy: Being able to organise oneself

Communication is an obstacle, but is essential for both autonomy and support

Bridge 4, 5 & 6

As may be seen within the domain of autonomy, good communication increases the feeling of control. This can manifest in multiple ways, for instance: having an outlet for emotions, clear communication of expectations and a lack of communication barriers. Similarly, when the support domain is viewed, we see that communication can also have an impact on the feeling of support. We see that besides communicating interest in someone, simply being heard increases the feeling of support - regardless of outcome. Therefore, we can deduce that good communication can simultaneously benefit one's sense of autonomy and sense of support.

However, when we consider communication within the domain of the general lived experience, we see that it was experienced as difficult on at least two fronts: both in relation with organisations, as well as within their housing community. Firstly, there was the theme of feeling unheard through repeated redirection between organisations, as discussed in key insight 3. Besides this, communication with other tenants was also found to be difficult at times, although this was a slightly less potent theme. Language barriers and communication with a large number of housemates were manifestations of this within their community.

When we compare these themes, an opportunity presents itself to improve the sense of autonomy and support, by improving communication within the context related organisations and/or within their network.

Conflicts

Experience: Communication challenges with housemates	Autonomy: (Good) communication increases feeling of control
Experience: Feeling unheard through repeated redirection	Support: Not being listened to diminishes feeling of support

Emerging opportunities

As a result of the analysis of the participatory session, three opportunities emerged:

1. Improve sense of autonomy by improving sense of security

2. Improve sense of autonomy by inclusion in decision making and making feel heard

3. Improve autonomy and support by improving communication

Selected opportunity: communication

Due to its connection and positive impact on both the feeling of autonomy and feeling of support, the last opportunity was chosen to pursue further. This dual benefit makes it a strategic area for meaningful impact. Improving communication could be impactful on two fronts: within the housing community, and between tenants and organisations. Addressing the stronger and more pervasive issue of feeling unheard through clearer, more direct communication channels with organisations could empower individuals to feel more informed, and therefore more in control, of their

situations, while enhancing their sense of being supported. Similarly, improving communication within the housing community—such as addressing language barriers and fostering better interaction among housemates—offers the potential to strengthen interpersonal connections and create a more supportive and harmonious living environment.

In the next chapter, communication within the context of co-housing is further examined.

Communication in co-housing

This chapter dives deeper into the topic of communication in co-housing. The previous research on mixed co-housing was retroactively examined with a focus on communication, in order to identify aspects of communication which could be improved. Additionally, a small study was done with tenants of multicultural student houses in The Netherlands to see how these houses deal with communication.

Communication in mixed co-housing: a retroactive view

The previous field research findings were revisited with a focus on communication, examining areas where misunderstandings and frustrations commonly arise. In this section, key communicational issues are identified, both within households and in interactions with housing organisations.

Issues within households

Challenges in communicating expectations and frustrations
Communication of expectations and frustrations can be hard for people within the same cultural background, as differences in communication styles, habits or personal values, can lead to misunderstandings. In a multicultural setting, these challenges can be amplified by varying norms and assumptions about acceptable behavior, requiring effort to bridge gaps in understanding. Fear of confrontation or causing offense can further inhibit open dialogue, leaving tensions unresolved and harming the sense of community.

Language barriers as a source of frustration and miscommunications
In the mixed co-housing setting, disparities in language fluency can hinder open communication. Tenants may misinterpret each other's messages or avoid expressing their concerns entirely, fearing they won't be understood. This barrier can result in unmet expectations and unresolved conflicts.

Clashes due to varying cultural meanings and rituals
Cultural diversity can enrich a shared living environment, but it also may also present challenges when cultural practices and rituals differ. For example, varying interpretations of cleanliness, shared space usage, or celebration rituals may create tension if not openly addressed and understood.

Issues between tenants and organisations

Feelings of powerlessness and being unheard
Residents often reported feeling powerless when concerns are redirected between multiple organisations, such as property managers and support agencies, without clear accountability. This lack of tangible action can delay solutions and leave tenants feeling dismissed.

Exclusion from decision-making processes
Housing organisations frequently make decisions about policies, resource allocation, and conflict resolution without consulting tenants. This approach alienates them from processes that directly impact their daily lives and erodes trust in the organisations meant to support them.

Language Barriers in organisational communication
Tenants who are not fluent in the languages used by housing organisations face additional obstacles when raising concerns or inquiries. Misunderstandings and incomplete exchanges of information can lead to frustration and prolonged issues, further diminishing tenants' confidence in these organisations.

Communication in multicultural student houses

In order to deepen my understanding of communication mechanisms in multicultural student houses in the Netherlands, a small study was done consisting of three interviews with students who each have experience living in co-housing with both international students and local Dutch students. The research question was as follows:

How do multicultural student houses in the Netherlands, with Dutch and international students sharing facilities, deal with the communication of expectations and frustrations between housemates?

- What expectations and frustrations do they have relating to their dwelling? How do they communicate these?
- What communication mechanisms are there, which might aid multi-cultural communication?
- What are the pain points of (multicultural) communication within these houses?
- How do international students view communication with Dutch students? This could be somewhat of a blind spot for me, as a partially Dutch person

Findings

Communication channels

The interviewed all three had lived in high-engagement student houses, which relied on several communication channels to coordinate and connect:

In-person interactions: The primary and preferred form of communication was face-to-face conversations, such as knocking on someone's door to discuss a matter, or talking during a shared meal.

WhatsApp groups: Digital communication is centralized in WhatsApp groups, with a main house chat being the hub for daily communication and inquiries. Additionally, smaller workgroups are formed to organize specific tasks or events, such as planning a party or coordinating shared responsibilities.

House meetings: These are held once or twice a year, typically when a housemate deems it necessary to address a problem or pitch an idea. Common topics include resolving interpersonal issues, making decisions about significant purchases, or setting collective goals.

Inhibitors of communication

Despite the effectiveness of these channels, several factors were identified which could hinder communication:

Differing expectations: Housemates may not always share the same understanding of communal living. For example, one interviewee mentioned a new housemate from New Zealand who was living alone for the first time, and needed to learn etiquette and participation norms, highlighting the adjustment required in such environments.

Cleaning responsibilities: Cleaning is a recurring topic in house meetings and often a source of mild frustration. While most issues revolve around small matters like dishes being left uncleaned, they can still create tension if not addressed.

Cultural differences: Dutch directness was acknowledged and, while appreciated for its clarity, can sometimes come across as rude or abrupt to those from other cultural backgrounds.

Lack of presence: Prolonged periods without interaction can erode sympathy and understanding among housemates, making it harder to maintain positive relationships. This is part of why the houses preferred high engagement between housemates.

Factors aiding multicultural communication

Several practices were identified that enhance communication and foster inclusivity:

Careful selection of housemates: Choosing individuals who align with the house's values and dynamics ensures smoother interactions. Participants noted that there usually are no rigid criteria for selecting potential housemates - decisions are often based on a "vibe" or a natural connection with current members. However, one tangible criteria which was mentioned is the desired level of participation. Since these houses value high participation, they benefit from selecting housemates who share this mindset and are eager to contribute.

Aligning expectations: Relatedly, discussing and aligning on what it means to live together—such as levels of participation and openness to being part of a large community—reduces friction and establishes a shared foundation for collaboration.

Inclusive language use: Ensuring that plenary communication is conducted in a common language that everyone understands helps avoid misunderstandings and creates a more inclusive environment.

Open engagement: High-engagement houses thrive on members' willingness to actively participate in communal activities and decision-making processes. This fosters a strong sense of belonging and shared responsibility

INTERMEZZO

This marks the end of the Part 3: Listening to Stories. Clearly, a lot was brought the surface. One key takeaway was the tension between autonomy and support, along with the need to strengthen multicultural communication. These dynamics will be important as we move into the design phase.

Let's take a moment to revisit the assignment:

In the midst of a housing crisis and a migration crisis—compounded by the lingering effects of a pandemic—co-housing between newcomers and locals seems like an ideal solution for both. Yet, challenges remain: bridging differences, navigating integration, and addressing psychological well-being can put pressure on both residents and the organizations facilitating such projects.

How can Dutch students and newcomers live together in a way that allows both groups to truly thrive?

PART 4:
ENVISIONING & CREATING

This section traces the design process of developing an intervention to enhance communication in mixed co-housing environments, from initial design directions to final concept. Through iterative development, pilot testing, and evaluation, the final concept - Workshop Exploring 'Home' - was crafted as an engaging and structured tool to foster shared understanding among housemates.

Initial design directions

Based on the identified communicational issues, design directions were brainstormed. These issues had been categorized into two main areas: communication within households and communication with housing organizations. Consequently, two design directions were developed for each area, which each addressed specific needs. These four design directions can be found on the next spread.

Communication within household

Direction 1: Strategy for in-house communication of expectations and frustrations

A comprehensive strategy designed for SHS Delft to implement within co-living spaces. This strategy would provide a framework for addressing tenants' expectations and frustrations in a structured manner. Ultimately it should encourage dialogue and mutual understanding among housemates.

Aim: To help tenants feel heard by fostering a supportive and proactive communication environment.

Details: This direction leans towards a strategic design approach, involving multiple "horizons" or phases of implementation. One specific aspect would be developed in detail to serve as a practical example and to focus prototyping.

Direction 2: Conversation facilitator "game"

An interactive and visual tool designed to explore socio-cultural dimensions, personal values, and lifestyles of housemates. Drawing from frameworks such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and other relevant factors, such a game could promote meaningful conversations.

Aim: To help housemates communicate expectations and frustrations effectively while fostering a deeper understanding of each other.

Details: Such a game has the potential to afford multiple uses:

Beginning of co-living: Helps housemates get to know each other, unearth differences in backgrounds, and align expectations.

After settling: Provides a platform for reflection and ongoing dialogue about shared living experiences.

Medium: The design direction could evolve into a "Living artifact" - a dynamic, tangible object placed in communal areas, serving as a "living artifact" that tracks changes and facilitates continuous interaction.

Communication between tenants and organisations

Direction 3: "Problem desk" platform

A digital platform that acts as a bridge between tenants and housing organizations. It would provide a user-friendly interface for tenants to voice their concerns, access relevant information, and receive guidance on whom to contact for specific issues.

Aim: To help tenants feel heard by streamlining communication and offering clear, actionable solutions.

Details: This is a pragmatic and solution-oriented direction, prioritizing functionality and accessibility. While it may offer less creative freedom, it has the potential for significant impact by addressing immediate communication gaps and improving tenant satisfaction

Direction 4: Speculative/critical installation

A conceptual installation designed to provoke thought and stimulate reflection about co-living experiences. This direction would use speculative design principles, and could be implemented to engage tenants both at the start of their co-living journey and after they've settled in.

Aim: To stimulate reflection and ask critical questions about co-living experiences and future possibilities.

Details: This installation could:

At the beginning: Encourage tenants to think about their aspirations and expectations for co-living.

After settling in: Provide a space for reflecting on their experiences and considering areas for improvement.

While this direction is less concrete, it offers a playful and exploratory approach, making it a potentially engaging and memorable addition to the co-living environment.

Selection of design direction

Within-house context

The decision was made to focus on the within-house context due to its ability to foster deeper understanding and strengthen internal dynamics within households. The primary reason for this choice is that **designing for the internal environment helps create resilience, empowering housemates to manage and navigate frustrations that may arise.** By addressing issues within the household before they escalate into external challenges, a proactive, front-end approach to conflict resolution and relationship-building is taken. Strengthening the internal environment ensures that housemates are better equipped to handle challenges, fostering a more supportive and harmonious living experience. Additionally, fostering a strong internal support system reduces the likelihood of needing frequent communication with external organizations, as housemates become more self-reliant in managing and resolving issues within the household.

Conversation facilitator

The direction for a conversation facilitator was chosen to develop further. This choice was based on several key reasonings:

Pragmatic and contextual fit: The conversation facilitator approach is pragmatic and directly aligned with the specific context of the household. It is designed to address immediate needs in a way that is actionable and relevant to the residents' daily interactions.
Design background: Given that my background is not in strategic design, this approach is better suited for my focus on interaction design. The conversation facilitator is a more accessible and effective solution within the scope of my expertise, focused on designing for meaningful interactions.
Previous experience: I have relevant experience designing conversation facilitation tools that support productive communication. This experience adds confidence in the ability to create a solution that will truly benefit the household dynamic.
Time constraints: With the limited time available for the project, the conversation facilitator is a more feasible direction. It allows for timely development and implementation while still providing value to the residents.
Flexibility: This direction also offers the flexibility to incorporate speculative design elements, which could inspire forward-thinking discussions and future possibilities in housemate collaboration.
Overall, the conversation facilitator direction aligns with both the project's needs and my strengths and affinities, making it the most suitable choice to deliver the intended outcome.

Designing a Conversation Facilitator

“The intervention, aimed at tenants of mixed co-housing, should prompt reflection and facilitate discussions on expectations and experiences in their living situation.“

Based on this design statement, concepts were brainstormed. Two main concepts were expanded: the Common Area Artifact and the Card Game. After evaluating each concept through pros and cons, the card game was selected for further development.

First concept: Conversation Cards

A card game that aims to **improve understanding** within co-housing projects by creating a **safe space** in which tenants are stimulated to **reflect on their experiences** and have an open discussion about their **expectations and frustrations.**

First, an overview of existing conversation cards on the market was conducted to gain insight into available options and identify inspirational elements. Consequently, a prototype was made.

The card deck consists of three categories of cards, with questions that housemates can ask each other, each category getting progressively deeper. The first category (green) is designed for initial interactions and focuses on sharing expectations. The final category (blue) is intended for housemates who have lived together for a while and emphasizes reflecting on their shared living experience.

Figure 13: Conversation cards protype testing

Figure 14: Conversation cards prototype

Prototype testing

Goal
Test the functionality of the cards and observe interactions between native and non-native Dutch speakers. Explore how participants navigate a language barrier when they don’t share a common language.

Set-up
1-4 participants, including at least one native Dutch speaker and one non-native speaker, simulating a roommate scenario. Participants are given the obstacle to use the cards without relying on English.

Key takeaways
- Questions on the cards led to new inquiries and topics of discussion
- Drawing served as the primary communication tool (all participants were designers), and was interestingly used not just for answering questions, but also for posing them.
- Open-ended questions proved more effective, as they spurred more discussion.
- Valuable outcomes: self expression and learning about each other
- Google Translate reduced the fun in interactions
- Explore ways to foster empathy and connection without relying on language
- Consider strategies for increasing engagement

Concept pivot: Workshop

A pivot was made to the medium of a workshop, as it became evident that communicating expectations and frustrations in a shared living space requires more support and structure than a simple card game could provide. At this point it had become clear that no strategy was put in place by the housing corporation for the introduction of tenants. This while insights from Tinnemans et al (2019) and my interview at Riekerhaven both highlighted that a good introduction can significantly improve cohabitation, by breaking the ice between new housemates and setting a positive tone for future interactions.

Besides this, a workshop also means there is a designated, defined time, as the open-ended nature of the card game, where the initiation was yet unclear. As such, this shift in medium aimed to create a more supportive, structured and intentional space for dialogue.

workshop
A ~~card game~~ that aims to improve understanding within co-housing projects by creating a safe space in which tenants are stimulated to reflect on their experiences and have an open discussion about their expectations and frustrations.

Designing Workshop ‘Exploring “Home”’

This section details the process of designing the workshop and its activities, from the guiding concept description until the final workshop.

Guiding concept description

The following concept description was defined:

“A workshop (or a set of workshops) with the goal to set up the best living conditions within the mixed co-housing groups, by communicating their expectations about living together and their ideal conditions for a home.”

Goals of workshop

The following goals were defined to guide the design:

1. **Explore and communicate expectations** around living together
2. **Foster understanding** between (new) housemates.
3. Reflect on constructive ways to address **unmet expectations**

Interaction vision

To further guide the design choices of the workshop, an interaction vision was carefully chosen. First, the interaction qualities were selected to define the desired experience:

Insightful: the experience should encourage participants to uncover new meaningful understandings about their housemates and perhaps even about themselves.

Engaging: the experience should be fun and hence inspire active participation.

Unifying: the experience should foster a sense of togetherness and shared purpose among housemates.

Prospective: the experience should instil a positive, forward-looking mindset.

Collaborative: the experience should emphasize teamwork and create a sense of creating something together of which they can be proud of.

To embody these qualities, multiple analogies were brainstormed. Among the ideas considered, three analogies stood out:

1. Assembling a piece of furniture together
2. Making a puzzle together
3. Planting a community garden together

Strengths and weaknesses of the analogies were assessed, based on the nuances of the envisioned interaction. Ultimately, the community garden analogy was chosen, based on the following strengths compared to the other analogies:

- It conveys the strongest sense of **group effort**.
- It emphasizes **individual contribution and autonomy**. Whereas with the other analogies the “inputs” (furniture parts, puzzle pieces) are fixed, the input of a community garden is seeds - symbolizing ideas and expectations - which allows for more individual contribution.
- It evokes a stronger **sense of care and optimism**, aligning with the forward-looking perspective of the workshop.

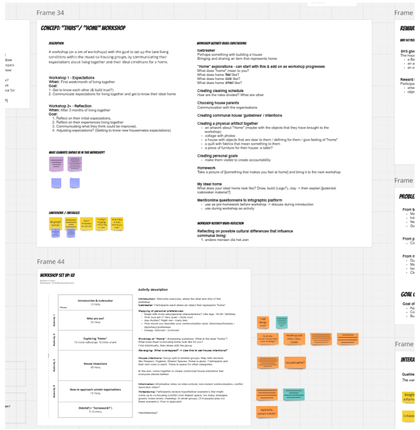
Figure 15: DALL-E generated image. Prompt: “create an animated image of a community garden, highlighting collaborativity”

Analogy:
Planting a community garden together

In this community garden, everyone contributes their seeds (expectations & ideas) and tends to them (communicates clearly, nurtures relationships). Over time, a healthy garden emerges (a harmonious living environment), but it requires continued attention, shared responsibility, and flexibility to adapt to different needs. Each plant is different, just like the individuals in the group, and together they can create a beautiful, thriving space.

Content development

The majority of the workshop's development process took place on Miro, which served as the central hub for organizing ideas and mapping out the workshop's structure.



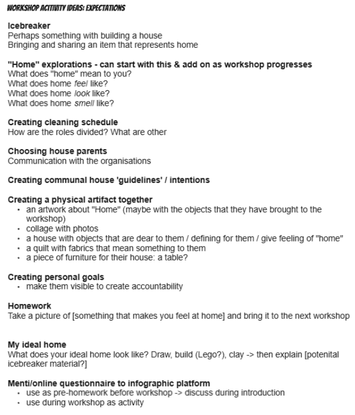


Figure 16: Left: Section of Miro workspace: concept development, activity brainstorm and first iteration of workshop structure. Right: Workshop activity brainstorm.

Brainstorming

Guided by the Workshop Goals and Interaction Vision, potential activities were brainstormed. This was carried both digitally, using Miro and offline, through sketching. This resulted in a list of possible relevant activities (Figure 16).

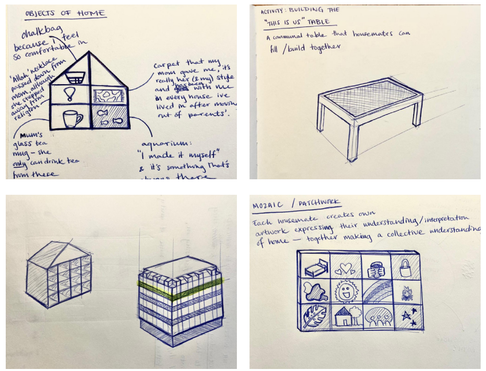


Figure 17: Acivity idea sketching

Giving shape to the workshop

The next step was to synthesize, from a collection of initially brainstormed activities to a cohesive workshop. This process began with the creation of a general structure (the progression of workshop activities), which became the foundation for the more detailed Workshop Plan discussed later. The structure was then refined iteratively to ensure a cohesive narrative with a logical progression.

General structure

In order to create the general structure, first the session duration was defined: roughly two hours. This time frame was chosen to balance depth and accessibility - allowing space for the workshop to be insightful and meaningful, while remaining engaging and low-threshold. With this boundary in place, the focus shifted to organizing the flow of activities within the allotted time. Recognizing the importance of both setting the tone and providing closure with a reflection, an introduction with an icebreaker activity was placed at the start of the session, and a debrief was placed at the end. Between these bookends, activities from the brainstorming phase were selected, shifted around and positioned like puzzle pieces, taking into consideration the goals of the workshop and interaction vision.

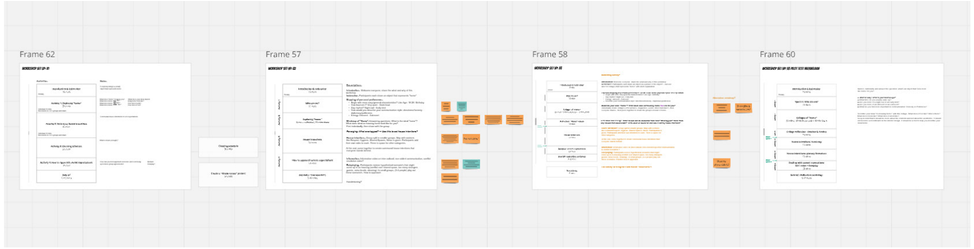
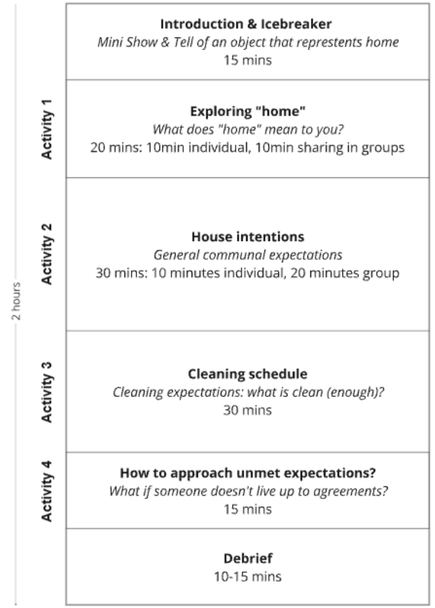


Figure 18: Screenshot of the first 4 iterations of the workshop in Miro

Guiding narrative

For the workshop's narrative, I aimed to start by gradually easing participants into the subject through general questions about themselves and the concept of "home", then moving towards progressively more specific discussions regarding their expectations of co-living. Also, as in the community garden analogy, I wanted to ensure that participants collaborated to create something tangible during the workshop—a physical object that would visualize the household's shared expectations, which they worked on together, all stand behind and can be proud of creating together.

Iterating the workshop structure



Iteration 1: An initial set up

The workshop begins with an introduction, followed by an icebreaker in the form of a short show-and-tell where participants share an object that represents "home" to them. This is followed by four key activities:

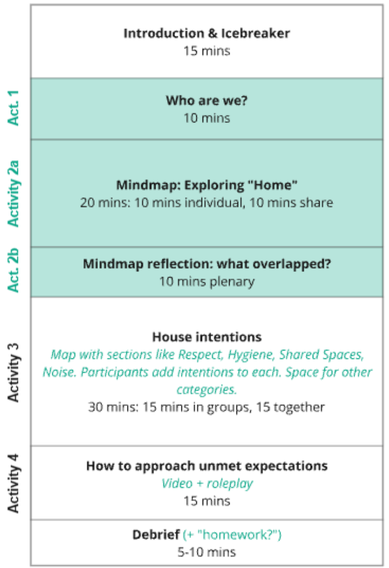
Activity 1, "Exploring 'Home'", explores the concept of home through reflective questions such as "What does 'home' mean to you?" and "What does your ideal shared living home look/feel/work/smell like?" The medium was not yet defined at this point, but media like an interactive survey or a mindmap were considered.

In Activity 2, "House intentions", participants work on setting house intentions by first individually identifying their own expectations and then discussing these, in order to collaboratively create a communal set of expectations. This would be guided by tools that will be designed later.

Activity 3, "Cleaning Schedule", focuses on discussing cleaning expectations, addressing questions like "What is clean enough?" and how participants will manage cleaning responsibilities.

In Activity 4, "How to approach unmet expectations?", the group considers how to handle hypothetical situations in which the previously agreed-upon expectations are not met.

The workshop concludes with a debrief to reflect on the activities and their outcomes.



Iteration 2: Alterations & refinement

In this iteration, the workshop begins with the same introduction and icebreaker.

Upon reflecting on the first iteration, the questions in the 'Exploring "Home"' activity were found to be too broad and sudden. An activity, "Spectra: Who Are We?" was added to ease into deeper discussions. In this activity, participants map their personal preferences and dimensions to visualize initial differences and similarities within the group. The dimensions are relevant things you'd want to know about your housemates, beginning easy and slightly increasing in complexity as to prompt conversation:

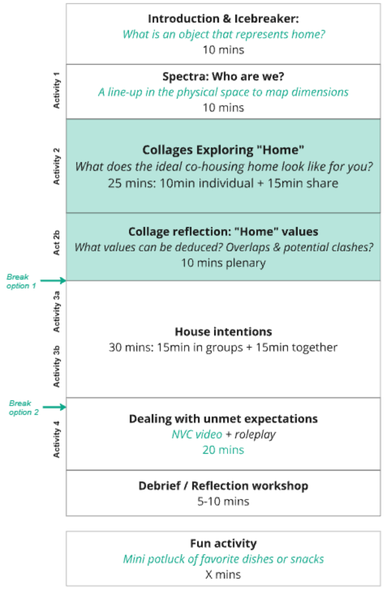
Age: 18-28 / Birthday
Day rhythm? Night owl - Early bird
Energy: Introvert - Extrovert
How loud are you? Very quiet - Quite loud
Preferred communication: Direct & Honest - Diplomatic & Polite

The "Exploring Home" activity follows. In this iteration, it was further refined into a mind-mapping exercise, where the initial questions ("What does your ideal shared living home look/feel/work/smell like?") are explored.

The "House Intentions" activity is also more structured in this iteration. Participants work on a map with predefined categories, such as Respect, Hygiene, Shared Spaces, and Noise—categories identified during research as common sources of mismatched expectations. Space is also reserved for participants to include additional categories they feel are important.
The previous iteration's "Cleaning schedule" activity was removed, as the topic of expectations around cleanliness is extensive enough to warrant a separate workshop. Instead, more time was allotted to the earlier activities and focussing on exploring expectations on a broader level.

Activity 4: "How to approach unmet expectations?", is further defined with an educational video on effective communication techniques and a role-play exercise to practice resolving conflicts constructively.

For the final debrief, the idea of formalizing house intentions with signatures or a fun "homework" assignment was considered but ultimately set aside. Such additions felt overly binding and contractual, whereas the goal was to foster a more organic and collaborative interaction.



Iteration 3: Refinement for pilot testing

In this iteration, the icebreaker was revised to make it more accessible: instead of bringing an object that represents home, participants introduce themselves and answer the question, “What is an object that represents home to you?”

The “Spectra: Who Are We?” activity was also modified to be more interactive, using the physical space instead of a two-dimensional surface. An imaginary line representing a spectrum is created in the room, and participants position themselves along the line to answer the questions: What is your relative age? What time do you usually wake up? Are you more of a night owl or an early bird? Are you more of an introvert or an extrovert? What do you find more important in communication: Honesty or Politeness?

The mind-mapping activity was transformed into a collaging exercise to introduce a fun, creative element while still exploring the same questions about participants’ ideal co-housing environment. This change added variety and avoided redundancy since mind mapping is utilized later in the workshop. In plenary, a reflection is done on their collages, identifying overlapping elements and potential areas of conflict.

For the house intentions activity, structured sheets were developed to guide the participants.

The unmet expectations activity was refined with the inclusion of a video on Nonviolent Communication (NVC), as well as the creation of scenarios for a role-play exercise.

Finally, addressing concerns that the previous activity might feel negative (discussing the situation wherein someone doesn’t live up to agreements), a final activity was added to conclude the workshop on a positive note: a mini potluck where participants share their favorite snacks, fostering a sense of community and lightening the mood.

Designed workshop materials

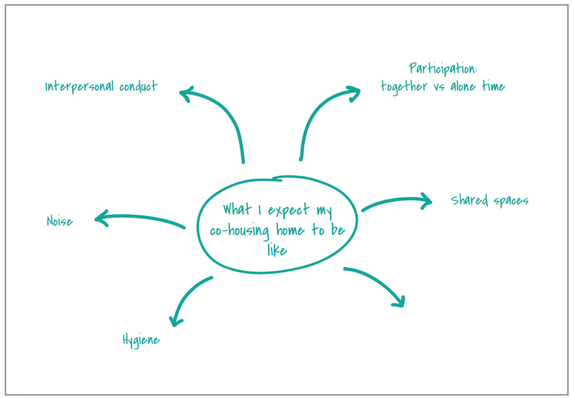


Figure 19: House Intentions (sheet 1 of 2): Mindmap: Ideal co-housing

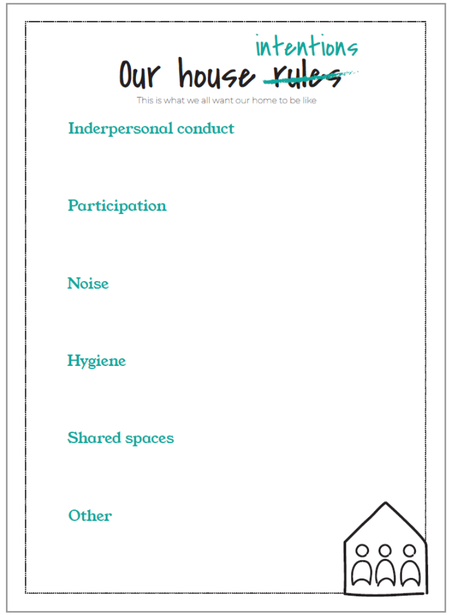
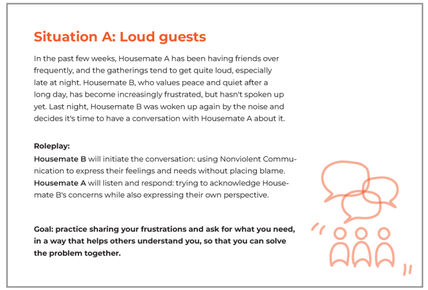


Figure 20: House Intentions (sheet 2 of 2): Setting intentions



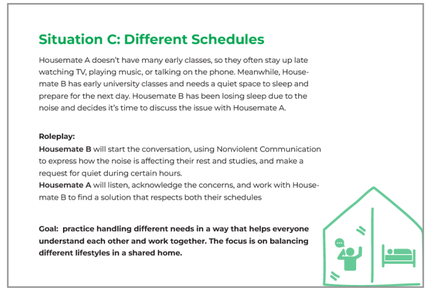
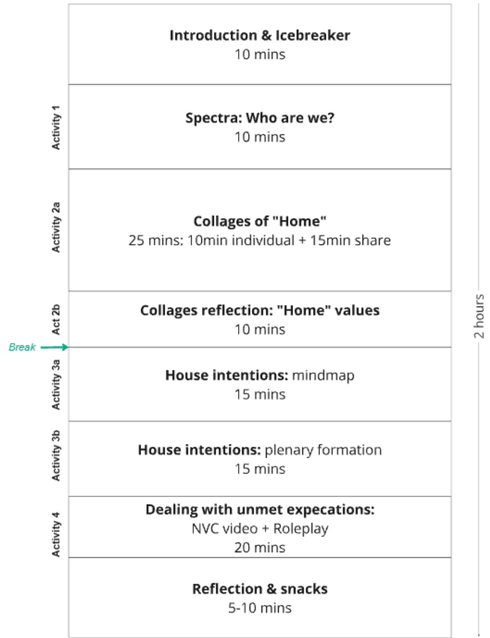


Figure 21: Roleplay scenario's

Workshop Exploring ‘Home’

This section provides an run-through of the workshop in its state for the pilot test. For more details, please refer to the pilot workshop plan in Appendix L.



Introduction & Icebreaker

The session begins with a warm welcome, during which the facilitator introduces themselves, the project, and the workshop’s goals. Participants are informed that the workshop is designed to explore the concept of “home,” uncover varying expectations related to this, and to establish better communication among housemates. The facilitator establishes a comfortable, safe environment by explaining the voluntary nature of participation and addressing any questions. Consent forms are handed out before proceeding with activities.

Participants are then asked to introduce themselves by sharing their names, nationalities, and identifying an object that feels most like home to them. This simple icebreaker sets a relaxed tone while encouraging personal storytelling.

Activity 1. Spectra: Who are we?

An invisible line on the floor serves as a spectrum for participants to position themselves based on questions like age, daily routines, and personal values. The activity is interactive, adn promotes both movement and dialogue as participants explain their positions, fostering understanding of individual differences and shared traits.

Activity 2. Collages of Home

Participants use provided materials (magazines, coloured string and other crafting items) to create a collage that visually represents their ideal co-housing home, emphasizing feelings, community, and atmosphere over the aesthetics. After sharing their works, the facilitator leads a plenary reflection session, noting recurring themes and values, discussing overlapping elements and potential clashes - these are written on the flipboard. This marks the end of the first half of the workshop. Participants are asked to keep the identified elements in the back of their minds for after the break.

Activity 3. House Intentions

After the break, small groups brainstorm about their ideal cohousing situation using the worksheet provided by the facilitator. The mind map centers around the open statement “This is what I expect my ideal co-housing to look like” and includes prewritten categories like interpersonal conduct and shared spaces, as well as an undefined category. Participants are asked to further specify their expectations for each of these categories as concretely as possible.

The outputs of the mindmap feed into the creation of house intentions —shared agreements reflecting mutual priorities and respect. First this is first done in the same small groups, and this is followed by a plenary discussion solidifying the house intentions that everyone stands behind.

Activity 4. Roleplay: Approaching Unmet Expectations

After collective expectations have been set through the House Intentions, it's time to address what to do if these expectations are not met. First, a brief video on Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is shown ("Nonviolent Communication For Beginners" by Expert Academy on YouTube). Subsequently, participants practice applying the NVC framework in the form of roleplaying, to scenarios such as addressing dirty dishes left in shared spaces. In this way, the activity prompts participants to think about clear but empathetic communication to resolve tensions

Workshop plan

The detailed workshop plan can be found in Appendix L. It outlines the structure of the pilot workshop and provides step-by-step instructions for each activity.

Pilot testing

To evaluate the workshop, a pilot test was conducted. Given that it was not possible to do a pilot test in a mixed co-housing household with students and statusholders, the pilot test was done in a multicultural co-housing project where people from various backgrounds and ages live together, nevertheless providing valuable insights for future iterations.

Figure 22: Participants collaging during pilot test

Goals of pilot test

The test had the following goals:

1. Test the flow and activities of the "Exploring Home" workshop in a **multicultural student house setting**
2. Test effectiveness of workshop in achieving **workshop goals & interaction qualities**
3. Test & practice **facilitation**

Evaluation Set-Up

The evaluation of the pilot workshop consisted of the following key components:

- **External Observer:** An observer was present to take notes on participant engagement and interactions.
- **Feedback Survey:** Participants were asked to complete a feedback survey at the end of the workshop.
- **Audio and Video Recordings:** These were considered as a supplementary reference if needed.

Results

Figure 23: Collaging and mindmap results of pilot test

Partipant dynamics

These participants already knew each other as housemates, so already had an existing rapport and hence had little trouble engaging in conversation. A key question that arises therefore is: How will dynamics shift when the group comprises strangers? It will likely be harder for people who don't know each other to relate and engage as quickly.

Takeaways:

- Provide more guidance and support during the workshop to encourage dialogue, paying close attention to active inclusion of less talkative or shy participants. Prepare prompts to stimulate conversation.
- Be prepared to address and mediate potential conflicts if they arise.

Group Size

This test involved six participants, but the actual workshops may include 10-12 participants, which can have implications for the group dynamics, and re-enforces the need for good time keeping.

Takeaways:

- Adjust activities to ensure inclusivity and engagement for all participants.
- Consider that managing larger group dynamics may take more time.
- Implement methods such as smaller breakout groups to increase individual contributions - people will be more likely to share in smaller groups.

Time management

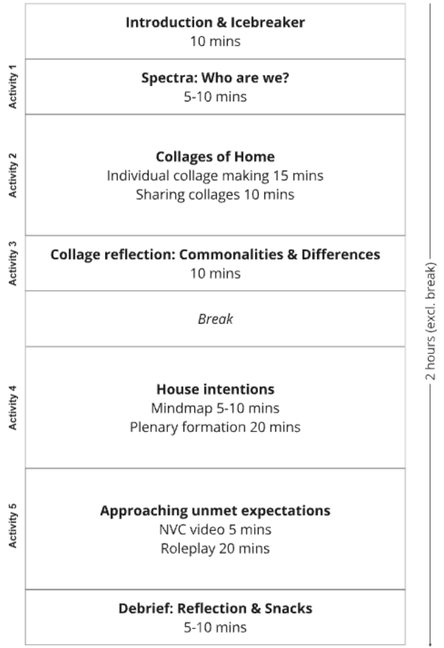
The workshop exceeded the planned two-hour duration. This was due to the fact that some tasks required more time than anticipated, but time-keeping could have been done more strictly.

Takeaways:

- Use a timer with a gentle alarm to manage time effectively and signal to participants when to wrap up.
- Consideration point: Either adjust the agenda to fit the intended time, or expand the workshop into a full morning or afternoon program to accommodate all tasks.

Final refinements

This section provides an overview of the adjustments made to the workshop based on the pilot test outcomes. Minimal changes were made to the workshop structurally, however the workshop plan was further detailed and refined to address the three main takeaways of the pilot session: reducing workshop duration, stimulating conversation between strangers, and catering to a larger group. For the detailed changes, please refer to the final workshop plan in Appendix O.



Reducing workshop duration

The implementation of a (gentle) alarm was integrated into the workshop plan, to signal the end of each activity a few minutes early, allowing participants time to conclude.

Activities were streamlined, for instance: The statements in the “Spectra” activity were reduced from five to three - as it is believed that the same effect can be achieved with this amount, it also allows for a closer examination of the statements. The most interesting statements were chosen, omitting the “relative age” and “wake-up time” statements.

Additional instructions for activity preparation were built into the plan to ensure smoother transitions. For instance, during the collage sharing activity, participants are prompted to listen carefully and observe similarities and differences between the explanations in preparation for the next activity, instead of only asking them during the subsequent reflection activity.

Enhancing interaction among participants

Facilitator notes were made clearer and expanded. Conversation prompts were added which the facilitator can use to encourage dialogue and engagement among participants, particularly between those unfamiliar with each other.

Adapting to larger groups

Facilitator notes were made clearer and expanded. Conversation prompts were added which the facilitator can use to encourage dialogue and engagement among participants, particularly between those unfamiliar with each other.

PART 5:
EVALUATING & REFLECTING

This section focuses on assessing the effectiveness and impact of the Workshop Exploring “Home”. It begins with a detailed evaluation of the final concept, followed by the conclusion and discussion which synthesize findings and reflect on the process and the project’s broader implications.

Evaluation set up

To evaluate the workshop, a test was done with one of the households of SHS Delft’s mixed co-housing project at the Polakweg - “the actual intended context.”

Partipants

The workshop test involved eight housemates, three of the housemates were unable to attend. Among these participants were:

- 6 students from a Christian student association in Delft (including 3 first year students)
- 1 non-association student.
- 1 status holder from Syria who had lived in the Netherlands for two years and planned to start studying the following year

Approach

Given that the workshop aims to achieve both short-term as well as long-term goals, a combination of both immediate feedback and follow-up evaluations is appropriate. Immediate feedback included:

- A feedback survey (Appendix P) completed at the end of the session.
- Observation notes taken by an external observer present during the test session.

To assess long-term impacts, a follow-up evaluation is ideally planned for several weeks or months after the session. However, due to time constraints, this follow-up had not been conducted at the time of writing of this report.

Focus points for observation

The following four points were given to the external observer, as points they should pay attention to. The full document given can be found in Appendix K.

1. Participant engagement

- Are participants actively participating in activities (e.g., collaging, discussions)?
- Are they asking questions or contributing ideas during group discussions?
- Do they seem attentive or distracted during the workshop?

2. Group dynamics

- Is there collaboration and teamwork during group tasks?
- Are participants respectful and listening to each other?
- Are any individuals dominating or withdrawing from the conversation?

3. Emotional tone

- Is the overall mood positive, neutral, or tense?
- Are there moments of laughter, visible agreement, or shared understanding?
- Do participants appear frustrated or disengaged at any point?

4. Facilitator interaction

- How do participants respond to prompts and instructions?
- Is the facilitator able to engage the group effectively?
- Is there anything that doesn't go smoothly? (Instructions that are misunderstood/misinterpreted)?

Observation summary

Figure 24: Participants collaging

Partipant engagement

The participants demonstrated strong engagement and respect throughout the workshop. They listened attentively to the facilitator and to one another, particularly during instructions and discussions. During activities, such as the Collaging activity, they actively participated, asking each other thoughtful questions. Even when the facilitator briefly stepped out during the House Intentions activity in the second half of the workshop, the participants continued their discussion, showing their engagement in the process.

Notably, participants showed strong recall after the video on Nonviolent Communication, remembering the framework's key steps indicating they had been paying close attention. While there was some chuckling during the roleplay activity, this lightheartedness did not detract from their participation, suggesting a relaxed yet engaged atmosphere.

Group dynamics & Emotional tone

The workshop maintained a positive and convivial tone throughout, balancing productivity with a sense of camaraderie. A large part of the group seemed to have an established rapport before the workshop, as observed in their interactions prior to the session - when a group of six housemates were cleaning, joking, and hanging out together after dinner. This existing dynamic likely contributed to the group's ease and openness during the workshop.

The newcomer participant joined the group at the start of the workshop - apparently not having been at the dinner prior to the workshop. While he appeared slightly reserved initially, he gradually became more comfortable with the group. By the end of the session, he even sang two songs, both in English and Dutch, evidencing his growing comfort with the group.

The participants chuckled and joked throughout, occasionally using student slang - one participant attributed this to being "in a corny mood". Two individuals stood out as particularly vocal and humorous, but this did not disrupt the overall focus nor process flow. Despite the relaxed atmosphere, participants were serious and thoughtful when the activities required this, such as during the House Intentions discussion.

Respect was a consistent theme across interactions. For example, when discussing religion—an important topic given the mostly Christian demographic —participants were open, respectful, and willing to listen to differing viewpoints. Similarly, during the Collage Reflection activity, they valued and respected each other's opinions, fostering a supportive environment.

Figure 25: Participants during roleplay

Facilitator interaction

The facilitator was able to effectively guide discussions and stimulate inclusivity. She created space for participants to share comments and ideas, effectively managing group dynamics during activities. The facilitator ensured everyone was able to contribute throughout, and when participants worked in smaller groups, such as during the roleplay activity, the facilitator provided oversight and support to keep them focused on the task. Her ability to balance structure with flexibility contributed to the productive yet positive atmosphere of the workshop.

Overall impression

The workshop was successful in fostering engagement, participation, and respect among a diverse group of participants. The positive atmosphere, bolstered by existing rapport among some attendees, the made it an inclusive and seemingly enjoyable experience for participants. While there were ample moments of lightheartedness, the group remained focused and productive when it mattered. The facilitator's attentiveness and ability to guide discussions further enhanced the workshop's outcomes.

Figure 26: Collaging and house intentions results

Evaluation

The evaluation of the workshop was primarily based on a survey conducted at the end of the session. Given the relatively small number of participants, a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis methods was applied. The workshop's goals were evaluated as well as the interaction qualities.

Evaluation of workshop goals

The workshop aimed to foster a better understanding between (new) housemates by exploring and communicating expectations.

The workshop revealed several positive outcomes related to this. When participants were asked through an open question, 'Initial thoughts: What worked well?' four participants highlighted the value of sharing expectations and collaboratively creating the house intentions. Additionally, two participants appreciated gaining new insights about their housemates. One noted, "What worked well - I got to know my roommates better!" while another shared, "Discussion topics arose that we had never discussed with each other before."

The workshop also provided varying degrees of improved understanding of housemates. When asked specifically about this, two participants indicated they already had a prior understanding of their housemates. One remarked, "I already knew the expectations of a few housemates," while another stated, "Most of the expectations were already clear, but it's nice to really have everything in place now." Despite this, three participants mentioned that the workshop brought improved clarity. One participant explained, "Now, I know my roommates well on the surface, but it will take more time to really get to know each other better."

Of course, it is important to contextualize these findings. Most of the housemates in this particular workshop already knew each other, which influenced the baseline understanding among participants. For other houses with more new housemates, the outcomes could differ significantly. During the design process, an assumption was made that participants would have varying levels of familiarity. This assumption might need to be revisited for workshops in houses where housemates are predominantly unfamiliar with one another.

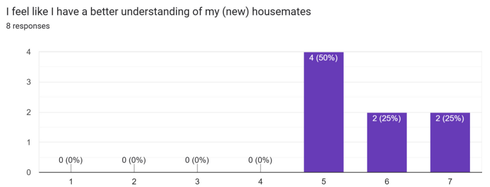


Figure 27: Survey result: better understanding of housemates

Evaluation of interaction vision

Insightful

The workshop fostered new insights among participants. When asked through an open survey question, “What worked well?” two participants noted gaining a deeper understanding of their housemates. One participant stated, “What worked well - I got to know my roommates better!” while another reflected, “Discussion topics arose that we had never discussed with each other before.” Another stated, “I learned new things, such as the non-violent method”

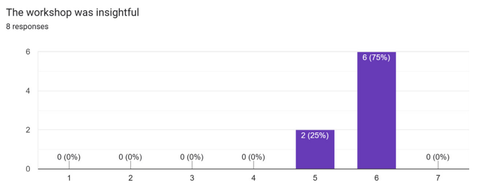


Figure 28: Survey result : insightful

Engaging

Participants found the workshop enjoyable and engaging. In response to the question, “What worked well?” two participants mentioned that they enjoyed the workshop. When asked about their overall satisfaction, three participants highlighted the combination of a “gezellig” atmosphere with learning. One participant shared, “The atmosphere was very ‘gezellig’ - we laughed together, while we also had deep, serious conversations with each other!” When specifically asked about how engaging the workshop was, participants noted the facilitator’s role in creating an inclusive and accessible environment:

“You [the facilitator] allowed it to be a light-hearted conversation, with a serious tone in between.”

“Workshop was very accessible and your presence [facilitator] made it so we were focused on doing this together.”

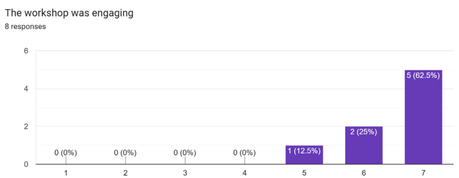


Figure 29: Survey result : engaging

Unifying

The workshop helped participants feel more unified with their housemates. When asked to explain their response to the statement, “The workshop made me feel unified with my housemates,” participants shared positive reflections:

“We complemented each other well.”

“We now really have new intentions to do more together; that’s nice!”

“It was very ‘gezellig’ and because of this we created (stronger) a bond.”

“Looking forward to doing more things together.”

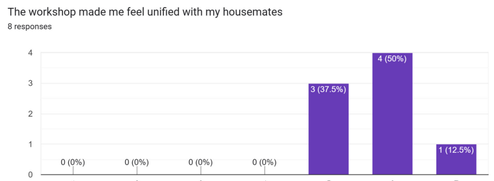


Figure 30: Survey result : unifying

Prospective

The workshop seems to have encouraged participants to toward the future with optimisim. One participant shared, “I’m looking forward to doing more activities together.”

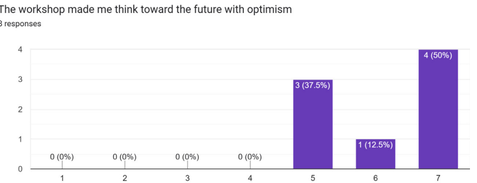


Figure 31: Survey result : prospective

Collaborative

The workshop fostered a sense of collaboration among participants. One participant noted, “Everyone participated and let each other talk.” Another remarked, “As I previously said, your facilitation helped keep everyone at the same level!”

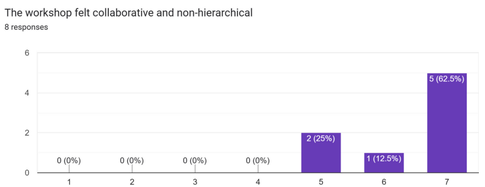


Figure 32: Survey result : collaborative

Evaluation conclusion & recommendations

The workshop succeeded in its goal of fostering understanding and communication between housemates, particularly by creating a platform for shared expectations and open discussion. However, the degree of improvement was influenced by the pre-existing relationships among some of the housemates. Future workshops might benefit from tailoring activities to account for the familiarity levels of participants. Additionally, the role-playing activity was less well-received by three participants, who described it as: “less real,” and “a bit awkward and obvious.” This feedback suggests the activity may need to be revisited and refined for future sessions.

Limitations

Some limitations should be acknowledged. Ideally, multiple workshop tests could have been conducted with various households to ensure broader applicability of the findings. Unfortunately, time constraints, due to a number of factors including project delays at Polakweg and the associated limited availability of newcomers, made this unfeasible. Additionally, although the survey was designed to be completely anonymous, the facilitator’s presence in the room while participants filled it out may have influenced their responses. This factor may be considered when interpreting the results.

Conclusion & Discussion

The initial assignment set out to explore how Dutch students and newcomers can live together in a way that allows both groups to thrive, emphasizing the creation of understanding and equitable exchange. Setting out to take a systemic and social design approach, the goal was not to deliver a definitive solution but rather to probe the system in a positive direction and spark new ways of thinking and collaborating. The designed intervention, the “Exploring Home” workshop, offers a concrete step in this direction by fostering understanding and dialogue between housemates in mixed co-housing settings.

Reflection on initial assignment

The workshop effectively addresses its core aim of enhancing mutual understanding among housemates, establishing a strong foundation for a thriving living environment. While long-term success requires continued effort and engagement beyond the workshop itself, this intervention provides a clear and actionable starting point. Its impact is not static but rather an evolving process that can be refined and adapted based on further experience and feedback.

Additionally, the workshop demonstrates the potential for fostering equitable exchange by creating space for all participants to contribute meaningfully, regardless of background. While further iterations will benefit from refinements—such as attention to ensuring balance when participant ratios vary—these outcomes underscore the workshop’s promise as a valuable tool in shaping more inclusive and harmonious shared living experiences.

Implications

The Exploring Home workshop holds significance on both intrapersonal and policy levels. On a social level, it demonstrates how collaborative interventions can enhance interpersonal relationships, promote accessibility, and foster a stronger sense of community within mixed co-housing environments. By creating a structured yet open space for dialogue, the workshop encourages participants to actively engage with one another's perspectives, breaking down barriers that might otherwise persist in shared living situations. This emphasis on mutual understanding and co-creation reinforces the idea that integration is not merely about coexistence but about actively shaping a shared home where all residents feel valued and heard.

From a systemic perspective, the workshop underscores the importance of intentional facilitation in mixed co-housing settings. It suggests that structured opportunities for dialogue—where expectations, needs, and responsibilities are openly discussed—can be a crucial component of more inclusive and harmonious living arrangements. In this way, such workshops could serve as a complementary tool to broader policies aimed at integration, community cohesion, and participatory governance. By embedding these kinds of reflective and communicative practices into housing initiatives, policymakers, housing organizations, and community facilitators can strengthen social bonds and address challenges proactively, rather than reactively. Ultimately, Exploring Home points toward a model where integration is not just a policy goal but an ongoing, co-created process shaped by those directly involved.

Reflection on process

The project initially embraced both systemic and social design, aiming to explore the broader systemic influences on co-housing dynamics. While the process were inspired by systemic design, the project ultimately took a more social design and human-centered approach, focusing on the lived experiences of the residents. This shift grounded the intervention in tangible human interactions, but it also highlights that more deeply integrating systemic considerations, such as policy and organizational influences could be beneficial.

While the interviews with tenants provided valuable insight into their lived experiences, is was self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or a limited scope of questions. A more immersive approach—such as participatory observation or deeper ethnographic methods—could have revealed hidden dynamics and subtle interpersonal dynamics that cannot fully be captured through interviews alone.

An area for improvement was in the explicit framing of the problem. A clearer, more defined problem statement earlier in the process could have prevented many issues that arose, particularly around decision-making. This abiguity at the outset led to inefficiencies and complications in the process. Making design choices sooner rather than later would have allowed the project to focus more on actionable steps.

Suggestions for future work

Further development of the Exploring Home workshop would benefit from several key areas of focus. One important consideration is the transfer of facilitation knowledge—ensuring that future facilitators can effectively lead the workshop without relying on the original designer's firsthand experience. This could be addressed through a well-documented facilitation guide or booklet, providing clear instructions, best practices, and adaptable strategies for different group dynamics. Additionally, refining the workshop to account for varying levels of familiarity among participants would enhance its effectiveness. The dynamics between housemates who already know each other versus those meeting for the first time can significantly impact discussions, requiring tailored approaches to engagement. Lastly, further testing across diverse participant groups and mixed co-housing contexts would provide further insights into how the workshop functions in practice, and may ensure its relevance in a wider range of co-housing settings. Expanding the evaluation methods, such as gathering participant feedback over a longer period, could also shed light on the workshop's lasting impact on community relationships.

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