

Co-Housing. Resilience in times of hardship

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Abstract

Having to deal with an emerging phenomenon in terms of housing, the questions that this study would try to observe critically and answer, are addressed on various levels. In connection to the conference, the central question of this work focuses on the built environment and the relations that arise from it: how can participatory design redefine residential buildings from a sustainability standpoint?

The presentation will first ground the concept of co-housing in its contemporary context, followed by two case studies of co-housing developments in Romania and abroad. It argues that co-housing can be seen as a living laboratory for architecture's potential to support collective life, especially when residents are involved in the design process. Through a semi-structured interview and comparative analysis of two different co-housing projects, this work positions architecture not merely as a backdrop for social life but as an active agent in community formation. The paper includes diagrams and sketches that illustrate spatial connections, social relations, and the economic or legal aspects involved in this type of housing development, endorsing the hypothesis that sustainability is achieved on various aspects through alliance.

Keywords: Architecture, Collaboration, Trust, Convergence, Contingency, Viable, Collective.

Introduction

The housing market consist of investments from either public or private sector, but at one point in the beginning of the 20th century (Schindler, 2021) and even before that (Larsen, 2019) there appeared another type of housing: community housing. Neither wide spread or legally acknowledged in every country it exists, co-housing in short, is challenging conventional housing norms and trying to offer solutions to the housing supply drawbacks, being an alternative to the speculative market. It questions social norms of living arrangements (Vestbro, 2008, p.5), offering other options to those looking for such. At its core and as defined so far, **co-housing** stands for a **practice that is community driven and orientated, non-speculative, nonprofit, participative, and sustainable**.

Literature Review

The literature on cohousing defines itself as lacunar (Tummers, 2017) and is approached from a variety of fields, ranging from civil engineering to social studies. Given this wide spectrum of disciplines and the term's vague definition, studying cohousing as a whole appears to offer valuable insights into both the built environment and social architecture (Hagbert, Larsen, Thörn, & Wasshede, 2020). Although there is no commonly accepted definition of the umbrella term, what all studies on co-housing highlight is the heterogeneity of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2020) and the dependency on the context it exists in (Czischke, Carriou & Lang). From an architectural perspective, co-housing is a residential architectural program that treats common spaces not merely as transitional areas but as functional spaces that encourage residents to engage in social interaction.

Methodology

Apart from the theoretical, **quantitative** study of co-housing, intended to ground the concept and serve as a backbone for the fieldwork, the core of this paper lies in two case studies from which **qualitative** data

will be extracted. These data will focus on **sustainability** within co-housing, as defined by its three dimensions: **social, ecological, and economic** (Hagbert, Larsen, Thörn, & Wasshede, 2020). The case studies were chosen after the sole criteria of temporality, meaning they need to belong the contemporary co-housing wave, as identified further on, therefore addressing the current housing problems such as the lack of affordable housing or the commodification of this basic human need and sustainability as a whole (Vincze & Betavatz, 2024). Structured around four aspects, legal framework, financing, participatory design issues and social dimension, interviews were conducted online with at least one of the residents that have been involved in the project since the core idea of living together was put forth.

Results

Findings from the two co-housing initiatives clearly state that it is an alternative to the capitalist market, offsetting speculation in the residential sector and from a design standpoint. An alternative represents a different approach. In most cases, **it is a combination of legal pathways and actors** that enable the housing project to develop. It is a formal settlement, neither a state-developed initiative nor a private investment. Instead, it is centered and organized around the **community's well-being and interests** (Hagbert, Larsen, Thörn, & Wasshede, 2020, p.46), integrating **dedicated spaces that facilitate interaction**. It is developed through a participatory design process and views **housing as a human right**, not as a commodity (Giorgi, 2020, p. 46). Sometimes, the co-housing project even serves as a generator of new legislation and is officially acknowledged as a novel approach. In attempting to define the aspects that make up co-housing, it is better understood as a web of interconnected concepts, movements or theories that have shaped society in the recent history mapped out in fig. 1 and that are embodied in a concrete form in the final outcome of the co-housing project, put into work by various actors facilitating the implementation in a concrete form, named in fig. 2.

Fig. 1 Concepts at play in co-housing initiatives.

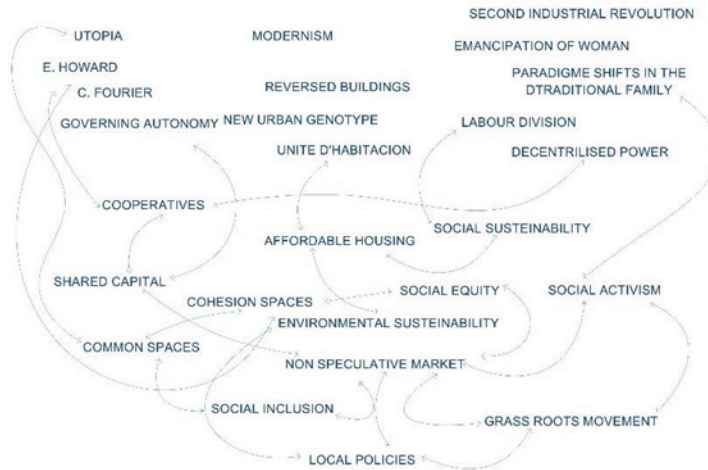
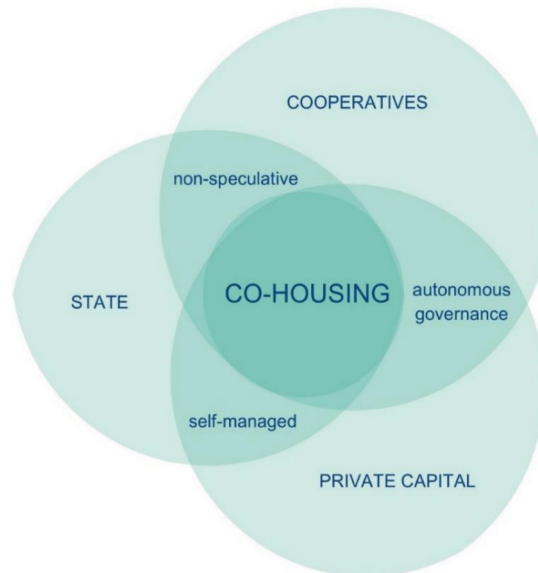


Fig. 2 Actors involved in co-housing development.



Even though co-housing seems to have its roots somewhere in various social utopias (Larsen, 2019, p16, Matysek-Imielińska, 2020, p.39) , when it comes down to the real world, the utopian ideal is diluted along the way, with an ideal still in the background.

Co-housing in waves

Countries with a history of co-housing, such as Denmark (Larsen, 2019), Switzerland (Schindler 2021), Germany (Bittman, 2022.), or Sweden (Vestbro 2008), tend to experience the development of co-housing in waves. These waves may involve various administrative models: cooperative housing, co-ownership societies, collective urban housing, community land trusts or CLTs, community-led collaborative housing, shared cooperatives, right-of-use co-ops, self-built co-housing, communes, and other forms of collective housing. These waves often appear to emerge in response to certain types of crises, and the contemporary one seems to focus on sustainability as the issue at hand. The waves seem to have ripple effects over time, so co-housing is shared as a concept and implemented in a specific place adapted to the specificity of the context. During this period of globalization and network, co-housing implementation know-how can be spread via internet networks and countries such as Austria or Switzerland can share knowledge and practices with counties where this phenomenon is emerging, namely the ones from easter europe. Furthermore, the co-housing project from bucharest had its inspirations in the one from Amsterdam via Urban eye film festival.

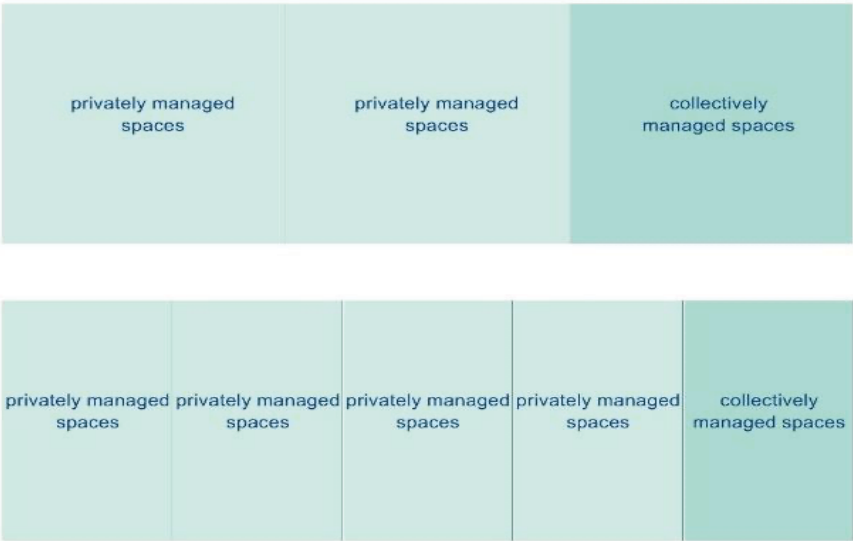
Discussion

Within the semi-structured interview, the analysis will focus on the three sustainability themes: social, ecological, and economic. Overlapping with three of the four criteria analyzed in the survey, this paper can argue that co-housing has sustainability as a core value.

The first case study is set in Amsterdam. It is an ideal story in which a group of friends had the idea of moving in together, had the boldness

to apply for a public competition regarding a plot of land designated for a residential building, which they won, and also the ability to finance it to completion. From a **social sustainability** standpoint, both during the process and in its aftermath, they managed to create a co-housing community and foster a sense of belonging within the neighborhood. By opening up their common space to nearby residents and acting on the principle of holacracy, the 50 members of the co-housing unit managed to live in the community they had imagined. **One third** [fig. 3 | of the building is made up of **shared spaces**, with various rooms dedicated to arts, crafts, and work, as well as rooms for visitors. They also open up these common spaces to host events with residents from other housing units, with the goal of encouraging social interaction. In figure 3 is depicted the percentage of common spaces present in the evaluated co-housing initiative, as stated by the residents vs. an average of 20% as defined by building regulations or the specific architecture program.

Fig. 3 Proportions of interactions in co-housing and in a standard residential building



The **ecological aspect** is where the **participatory design** practice played a central role. They knew what they wanted in terms of sustainability, but not how to achieve it. Working closely with the architect, the final form of the building took shape: a green façade to support birds and insects, and an energy-efficient building that actively contributes to its environment. Financing the project, when none of the residents had personal funding, was the most painstaking task. With one of the tenants holding a master's degree in finance, they managed to set up a complex system of public loans, crowdfunding, private investments, and ultimately a monthly rent-like tax that allows them to repay the loan while keeping rent below the average. Owning the building collectively while renting individually is the model under which the property is managed, helping to prevent speculative transactions.

The second case study is located in Bucharest and was inspired by a documentary film made by the Amsterdam group about their building process and its aftermath. Even if the hierarchy of sustainability principles may differ from that of the Dutch group, they still cascade from one to another. The main driver of this co-housing unit was **economic sustainability**. With no support from the state or other institutions, and when thinking about how co-housing could be applied in Bucharest, the project initiator realized that as a group, they could build in the city center on plots of land that were too small for residential developers and too expensive for individuals. With this idea in mind and a background in architecture, he began studying available plots of land in central Bucharest that could host a six-family apartment building. He shared these studies on social media, and not long after, the core group was formed. The process of securing financing, engaging in long discussions, negotiating, and making collective decisions with the shared goal of living together, ultimately resulted in the formation of a **social entity** based on trust and respect, one that had not previously existed. Although the project included less common space than the Amsterdam case, the residents envisioned an open ground floor with a multifunctional communal room connected to the courtyard, as well as a space with a public function to engage passersby. **Ecology** was also an important topic for the future

residents. The building was designed to be energy efficient, both in terms of its envelope and the equipment used. Since decisions are made collectively and the land is co-owned, the community that formed around this co-housing unit serves as an example of how **shared sustainability goals** can have ripple effects across many aspects of communal life. The table from figure 4 depicts the findings of the two case studies alongside with an average contemporary residential building.

Fig. 4 Table representing sustainable principles of residential buildings extracted from the interview compared to the average

	Social	Ecologic	Economic
Amsterdam	robust community of 50 members with constant community interactions	participatory design with strong emphasis on sustainable technologies	mixt non-speculative financing
Bucharest	solid community of 16 members	participatory design with strong emphasis on sustainable technologies	private investments phased over time
Average	cordial relations	normative standards with no specific sustainable practices.	mainly loans with high interests

Conclusion

Although co-housing is not a widespread living arrangement and may not be the preferred option for everyone, it has demonstrated that, as a collaborative practice across many aspects, from design to daily living, it can address all three pillars of sustainability, **social, ecological, and economic** in an interconnected manner. Co-housing can help offset social isolation and offer a solution to the housing crisis, provide innovative approaches to financing a home, and can result in buildings that are more environmentally friendly and designed for social inclusion, than standard residential developments. The two examples

also show that co-housing tends to spread more easily in contexts where there is strong state support, compared to relying solely on public funding. Most importantly, they demonstrate that **cooperation**, at every level, significantly increases the chances of success. On the long run, co-housing can be a sustainable solution for state economy, offsetting spending on different aspects of healthcare, such as mental health or nursing homes. Far from being a fit all solution, co-housing can be one of the tools used for urban regeneration and sustainable urban growth.

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Co-Locuirea. Reziliență în perioade dificile

(rezumat)

Confruntându-se cu un fenomen emergent în domeniul locuirii, întrebările pe care acest studiu încearcă să le observe critic și să le răspundă sunt abordate pe mai multe niveluri. În legătură cu tema conferinței, întrebarea centrală a acestei lucrări se concentrează pe mediul construit și relațiile care decurg din acesta: cum poate designul participativ să redefinească clădirile rezidențiale din perspectiva sustenabilității? Prezentarea va fundamenta mai întâi conceptul de co-locuire în contextul său contemporan, urmat de două studii de caz ale unor proiecte de co-locuire din România și din străinătate. Se argumentează că co-locuirea poate fi văzută ca un laborator viu pentru potențialul arhitecturii de a susține viața colectivă, în special atunci când rezidenții sunt implicați în procesul de proiectare. Printr-un interviu semi-structurat și o analiză comparativă a două proiecte diferite de co-locuire, această lucrare poziționează arhitectura nu doar ca un fundal pentru viața socială, ci ca un agent activ în formarea comunității. Articolul include diagrame și schițe care ilustrează conexiunile spațiale, relațiile sociale și aspectele economice sau juridice implicate în acest tip de dezvoltare rezidențială, susținând ipoteza că sustenabilitatea este realizată pe diverse planuri prin colaborare..