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Brief Report

Cohousing for older people: housing innovation in the Netherlands and Denmark

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Objective: *The aim of this paper is to elucidate cohousing for older people.*

Method: *The research is based on a literature review and interviews (in English) with residents of seven schemes in the Netherlands and Denmark, a social housing organisation and several researchers in the field (in 1995 and 2002).*

Results and Conclusions: *Cohousing for older people is now well established in its countries of origin – Denmark and the Netherlands – as a way for older people to live in their own house or unit, with a self-chosen group of other older people as neighbours, with shared space and facilities they collectively determine or control. As more such housing is built and occupied it has become easier to choose and assess this option. It remains to be seen how widespread its appeal will be, but cohousing for older people is now a valued housing niche.*

Key words: *cohousing, housing innovation, resident control, sharing and privacy.*

What is cohousing?

'Living together on one's own' is the seemingly contradictory maxim of the Dutch National Association of Housing Communities for Elderly People (LVGO), which nonetheless captures the essence of cohousing. Cohousing is a form of intentional community, invented over 30 years ago in Denmark and the Netherlands, by people who wanted to live in a more communal neighbourhood without sacrificing the privacy or integrity of individual families and their dwellings; hence, living together on one's own. In cohousing, typically 20 to 30 families come together to plan a neighbourhood in which they will have significant common space and facilities in addition to individual dwellings. A common house with a kitchen, dining space, common laundry and often other rooms is near universal. Common meals are regular, but vary in frequency between communities. Outdoors, the individual houses retain private courtyards or gardens but common spaces predominate: for example, space to kick a ball with others, and a common vegetable garden and chickens. Cars are typically corralled at the edge of a site [1]. The communal realm in cohousing is designed to complement and rationalise the spaces of the individual dwelling, not to displace or marginalise them. All

communities have a governance structure of their own devising, including dispute resolution.

There are now several hundred cohousing communities worldwide, typically in the suburbs. They have proved enduring, even as their household membership changes, largely because the balance they strike between community membership on the one hand and household privacy and engagement with the wider society on the other accords with the values of familial autonomy and individual freedom. The planning stage in cohousing is both democratic and sufficiently protracted that prospective cohousers come to understand what they are embarking upon and whether or not cohousing is for them [1].

Whilst older people do live in cohousing, they are not well represented. Only approximately 15% of residents in the Danish communities are aged over 50 years, which is the percentage of people over 65 years in the general population [2]. Cohousing was initiated mainly by young families and it has served their interests well.

Cohousing for older people

Cohousing for older people (older cohousing) reflects the differences in expectations, interests and life circumstances that a group of exclusively older people bring to this practice, but is otherwise remarkably similar. Many older cohousers display the same youthful enthusiasm for community one encounters in cohousing generally. One simple difference is that many older women do not want to continue frequent meal preparation for several others, having spent much of their married life doing so for their families, and many communities have moderated their initial enthusiasm for eating together frequently. Women typically outnumber men (in one community by 3:1) and singles typically outnumber couples (in that same community by 7:1).

Older cohousing has been a grassroots initiative, just as cohousing was. In the Netherlands, there had been a 'strong tendency to regulate the living situations of the elderly' such that 'well into the 1970s, it was customary – to a much greater extent than in surrounding countries – to apply to a home for the elderly once retirement age was reached' [3, p. 350]. Several attempts by older people in the late 1970s to escape this institutional trajectory resulted in the formation of LVGO in 1984 to foster older cohousing in the social housing sector. The dominant motives of older cohousers are: 'remaining active and positively preventing loneliness through social contact, togetherness and solidarity' and whilst 'mutual care certainly plays a part . . . it is not their main objective, just as care is not the primary goal of other

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Figure 1: 'Home afternoon' at *Det Kreative Seniorbo* (DKS) (common room is background right).



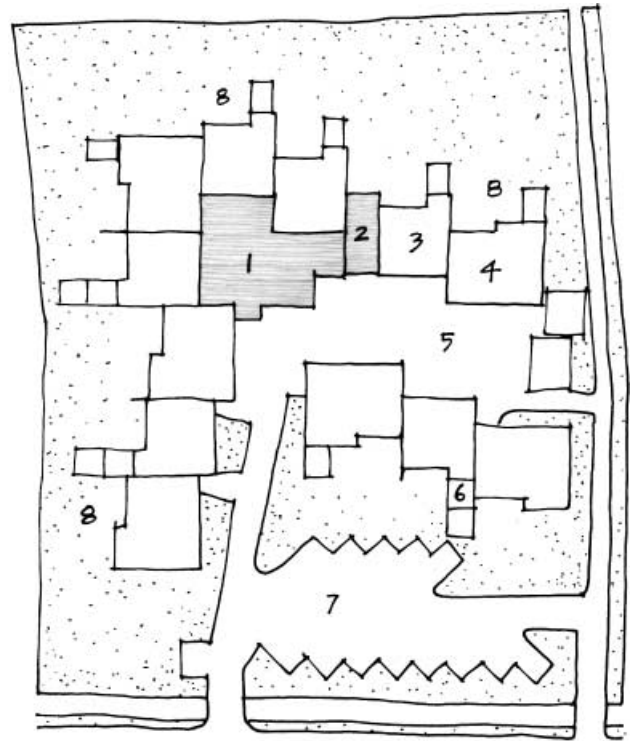
human relationships. The care stems from an interrelatedness members feel as good neighbours or friends' [3, p. 352]. By June 2001, LVGO registered 153 occupied schemes, with a further 65 under construction, and there are some private older cohousing schemes.

In Denmark, older cohousing has a similar history. A non-profit housing organisation formed a study group in the early 1980s for those who 'wanted to choose their living conditions before they became so frail that they would have to let other people choose for them' [4, p. 6]. Nine single women from this study group established the first community, *Midgården*, in 1987, in a five storey block of social housing. One flat on the ground floor was converted into a common flat, and nine other flats, served by an adjoining stair, became their community [4]. By 2000, there were 113 older cohousing schemes in Denmark, typically as social housing, with most schemes having between 10 and 20 dwellings each [2].

***Det Kreative Seniorbo*, Odense, Denmark**

Det Kreative Seniorbo (DKS) resulted from an older cohousing study group and was completed in 3 years in 1992. DKS is social housing but with a capital injection from the residents, who were formerly homeowners. They were aged between 56 and 76 years at my visit and all were active in creative pursuits. Everyone was retired, although some still did voluntary work. DKS rules include: minimum entry age of 55 years; no children intending to live with you; and residents must be able to look after themselves. Anyone on the social housing waiting list can apply and is accepted on a 'first come, first served' basis, but applicants are inducted in the DKS ethos. Thursday afternoon is 'home afternoon', when people aim to be home and have coffee together (Figure 1). 'Everyone comes' to the monthly meeting in the common room, which is preceded by a meal and 'everyone goes' on the summer excursions, such as bus trips. At Christmas, most return to their families, most of whom live in Odense, but they come home to DKS for a New Year's Eve party 'for ourselves'.

Figure 2: *Det Kreative Seniorbo* (DKS) layout diagram [4, p. 80]. (1) Common room; (2) guest accommodation; (3) one-bed townhouse; (4) two-bed townhouse; (5) pedestrian street; (6) private garden shed; (7) car parking; (8) private courtyard.



DKS consists of six one-bedroom and six two-bedroom townhouses, grouped around an L-shaped pedestrian street (Figure 2). The common room visually terminates the approach from the main entry to the site and its prominent roof, its glazed cap acting like a beacon at night, declares its centrality in their community (Figure 1). The common room includes a kitchen, dining area and laundry, with an adjoining guest room. Their children often visit and the guest room ensures grandchildren 'don't get under your feet and you don't have to put everything out of their reach'. Several features of DKS distinguish it from merely housing with common facilities [4]. For example, five households enter their dwellings through the common room which is both a socialising space and a quasi-industrial workshop, with noisy stone polishing equipment, workbenches and storage for their various craft activities. When their architect proposed a double height space in the living/dining room of each townhouse, the cohousers requested a small mezzanine, which is reached by a 'glorified ladder' (council approval took 6 months!). Without residents in the driving seat, few architects or housing providers would make or approve such decisions (although most schemes are, like *Midgården* mentioned earlier, less adventurous in this regard).

Conclusion

Cohousing has established a foot-hold in North America but only a toe-hold in Australia and will likely only appeal to, or

be realised by, a relatively small minority of households in any country. The foundations of cohousing lie in the organisational skills and the social and psychological inclinations or capacities of those who develop or chose this form of housing, which defines the conditions for its success and the limits of its appeal. The growth of cohousing in its countries of origin has been significant, however, and greater in older cohousing, which thus deserves to be more widely known in this country as a housing option and the obstacles to its development better understood. Cohousing further demonstrates the value of resident involvement or consultation in the design and management of housing, which is an important consideration where neighbourliness is hoped for or the sharing of space and facilities is intended or provided [5].

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Key Points

- Cohousing for older people is housing initiated and managed by older people themselves, with individual dwellings and common spaces, aiming for privacy and community.
- What is common is thus not an inferior substitute for what householders would otherwise prefer to be private, or someone else's idea of what is good for them, but their choice of how to complement the private realm and support interhousehold relations and activities.
- Cohousing for older people is 'not a way of living for alternative people: it is an alternative for ordinary people'.