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Collaborative Housing in Western Europe and Scandinavia

Lisa Danovich ASID-MSW Candidate 2011, University of Michigan- Ann Arbor

Housing and social (in)justice are tied together, even if we are unaware of this as the single family home and the suburban neighborhood have become accepted conditions. Multiple American generations have become accustomed to this standard, and are not familiar with other housing alternatives that have been, and are, a successful option. One way to look at resolving social inequities and creating healthy societies is to reconsider the family home. How shelter for a domestic life is shaped and relates to its surrounding community affects how individuals experience their life. Even today with relative comforts and higher standards of living due to technological advances and wealth based on exploitation of resources and of others, throughout the classes, many find their experience of life not satisfying in many basic ways– including housing and social interaction.

As designers, planners, architects and policymakers, the desire to shape a good life, a healthy community, and to support an equalitarian society (an American premise) with building patterns is a complex challenge. Looking into past and present housing within varying neighborhoods can expand the pattern of possibilities for achieving harmony that has been increasingly lacking today.

In Scandinavia and Western Europe there has been a successful housing model, which has increased over the past 20-30 years. This typology has many different names and variations, but share common threads. They are referred to as collaborative housing and co-housing. For example, in Sweden, cohousing is currently 20% of the housing stock. For my study, I made contacts via email to find persons involved with collaborative housing in several countries and was able to accept most of the invitations offered.

I visited collaborative housing developments in Oslo, Norway; Stockholm, Sweden; Rotterdam, Utrecht and Delft, Netherlands; Rennes and Angers, France and London, England. I visited both collaborative homes for independent persons and families as well as group homes for those needing more assistance. I visited homes in urban centers and in rural outskirts and small villages. I was offered group meals and guest rooms and shared apartments, within collaborative developments, as well as guest stays with architects and sociologists involved with the collaborative developments. I was also able to meet with architects and with many residents of collaborative housing, as well as with directors and care providers in assisted collaborative homes.

What I observed in each instance were groups of people living in housing communities in which each resident had the typical private home, whether an apartment or free-standing home, which was nestled in it’s architectural layout so that common rooms were easily available for all members fostering social interaction. It was rampant between community members in passing and in planned activities. Because of this, social networks allowed for easy friendships, networking for employment and services, shared childcare and evening meals, as well as shared property caretaking and gardening. In one case, there was a shared agri-business that was in the development stages. This kind of available, if not required, social interaction designed into the physical architectural layouts as well as into the social programs, was based on the residents sharing certain values, which could be different in the varying developments and countries. There were many spontaneous social interactions.

Values of sharing were often based on theoretical assumptions. In Oslo, the group homes that I visited were created and managed by Bybo Misjon. The themes for success were these: 1) small homes 2) permanent homes– no kicking out 3) to achieve goal of self-empowerment it takes patience and support (treatments) for healing. Bybo is a pioneering organization that takes the time to undertake community assessments and observing the population groups (like those with mental health issues, the abused and prostitutes, migrant groups from Eritrea, Somalia and the Rom Gypsies) to learn of their requirements and issues ad values, in order to support and hold a space for healing to be accessible.

In Sweden, the collaborative housing model was the result of feminist ideas and was fostered by the Swedish activist “Group of Eight”– two of who were my hosts. This group was those responsible for gender equality laws addressing childcare, employment for women and their families, and the collaborative housing was a solution for mothers joining the workforce. Sharing the evening meals is considered the binding activity, which cements residents socially.

In Holland, I met with an architect responsible for one of the many and original cohousing developments. He reported that the concept was to break apart the nuclear family, which was thought to be unhealthy, and instead, to foster extended “families” while at the same time, to equalize privacy for each individual, including children. Four sleeping rooms and bathrooms and a kitchenette were a “family pod”. This group became a cluster of 8-12, composed of 2 families, 1-2 couples and 1-2 singles, which shared a large kitchen and living room and outdoor dining space in the their own garden. Then, 2 to 3 groups (16 to 24 residents) become a cluster and share gardens, laundry room, hobby rooms and bicycle storage.

The maximum size of the development recommended in order for one not to become anonymous within the community is about 100 or 4 to 5 clusters. Meals were originally shared in the early days of the development, but this has become volunteer-only, and not a requirement, as in Sweden. Even so, I witnessed many pods of 8 cooking and sharing their evening meal together. Where there was a lot of volunteer activity in the collaborative housing developments in Holland was in the community “bar” within the development. All ages were welcome and alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages were available for purchase and it was a family space.

In France, Collaborative housing was more of a struggle. The laws and social attitudes since the Revolution maintain that no one person or group is to have separate or special treatment or amenities. Therefore, many look upon collaborative housing developments with great suspicion. Some local politicians support the benefits of collaborative housing. In those communities it has been possible to see collaborative housing developed. The communities that I visited in France were aesthetically pleasing and had a combination of freestanding as well as townhouse type private homes intermingled with large central gardens. Sharing meals was more of the nature of separate families bringing their meal to a shared picnic space for dining together, but not cooking together. Children played within the yard area together and the rules were for children to ring the front doorbells to invite playmates in lieu of calling for playmates from the back yards.

In London I was able to visit two apartment complexes. One was for the aging requiring physical support and the other was for those with mental health issues requiring support. However in both instances, each resident was living independently, but had staff available for the various kinds of support that might be required. In a central location, it became cost-effective to make it possible for these residents to live independently because they had the services that they needed. In both instances there were communal rooms like a group living room and laundry. In the home for the aging, there was also meal service available in addition to apartments with full kitchens.

Positive aspects that I witnessed in the housing developments were social cohesion and a lack of isolation, childcare support for families and single parents, networking for many topics like employment, services, sharing vacations and cultural or shopping excursions, along with meal sharing and hobby groups. There is a cost benefit to living in a smaller private domain in order to afford sharing many amenities as a group. These amenities might otherwise be beyond the budgets of each individual resident. The most successful communities were those that were actually, communities. Instead of a condo like apartment complex or neighborhood, a village was developed with miniscule to deliberate social interactions for all throughout the day- at the same time privacy is respected.