

Cohousing: Flexible Village-Like Communities Inside Big Cities

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Abstract (188 words)

In a context of ever faster globalisation, cities are clearly put under pressure. As a result, they also have to adapt and find solutions to overcome the growing difficulties they face such as urban migrations, aging population, cultural diversities, high level of stress, social fragmentation and so on.

This article stresses how the cohousing model brings relevant answers to some of these problems. Cohousings are urban neighbourhood developments that creatively combine private and common dwellings to recreate a sense of community and useful networked relationships, while preserving a high degree of individual privacy. If city life appears to be an impasse for many, the cohousing movement brought some fresh air and shows that urban citizens can not only work together to solve some of their problems, but have fun at the same time too.

Far from being just a theory, this phenomenon that started in Scandinavia 30 years ago, is spreading in the Anglo-Saxon world and in Japan since the 1990s, and more recently in the rest of Europe. This success is mainly due to its high flexibility, making possible to adapt each cohousing in diverse cultural contexts.

Introduction

The last fifty years have witnessed a radical transformation of the urban contexts, influencing man people's daily life. On the one hand, this has gone along with the rise of individual's freedom; but on the other hand, it also went with a manifest collapse of the community. This double phenomenon is not only unprecedented in History; it is also connected to an important paradox: individuals are losing their ties with their community at a period when they might need them increasingly more than before. In fact, many enjoy the positive sides of their urban individual freedom, whereas they also feel increasingly more exhausted as they struggle to face, on their own, the daily soaring stress level, competitive working contexts, changes in family unit (especially single women with children), reduced mobility and social isolation of contemporary urban life.

In this context, some families and individuals decided to recreate a sense of community by developing cohousings, urban neighbourhoods. Although the idea is not new, its adjustment to modern life clearly is. The phenomenon started 30 years ago in Denmark, and similar housing models are now popping up all over the globe, mainly in the US and in the EU¹. Its success is so obvious today that, for the first time ever, a specific model of flexible community is being spread on a global scale. If some argue that globalisation tends to destroy cultural varieties, the flexibility of cohousing has allowed it to resist and to adapt to people's needs in different cultural contexts.

This article is structured in two parts: firstly, it analyses some of the current changes occurring in cities; secondly, it explains how cohousing could be seen as a useful alternative for many urban citizens at the dawn of the 21st century.

Contemporary cities and the crisis of community

Cities have always been considered as one of the main achievements of the western civilization and it is not surprising that many thinkers dedicated part of their work to analyse them. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, saw them as the political place by excellence². For Rousseau³, it was a place where citizens could gather, and protect themselves from the authority of the state. Even Max Weber, one of the most important sociologists of the early 20th century, wrote that it was a place of liberty and citizenship from the end of the dark middle-ages⁴. One common point in their writings is that the city is described as a place of vibrant and rich interpersonal relationships, a place where it is possible to reach new goals, where people feel protected, and where cultural diversities could coexist.

What to think however about the city at the dawn of the 21st century? Is it still such a protective fortress that many dream about? Or is it like an irresistible magnet that tends to swallow people's energies? To many aspect cities are for sure exciting places to be. In the last 30 years however, and with the speed of financial globalisation, cities are increasingly less considered as fortifications where one feels protected. People feel they have to adapt increasingly faster to the urban changing environment (job, family, geography, cultures, language, etc.). Just like firms, states and any institutions from the school to the church, cities

1 McCament, K. & Durrett, C. (1993), *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, Ten Speed Press; Meltzer, G. (2005), *Sustainable Community: Learning from the cohousing model*, Trafford Press

2 Aristotle (1999), *Politics*, Oxford University Press

3 Todorov, T. (2001), *Frail happiness: an essay on Rousseau*, Pennsylvania University Press

4 Weber, M. (1958), *The City*, New-York: Free press

are also put under pressure of powerful global dynamics⁵. This in turn does influence the life of citizens on a daily basis. The city could hence be compared to a centaur: on the one hand, it fascinates by its 'beauty', due to the diversity of activities to do and people to meet; on the other hand, cities are exhausting places where people continuously rush to make ends meet, ever more on their own.⁶

In this context of changing cities, what is increasingly lacking is social cohesion. Since the 1960's, urban changes have severely pressurised the community, which entered a period of deep crisis⁷. As the city became bigger and bigger, individuals increasingly endeavoured to preserve their cultural roots and develop social networks in their neighbourhood. Changes in working distance, working conditions and above all the rise of individualist aspirations are three significant factors to take into consideration. Even the family structure, which one could define the closest community to an individual, appears progressively more further from being the stable institution it used to be. And by the same token, it is not a coincidence if the number of single parent families and singles are in sharp increase in urban contexts⁸.

As a result, the community buffer appears inefficient to defend individuals from the outside threats as much as before. Cities reveal therefore another paradox: while the number of urban citizens has never been so high, most of them don't know their neighbours anymore. In fact, estimations say that 3 billions people, over 50% of the world population, live in cities in 2007⁹; loneliness has however become a main characteristic of urban life, and *tele-* rather than face-to-face communication is in constant rise¹⁰.

5 Strange, S. (1996), *The Retreat of the State: diffusion of power in the world economy*, Cambridge University Press

6 For a similar argument, see Merrifield, A & Swyngedouw, E. (ed) (1995), *The Urbanization of Injustice*, London: Lawrence & Wishart; Brenner, N & Keil, R. (eds)(2006), *The Global Cities Reader*, London: Routledge; Smith, M P (ed) (1992), *After modernism : global restructuring and the changing boundaries of city life*, New Brunswick: Transaction

7 Delanty, G. (2003), *Community*, London: Routledge

8 Kroger, T & Sipila, J. (eds) (2005), *Overstretched : families up against the demands of work and care*, Oxford: Blackwell; Kaufmann, F (ed) (2002), *Family life and family policies in Europe*, Oxford university Press

9 UN (2004), *The world Population Prospect*. <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/WPP2004/wpp2004.htm>

10 Bugeja, M (2005), *Interpersonal divide : the search for community in a technological age*, Oxford University Press; Stivers, R. (2004), *Shades of loneliness : pathologies of a technological society*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield

Cohousing: a pro-active neighbourhood citizenship

The first cohousing was built for 27 families in 1972 close to Copenhagen, by a Danish architect and a psychologist. The trigger was an article by Bodil Graae where she argued that children should have one hundred parents¹¹. The meaning of the original Danish name for cohousing, called *bofaelleskaber*, means literally ‘living community’¹² and it was designed for two main purposes: to increase the quality of cohousers’ social life and to lower the burden of every day life, while increase the free-time at home.

Cohousing is a neighbourhood development where private and common facilities are combined, and in that sense it does provide answers to the social and the practical needs of contemporary urban citizens. It was carefully designed, and improved with the years, to make life easier, greener, more social and more fun while preserving the privacy of each individual, both adults and children. As Randi, from Trudeslund cohousing in Copenhagen, explains: “*when we married, we thought it was very nice to move from our village to Copenhagen. It was like starting a new life! But then after a while, and when we started to get children, we started missing the good things about the smaller communities. We missed the social network where it was easy to talk with other people when you came home from work, and where it was easy for the children to run around and play with other children.*”¹³

The advantage is that nothing is rigid in such a place: it all depends on what the community can afford and what the group of individuals wants to create. In other words, what is fundamental is that cohousers themselves are in the driving seat. The result, in the form of (semi-)urban communities, was of course not a new concept. In fact, life had been organised in small communities from ancient tribes to pre-industrialised societies. During the Renaissance already, key essays, such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* in 1516 or Tommaso Campanella’s *City of the Sun* in 1623, stressed the difficulties – but the need – to maintain communities in cities. Much later, and as the tendency became clearer in the 19th industrial century, writings by the first utopian-socialists also pointed out the issue of communities. What is new, today, is that people try to implement this old idea of community life to an unprecedented *fast changing urban context, characterised by flexibility*. In post-industrial societies, cohousings enable people to recreate active and supportive neighbourhoods inside impersonal cities¹⁴. As Birgit, from Rio cohousing in centre of Stockholm puts it: “*the*

11 Bergamasco, F & Canossa, G. (2003) , *Sostenibilità e Integrazione* , thesis in architecture, University of Venezia, Italy.

12 McCament, K. & Durrett, C. (1993) op. cit.

13 Interview with Randi, Trudeslund cohousing, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 2007

14 McCament, K. & Durrett, C. (1993) op. cit.

*important thing and the idea with this building was to create a village-like community where you know your neighbours, where you have the security of having relations, and where you give and receive support. Some social capital if you wish, but inside an urban context*¹⁵.

The concept rapidly spread and it reached the Netherlands, where the first cohousing was completed in 1977. Sweden, which already had a strong community history since the 1930, followed too and the cohousing model became institutionalised and recognised by public authorities in 1980. In the last 15 years, cohousing conquered the USA, the UK, Australia, New-Zealand, Canada, and Japan. Even more recently, it started being discussed in the rest of Europe, mainly in UK, Italy, France and Belgium. All together, one can estimate that there are over 1000 cohousings already in operation, about 1% of the Danish population already live in such housing models. Moreover, approximately the same number of projects started in the last decade and will soon be ready to welcome new cohousers¹⁶. An interesting indicator of the boom can be seen not only in the growing international mass-coverage but also in the phenomenon of internet communities, mainly in the USA¹⁷. Internet is in fact a crucial source of information that cohousers skilfully use to spread awareness, to share experience and learn from trials and errors¹⁸.

Cohousings normally gather between 15 to 35 families, that is about 50 to 100 people, who organise the management of the common rooms and shared activities. Many experts think that there are several reasons explaining why it is common to find this number of families. On the one hand, a small number of units make it harder to keep one's privacy and to distribute equally the tasks of the daily management¹⁹. Moreover, a small community is much more disturbed when one family leaves or enters the cohousing²⁰. On the other hand, in a cohousing over 35 units, it becomes hard to know all the residents, and the degree of social cohesion tends to drop. This does not mean however that a cohousing is limited in size. In the case of Munkesoegaard cohousing, in Denmark, there are 100 units but these are divided into 5 clusters of 20 units each to make the management and the social cohesion easier.

15 Interview with Birgit, Rio Cohousing, Stockholm, Sweden, July 2007

16 Meltzer, G. (2005), op.cit.

17 dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/Cultures___Community/Groups/Intentional_Communities/Cohousing

18 <http://lists.cohousing.org/mailman/listinfo/cohousing-l>

19 Interview with Randi, Trudelsund Cohousing, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 2007.

20 Meltzer, G. (2005), op.cit.

6 fundamental characteristics of Cohousing

1 - Participatory process:

Cohousers are managing the whole process from scratch. They can be helped by experts (lawyers, architects, facilitators, etc) but they are in the driver seat. This requires much time and tough weekly meetings for years and years.

2 - Intentional neighbourhood design:

The design of the cohousing site is fundamental as paths, green zone, houses, benches, parking have major influence on the quality of the community glue.

3 - Extensive common facilities:

Seen by many as the heart of the cohousing, common facilities and activities must be given a crucial attention. Experienced cohousers even say that it is much more important than the private dwelling where cohousers spend statistically less time than they originally thought.

4 - Complete resident management:

It is fundamental that cohousers meet on a regular basis to take decisions. Decisions can be taken either by consensus, by voting or by hybrid approach. Each cohouser should get a voice, and the use of facilitators is often practiced. The use of small working groups for the daily management of the cohousing is required.

5 - Absence of hierarchy:

The existence of rankings and leaders is acknowledged by cohousers as these are human processes that naturally occur in communities. However, clear mechanisms are created to ensure that everyone gets a fair opportunity to express their ideas during meetings.

6 - Separate income:

A cohousing is not a commune and in that sense each unit is responsible to earn money by itself. In some cases, community rooms can be hired as office or some cohousers can be paid for occasional work.; but in general a cohousing is a place for living, not for working.

A final important element to stress is that even though cohousings have specific characteristics in different cultural contexts (e.g. in Denmark, they are privately-owned and built horizontally, located in the suburbs; in Sweden, they are public-owned and built vertically in the city centre; in The Netherlands they are divided into smaller clusters, etc.), there has been a parallel boom of cohousing for the elderly both in Europe and in the USA. As Hanne from Dreierbanken in Denmark tells: *“there has been a development of similar communities especially for elder people in the last decade. And I think there have been even more of them than for standard families”*²¹. And Ingrid from Stockholm to confirm, *“in Sweden it seems to be more common that you have no people around at all when you get*

²¹ Hanne, Dreierbanken cohousing, Odense, Denmark, July 2007

older. So this is why I had the idea to move to such cohousing"²². As a matter of fact, cohousing communities have the advantage that they can help to integrate elderly and differently-able people with the larger society, as opposed to confining them separately²³.

Conclusion

This short essay is now drawing to a close and some final concluding comments need to be underlined. As it was shown the cohousing model offers answers to some of the main problems in contemporary urban context: the collapse of community and the atomization of individuals. For space consideration it was not possible to develop the idea in details, but it is important to stress a few tangible examples how “village-like” communities do help people to enjoy their free-time at a material and social level. In fact, the success of cohousing is that it gives practical solutions to problems that many citizens are today facing. To give short examples, adults normally cook only 3 or 4 times a month, saving about 1 hour a day, to do a hobby, to relax or to spend some time with children, partner or friends; neighbours help each others to drop and pick up children at school, so that time before and after work can be use more efficiently; car-sharing, tools sharing, time banking, buying groups, etc. do enable to save time, space and money while increasing social connections. Finally it must be stressed that each cohousers always has the opportunity to take some distance with the community and simply enjoy individual time in the private dwelling.

Rebuilding community is however far from being so easy. In fact, why don't we all live in cohousing types of neighbourhood then? This question opens the doors to underline what, I think, is the main problem that cohousings still face: in a hyper-individualist society, the main challenge ahead is to learn, or perhaps to re-gain knowledge of, group decision-making process with the other members of a community. Issues related to the education of the children, the supervision of common domestic tasks, the management of the community budget, and so on are in fact significant questions we are not used to debate with our neighbours anymore. Considering that we increasing live in multi-cultural societies, this is probably the biggest challenge. The many cohousings already in function represent however an important source of knowledge that one can learn from.

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²² Ingrid, Sodrastation cohousing, Stockholm, Sweden, July 007

²³ Durrett, C. (2006), *Senior Cohousing*, Ten Speed Press; Brenton, M. (1998), *We're in Charge: Cohousing Communities of Older People in the Netherlands: Lessons for Britain*

Cohousing”, selected at the 34th international Ekotopfilm festival 2007, is available at <http://notsocrazy.net>