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Bringing Us Home: Cohousing and the Environmental Possibilities of Reuniting People with Neighbourhoods

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Introduction: Our Developing Urban Environmental Concerns

At the beginning of the 20th century, what we would now recognize as *environmental* concerns about Western cities were largely confined to the effects, or alleged effects, on (many of) their residents of a physical fabric radically re-shaped by industrial capitalism. Overcrowding, unsanitary housing, pollution, disease, immorality, crime and social unrest were the concerns of environmental reformers.¹ By the end of the 20th century, however, environmental concerns about these same cities focus, conversely, on the effects of a typically more affluent, healthier, and better housed population on the bio-physical environment generally. To risk an oversimplification, where urban environmental concern a century ago was largely confined to the effects of production on people nearby, the starting point now is the effects of consumption on the environment everywhere, on species and habitats generally. An important implication of this shift in the nature of environmental concern, then, is that, once again, there is a need to rethink how we live in cities.

If we have learnt anything from the history of housing and neighbourhood design in the 20th century, it is that of the social and psychological importance of space exterior to the dwelling. How external household space (where it has existed) and common or neighbourhood space has been owned or controlled, managed, distributed, configured, kitted out and decorated has turned out to be of much greater importance than designers and others have often believed, not only in the lives of individuals and households, but for whole communities.² An important task now is to understand the *environmental* significance and

possibilities of such spaces and facilities, and of how inter-household or neighbourhood social relations might contribute to the realization of environmental goals, in particular, how we might fashion neighbourhoods to make domestic and neighbourhood life satisfy more of our needs and in the process reduce our dependence on market-based consumption for doing so.³ While there has been much talk of the need for ‘eco-communities’ to achieve such goals, precious little serious academic attention has been paid to this topic.⁴ In this paper, I consider the case of *cohousing* and sample some recent research in the Department of Architecture at this University to underscore this point.

What is Cohousing?

Cohousing is both a novel form of intentional community and a novel housing-cum-neighbourhood type, one which took shape in Denmark in the mid-to-late 1960s and, independently, in The Netherlands in the late 1960s / early 1970s. Prospective cohousers were motivated by a common desire to realise the social advantages they believed a more communal or community-oriented neighbourhood would have, without sacrificing the privacy and integrity of individual families or households and their associated dwellings. Could they have their cake and eat it too? It would seem so. There are now at least several hundred cohousing communities around the world, principally in Denmark and The Netherlands, but also elsewhere in Europe, especially Scandinavia, and more recently in North America where cohousing blossomed in the 1990s.⁵ The first cohousing community, *Sættedammen*, in Hillerød north of Copenhagen, turns 30 next year; the first Dutch community, *Hilversumse Meent*, near Hilversum, outside Amsterdam, turns 25. There are now at least three established cohousing communities in Australia, two in Hobart and one in Fremantle, and more are in the planning stage (though it has been much slower going here).

Cohousing is distinguished by the following three characteristics:

- prospective households (from a handful to 100 or more) coming together to *plan, design, procure and manage* their housing;
- extensive common or *shared spaces and facilities*, in addition to individual houses or flats - the latter being as independent or autonomous as householders want; and,
- an intentional or designed neighbourhood.⁶

The individual dwellings in cohousing are typically modest in size as residents aspire to maximise community space and facilities. Such common space and facilities relieve individual households of functions more easily or efficiently dealt with by a group of adjacent dwellings or by the whole community but, more importantly, it enables and supports the shared life beyond the household the residents desire. What is common is thus not an inferior substitute for what people would otherwise prefer to be private, as is often the case with (typically ill-considered or imposed) common space or facilities in housing schemes. In cohousing, the shared communal realm supplements, complements and rationalises the personal or familial. This common realm typically include a shared kitchen and dining room in a common house, along with, for example, recreational facilities, library, meeting or computer room, children's or teenager's room, guest room, workshop, laundry, freezer or bulk storage, re-use and recycling facilities (for, say, old clothes), vegetable gardens, chickens or other productive ventures, outdoor recreational spaces and facilities, common (alternative) energy production, 'waste' management, composting and recycling facilities. In concert with this common material fabric, there are also a variety of common systems, jobs and events; for example, a community may have a 'solidarity fund' (to which all households contribute and from which anyone may draw in time of accident or emergency), a working bee (with a treat at the end), a canoeing trip.

As the neighbourhood is the intentional setting for the continuing life of the community, neighbourhood space and facilities are configured, re-configured, and maintained to foster and support the necessary inter-household relations and activities, and thus environmental management is a priority. Moreover, such a neighbourhood, in contrast to much of either suburbia or down-town, is a source of novel social freedoms and opportunities and so often becomes an arena for environmental reform and expression.

Research in Architecture at UQ on Environmental Aspects of Cohousing

One of the original motivations for cohousing was the idea that neighbourhoods should be 'child-friendly' places and, in particular, that children should be able to form worthwhile relations with other adults (as well as other children) in their neighbourhood. The latter ambition is important because adults exercise considerable, often excessive, 'spatial power' over children in their daily lives.⁷ (And the profile of households in cohousing, then as now, indicates the attractiveness of such neighbourhoods for young families.) Much more of the

daily life of children in cohousing is, not surprisingly, located *in* the neighbourhood (rather than in front of television), and *with* neighbouring children and adults. Communities of 20 to 30 households (or smaller) can create a rich diversity of places and activities for children from their ‘pooled’ space, especially as cars are invariably corralled at or near the perimeter of the site. Some observations of children’s neighbourhood activities: in one community, *Ottrupgård*, in Denmark, the chore of hosing down the concrete floor of a large old tractor shed, in preparation for their summer feast, turned into fun for the younger children when a fire engine arrived to do the job, and successive waves of water from the fire hose were swept from the shed. When some young girls in *Ottrupgård* had their regular pattern of visiting particular neighbours disrupted by the summer holidays, they simply switched to visiting others who had remained at home. In *Wageningen* in The Netherlands, a former circus performer runs a ‘circus school’ in the common house on alternate Sunday mornings, and the children take an annual camping holiday giving performances in the camp ground. In *Sættedammen*, a father and son who had different recreational interests – the former liked soccer, the latter preferred fishing - teamed up with others in a similar bind, and the soccer games and fishing trips could then avoid conscripts.⁸

On the assumption that a necessary (minimal) condition for developing what we now understand as ‘environmental awareness’ in children is that they should understand and identify with where they live, with their environment, I asked all the children under the age of eleven in two similarly located, medium-sized Danish cohousing communities (*Overdrevet* and *Ottrupgård*) to do me a drawing entitled, ‘Where I live’ (with no further instructions as to what was required). I then compared these drawings, 24 in all, with those produced by children who did not live in cohousing and who attended a school nearby one community, *Ottrupgård*. The schoolchildren produced 35 drawings, only three of which were not of the artist’s own house or garden. (. Most of the drawings by the children in cohousing (of the same or similar ages to the schoolchildren), however, included part or all of their cohousing neighbourhood, more often its residents, and, surprisingly often, did not even include their own house.⁹ Figures 1 and 2 below reproduce two such drawings, superimposed over a portion of a view of their respective communities.



Figure 1: View of *Overdrevet* with the drawing, ‘Where I live’, by Anders, aged 7

Overdrevet consists of a large common house, flanked by two courtyards of row houses, and surrounded by a moat of open space comprising a soccer field, an extensive vegetable garden, barn and fields for various animals. Anders’ drawing above is a cross-section of the four, three-story row houses which make up his side of one courtyard (the row with the silver coloured, solar collector roofs). His drawing details how each house in this row is furnished, indicating his intimate knowledge of, and attachment to, his (immediate) neighbourhood.



Figure 2: View of *Ottrupgård* with the drawing, ‘Where I live’, by Pernille, aged 5

Ottrupgård’s common house is the converted barn at the end of the pedestrian path above. Their houses flank this path, which swells to form two courtyards along its route. Pernille’s drawing of where she lives is of the common house only, with a very large compost bin on the right, and assorted birds.

I turn now from this minor, if revealing, exercise to report some findings in Graham Meltzer's rich and suggestive, recently completed, doctoral research on cohousing. Meltzer attempted, amongst other things, to gather evidence to determine the extent to which, if at all, living in cohousing (in the USA) produced pro-environmental *behavioural* changes in its residents.¹⁰ Meltzer noted that Americans have generally failed to "walk their environmentalist talk", and this gives his research added impetus. In 1996, he surveyed in detail (using a range of measures) 346 households in 18 of the 22 then completed cohousing communities.¹¹

He found that cohousers had generally vacated larger dwellings for smaller ones, even though in cohousing their dwellings contained on average more bedrooms, presumably reflecting growing families. Cohousers had previously lived in dwellings that were substantially smaller (av. 138m²) than what seems to be the average for single family dwellings in the USA in the mid-90s (200m²), but they had opted for dwellings on average 15 per cent smaller than their previous homes (117m²). Even when the household share of common space is added (av. 15m²), cohousers still occupy or 'consume' on average less domestic space, albeit only 5 percent less space, than they did previously. Meltzer says that "residents commonly attributed their willingness to reduce dwelling and room size in cohousing to their access to common facilities and the amenity and extra conviviality" associated with such spaces.¹² Moreover, even though they had typically moved from more to less dense residential locations to establish a cohousing community, only one-sixth now occupied detached houses compared with over two-thirds previously, a move which is more likely to lead to better energy conservation and reductions in the environmental costs of garden maintenance (water usage, lawn mowing).¹³ As for household consumer durables, some obvious economies were expected - given common laundries, for example, reductions in the number of washers and dryers per household were probable. Meltzer found roughly a quarter fewer of each of these whitegoods following the move to cohousing. (This seems much less, however, than would be the case for European cohousing where our experience suggests the reduction is more likely to be closer to two-thirds, with very few households retaining individual washers or dryers.) Meltzer found a similar reduction in freezers (22 per cent) and, unsurprisingly, lawn mowers (75 per cent), as well as a significant increase in the sharing of household goods.¹⁴

In Table 1 below, a sample of Meltzer’s evidence for various reported reductions in consumption (or other improvements in pro-environmental behaviour), after moving to cohousing, is provided:

	Mean Before	Mean After
<i>Driving moderation</i> (car pooling, substitution of biking or walking for moderate distances, & more social and recreational needs met closer to home)	2.3	2.75
<i>Energy conservation</i> (low energy fittings, switching off unused lights, & turning thermostats down)	3.57	3.85
<i>Household food procurement</i> (purchasing food in bulk & home production)	2.23	2.53
<i>Recycling and composting</i> (separating wastes & composting kitchen scraps)	3.56	4.38

Table 1: Reported improvements in pro-environmental behaviours after moving to cohousing (using a five point scale from 1 = never to 5 = always)

Some of the above gains are modest, and substantial gains in some communities were offset by little or almost no change in others. Among the communities making substantial gains, for example, Winslow Cohousing moved from the mean for driving moderation to a score of 3.5; Pine Street moved from a score of just over 3 for household food procurement, which was already high, to just under 4. Most communities made significant improvements in recycling and composting, for example, but Nyland cohousers moved from a score of just over 3 (amongst the lowest) to close to 5 (amongst the highest). The small improvement in overall driving moderation above is probably more significant in light of the fact that, as noted earlier, cohousers generally moved from more to less dense locations, from urban to suburban, small town or rural settings. Also, some other measures above, such as energy conservation, do not include the often substantial improvements made at the design and construction stage of many projects.

In Table 2 below, Meltzer tracks the improvement in the pro-environmental behaviour of households as the effects of living in such a community change the way people think and act.

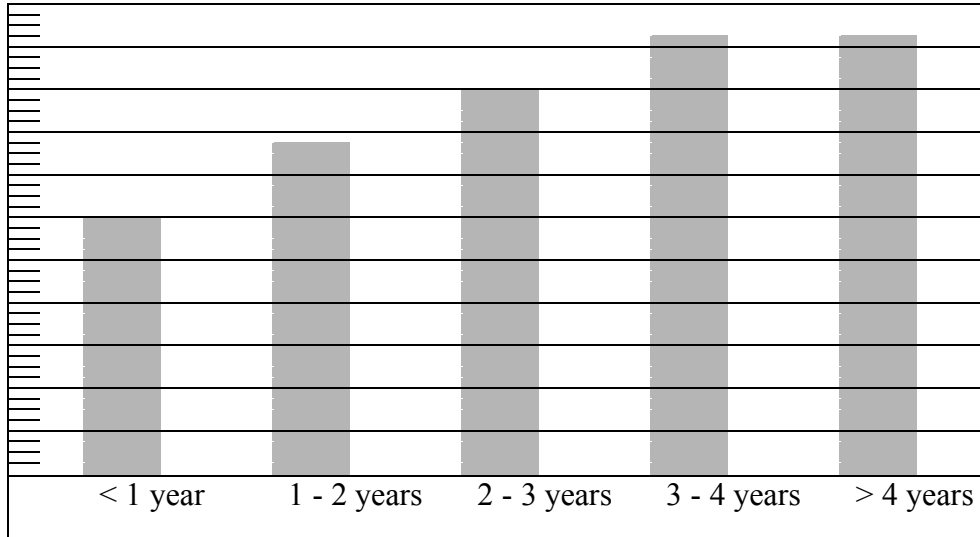


Table 2: Composite indicator for four reported pro-environmental household behaviours (water and energy conservation, waste and toxicity reduction) measured against duration of residence in cohousing¹⁵

Improvements in pro-environmental practices or behaviours in cohousing are partly a function, of course, of the ease or convenience which planned or agreed sharing and co-operation can readily afford. But it would be a mistake to suppose either that this largely explains or is the limit of their environmental gains, or that the material economies sampled above are the main reason for such sharing and co-operation or its only virtue. In cohousing, as I indicated earlier, inter-household interaction, sharing and co-operation is widely valued for its own sake, and for its social and psychological benefits. The latter emphasis, Meltzer notes, “is somewhat different to the emphasis in the literature on the practical advantage, functional efficiency and improved time management available through sharing.” He continues:

An illustration of this unexpected orientation occurred almost every night at Windsong during my visit there. At the time, the kitchen was unfinished but the dining area was in full operation. The community had common meals six times per week, more than any other community, yet there were none of the normal

efficiencies to be gained. Because the kitchen was inoperable the meals were a potluck, and every household was expected to contribute. Meals were well attended with over 60% of residents reporting that they usually or always participated. Residents ‘hung out’ in the common house long after the meal was over in a manner not observed in any other community. A major contribution to social occasions was being made by an 80-year-old member who, after she had eaten, would begin playing the piano in one corner of the dining room. As others finished their meal, they would join her for a sing-a-long that would continue well into the evening.¹⁶

Meltzer carefully analysed his qualitative data to show deepening layers of cohousers’ experience of their shared life and of the value they attached to it - from being influenced by others with greater environmental knowledge or awareness, to exchanging ideas about environmental matters, daily experiencing the results of their co-operative endeavour, mutual support, developing a sense of belonging and attachment to the community and neighbourhood, and of being or becoming empowered to act in environmentally more responsible ways. Their comments in relation to environmental matters and living in cohousing included:

- Children grow up with more ecologically sound models as the norm;
- Having common laundry facilities makes me aware of doing frivolous loads of laundry as I have to share the space, time and work etc with others;
- Car sharing instead of buying a new car – we rent half of a neighbour’s;
- Sharing so many appliances ... feels so good!;
- There is support in resisting cultural norms ie. consumerism etc, that contribute to environmental degradation;
- It’s easier to have congruency with your values and behaviour;
- It is empowering to do composting and water conservation as a group because it is easier to see that we make a difference; and,
- We have to make decisions and plans about how to solve problems and move forward.¹⁷

The diversity of reasons and benefits evident from the above comments indicates that the environmental gains are deeper than whatever material economies and efficiencies individual communities manage to achieve. Such communities affect the way people think

and act *generally*, building (transferable) social capital for tackling environmental (and other) problems generally.

Cohousing as a Source of Influence on Environmental Reform

It seems clear that cohousing will only ever appeal to, or be realisable by, a relatively small minority of households, so its importance is as much as a source of ideas and inspiration for, and an influence upon, housing and neighbourhood development generally. There are several good reasons for optimism here, and already strong evidence of its positive influences. Firstly, unlike most other types of intentional community, cohousing is a *mainstream* housing option. Cohousers remain ‘normal’ members of their local communities, just as do those who, for example, join a suburban play group or library. And the lives or dwellings of cohousers are no less open or ‘porous’ in respect of their relations with those who do not live in cohousing than are the latter’s. This aspect of the social character of cohousing serves to normalise and integrate what was, or is, *prima facie*, a radical living option, and so increase its influences. Secondly, cohousing appears to be remarkably *failsafe*. No established cohousing community, so far as we know, has failed. The planning stage of any community is inevitably sufficiently complex and protracted (although not typically so complex or protracted as to be daunting) to ensure that prospective cohousers come to understand what they are embarking upon. And cohousing as a type is sufficiently mindful of household and familial autonomy and individual liberty to succeed under contemporary conditions, pressures or expectations. Thirdly, cohousing schemes are impressive for their *diversity*. As I have indicated, they can be found in a variety of culturally distinct (Western) countries, and a variety of residential locations in those countries - from inner urban to rural. Cohousing works across a range of site planning strategies, housing densities and building types, similarly for community size, organisation of their common life, household types, incomes and the ages of its residents; it can be new-build, a refurbishment or re-use; it is tenure neutral.

On a broader canvas, cohousing has influenced some public or social housing authorities, private developers and architects to be more creative or generous in the provision of socially and environmentally useful spaces in housing schemes and neighbourhoods generally, and cohousing for the elderly is now well established as a distinctive housing option in both The Netherlands and Denmark.¹⁸ How much longer must we wait before we think more broadly and productively about our neighbourhoods?

¹ See, for example, Stedman Jones, G. 1984. *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between the Classes in Victorian Society*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middx; Frost, L. 1990. *Australian Cities in Comparative Perspective*. Penguin Books, Ringwood, Vic.; and Ebenezer Howard's scheme from the turn of the century for 'garden cities' in Fishman, R. 1982. *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century*, Basic Books, New York.

² See, for example, Cooper-Marcus, C. and Sarkissian, W. 1986. *Housing as if People Mattered: Site Design Guidelines for Medium-Density Family Housing*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Calif.; Coleman, A. 1990. *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing*, 2nd. ed., Hilary Shipman, London; Bamford, G. 1992. Density, Equity and the Green Suburb, in Harding, R. (ed), *Ecopolitics V: Proceedings of the Ecopolitics V Conference, University of NSW, Sydney, 4-7 April, 1991*, University of NSW Centre for Liberal & General Studies, Kensington, NSW: 661-66; Bamford, G. 1995. Sustainability, Social Organisation and the Australian Suburb, in Birkeland, J. (ed) *Rethinking the Built Environment: Proceedings of Catalyst '95 Conference*, University of Canberra Centre for Environmental Philosophy, Planning and Design, Belconnen, ACT: 49-57

³ See, for example, Trainer, E. F. 1995. *The Conserver Society: Alternatives for Sustainability*. Zed Books, London; and Coombs, H. C. 1990. *The Return of Scarcity: Strategies for an Economic Future*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

⁴ For example, Dobson, A. *Green Political Thought*. 1995. Routledge, London; see Bamford, G. 1998. How shall We Live Then? in Elliott, L. (ed), *Ecopolitics X: Proceedings of Ecopolitics X, Canberra, September 26-28, 1996*, Ecopolitics Association of Australia, Australian National University, Canberra: 31-39

⁵ 'Cohousing' is a term invented by two American architects, Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett. See McCamant, K. and Durrett, C. 1994. *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, rev. ed. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, Calif. The original Danish term is 'bofællesskab', which roughly translates as 'living community'; the Dutch term is 'centraal wonen' which roughly means 'central living' or 'common living'; other useful accounts or studies of cohousing not cited elsewhere in this paper can be found in the special issues of *Open House International* 17, 2 (1992), and *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 17, 2 (2000); Dovey, K., and Cooper-Marcus, C. 1990. Architecture and Community: Co-housing in the Netherlands, *Architecture Australia* 79 (December): 52-56; Fromm, D. 1985. Living-Together Housing, *Architecture Review* 179 (April): 63-75; Meltzer, G., and Bamford, G. 1993. Sociable Housing and Eco-possibilities, in Jolly, B., and Holland, I (eds), *Facing the Future: Ecopolitics VII Conference Proceedings, Brisbane, 2-4 July, 1993*, Griffith University Faculty of Environmental Science, Brisbane: 249-54

⁶ Ibid.: 38

⁷ Ibid.: 38 & 137

⁸ Bamford, G. 1998. Where do I live: Growing up, Neighbourhoods and Environmental Reform? In Birkeland, J. (ed.) *Designing Eco-solutions: Proceedings of Catalyst '97 Conference*, University of Canberra, Centre for Environmental Philosophy, Planning & Design, Belconnen, ACT: 319-20

⁹ Ibid.: 18-27

¹⁰ Meltzer, G. 2000a. *Cohousing: Towards Social and Environmental Sustainability*, PhD Thesis, The University of Queensland, Brisbane. Graham was a lecturer in Architecture at QUT for most of his PhD candidature; QUT supported his study program and provided periods of professional development leave which greatly assisted him in doing this research.

¹¹ Meltzer, G. 2000b. Cohousing: Verifying the Importance of Community in the Application of Environmentalism, *Journal of Architectural Planning and Research* 17, 2: 110-32

¹² Ibid.: 116

¹³ Ibid.: 116-17

¹⁴ For example, Meltzer, G. 2000a. op cit: 168

¹⁵ Water conservation measured reported changes to water saving shower heads, reduced shower times and basin water use in brushing teeth. Toxicity reduction measured reported use of bio-degradable household cleaning products and the purchase of organic food.

¹⁶ Meltzer, G. 2000a. op. cit.: 171; (I have deleted several references in this passage to Figures displaying photographs of the Windsong common meal.)

¹⁷ Ibid.: 155, 166, 174 and 189

¹⁸ See, in particular, Meltzer, G. 2000a. op.cit.; Meltzer, G. 2000b. op. cit.; and McCamant, K. and Durrett, C. 1994. op. cit.; and the other references supplied in note 5 above; for information on cohousing for the elderly see Boligtrivsel I Centrum (BiC), 1994. *Co-housing for Senior Citizens in Europe*, Copenhagen.
