

Cohousing and Formal/Informal Aspects of the Boundary

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ: Στις μέρες μας παρατηρείται ένα αυξημένο ενδιαφέρον της αρχιτεκτονικής για την συλλογική κατοικία, στο πλαίσιο αναζήτησης λύσεων για μια βιώσιμη κατοίκηση. Η συλλογική κατοικία εισάγει πλέον νέες μορφές αστικής ζωής με στόχο την αντιμετώπιση των σύγχρονων προκλήσεων και αναγκών. Ενώ η ανάγκη ιδιωτικής κατοικίας παραμένει αδιαμφισβήτητη, ο συλλογικός χαρακτήρας της συλλογικής κατοικίας συγκροτεί μια ιδιαίτερη συνθήκη, όπου η ιδιωτική διάσταση της κατοικίας συνδυάζεται με ποιότητες του δημόσιου χώρου. Η εργασία αυτή διερευνά τη συλλογική ποιότητα του κοινού χώρου στη συλλογική κατοικία και την πιθανή δυναμική του προς την ενίσχυση του δημόσιου χώρου. Η συλλογική κατοικία έχει δεχτεί κριτική για τη δημιουργία χώρων που ενθαρρύνουν την αλληλεπίδραση αποκλειστικά μεταξύ των κατοίκων, διαμορφώνοντας εσωστρεφή οικιστικά σύνολα που αποδυναμώνουν τον δημόσιο χώρο. Αφού συζητήσουμε τις τυπολογίες του συλλογικού χώρου στη συλλογική κατοικία, αντλούμε από την ανάλυση του Sennett σχετικά με τη έννοια της συνεργασίας και από τις μπαχτινικές έννοιες της πολυφωνίας και του καρναβαλικού και υποστηρίζουμε την ανάγκη σύλληψης του συλλογικού χώρου ως ενός ανοιχτού πεδίου επικοινωνίας μεταξύ της συλλογικής κατοικίας και του δημόσιου χώρου.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: συλλογική κατοικία, όριο, ανοιχτότητα, συλλογικός χώρος, δημόσιος χώρος, κατοικία, χωρικό ήθος.

ABSTRACT: There is increasing interest in architecture in cohousing as part of the search for solutions to sustainable habitation. In this context, cohousing introduces new forms of urban living to address contemporary challenges and needs. While the need for private homes remains unquestioned, the collective nature of cohousing presents a distinct condition in which the private aspect of housing blends with qualities of public space. This paper explores the collective aspect of shared space in cohousing and its potential to enhance public space, considering both formal and informal qualities. Cohousing has been criticized for providing spaces that encourage interaction solely among residents, fostering introverted complexes that weaken the public realm. After discussing the typologies of cohousing collective space, we draw on Sennett's analysis of collaboration and Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony and the carnivalesque to argue for conceiving collective space as an open field of communication between cohousing and public space.

Keywords: cohousing, boundary, openness, collective space, public space, housing, spatial ethos.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there is a growing interest in architecture regarding cohousing as part of the search for solutions that align with the demand for sustainable habitation. The dynamics of the collective in this perspective have emerged as an ideological and epistemological shift, which has been generally supported in policies choices

and decision-making. Indeed, in times of globalization and the networking of urban entities, emphasis has been placed on the collective, which seems to be based on a reinterpretation of concepts, in accordance to reassessed values. Thus, cohousing is reappearing in the Western world after the decline of mass housing in favor of private residency and suburbanization. Having long abandoned the idea of a new social subject, it suggests new forms of urban living within a realistic approach to contemporary needs. In any case, the idea of cohousing cultivates expectations of socialization, openness to diversity, and the strengthening of public space.

After discussing the cultural and social context in which cohousing emerges and the ownership and spatial forms it adopts, we examine the architectural strategies that shape the collective space within cohousing, the quality of the collective as content of the corresponding spatialities, and the ways in which they interact with public space.

II. THE CONTEXT: CULTURE, OWNERSHIP, SPACE

Cohousing first appeared in Denmark and Northern Europe in the 1960s and gained popularity in the 1990s in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, spreading across Europe after 2000 [1]. It emerged almost simultaneously with gated communities, which, however, originated in the United States. The socio-cultural tradition of Northern Europe, compared to that of the United States, gives an answer about the collectivist framework of cohousing as opposed to the exclusivity of gated communities. Cohousing primarily appeals to the modern middle class, responding in a rational manner to its values and needs [2]. Although it is often perceived as a bottom-up residential model, it is significantly supported by institutional and managerial agents, and by the conventional methods of promoting residential products to address housing needs.

Various categorizations of cohousing reveal distinctions based on residents' motivations, functions, or ownership structures. In the collaborative model, cooperation among residents forms the core function of cohousing; in the communal model, the focus is on creating a community; and in the collective model, emphasis is placed on the collective organization of services [3]. Residents' motivations further distinguish cohousing into groups that build together to reduce costs, settlements where residents share time and effort in daily obligations, and communities based on common ideals, potentially

related to ideology, religion, or lifestyle [4]. Furthermore, cohousing differs from co-living, as the former may be co-developed, co-designed, and co-organized by the group of residents, while the latter is usually developer-led and responds to the increasing demand for affordable smaller urban dwellings [5].

Regarding ownership structures, cohousing formations adopt models such as the 'condominium' or the 'co-operative,' depending on whether residents own or merely have usage rights to their apartments and the common spaces [6]. Cohousing has been criticized for attempting to establish spatial and psychological communities by adopting existing legal forms, while at the same time identifying prevailing ownership relations as part of the problem [7]. However, its conceptualization and architectural realization aim to provide solutions to economic living issues, social isolation, and environmental degradation [8]. By shifting daily functions to shared use, it contributes to saving living space [9], promoting gender equality [10], and fostering a model of living that moves away from the traditional family structure towards more cooperative forms [11].

Cohousing manifests in diverse ways across the world shaped by regional origins, cultures, and legislations, a fact which results in typologies and spatial features that vary from place to place. For example, it presents notable differences between England and Sweden. In Sweden, cohousing is primarily located in the city and develops vertically in multi-story buildings [12], whereas in England, it is often found in suburban areas, forming horizontally structured settlements [13]. Additionally, in Sweden, shared spaces are integrated within the cohousing building, while in England they are usually housed in separate structures within the settlement, distanced from private apartments. Furthermore, English cohousing communities consist of 10 to 40 households, whereas Swedish examples can be significantly larger in scale.

Germany presents a different model, distinguished by its strong emphasis on the ecological orientation, particularly in self-sufficient living and maintenance practices [14]. Baugruppen are resident groups that design and construct their housing cooperatively, aiming for a solidaristic and ecologically conscious approach to living. In brief, a common aspect of cohousing is the provision of shared spaces and communal facilities for daily needs, more so than in conventional cohabitation among multiple households [15]. Shared kitchens, dining areas, lounges, and recreational and service spaces form the physical foundation of a collective life on a daily or weekly basis.

III. FORMALITIES OF COHOUSING: TYPOLOGIES AND FUNCTIONALITIES

The forms that embody cohousing today converge on the following attribute: they recognize the need for housing space to ensure privacy for the residents and, consequently, they provide fully structured private apartments, with kitchens and bathrooms, varying in size. Having secured private space for the residents, then they provide different types of collective space, depending on the form of collectivity they support. Although cohousing always include some form of shared space, the way this collective space exists between the private space of individual apartments and the public space of the city varies.

In pursuing a kind of cohousing that is capable to host collective life among residents - rather than merely sharing space where individual residences are placed - architectural design primarily employs three typologies of shared space: the common area of shared spaces, the cluster of apartments (organized around shared space), and the flexible room (for occasional use). These typologies often coexist within the same cohousing structure, providing multiple approaches to collective space and introducing with varying intensity the spatial continuum from the private to the collective. Specifically:

The common area of shared spaces. The collective space in cohousing is organized by concentrating shared spaces in an area functioning in common for all private dwellings. This manifests as the consolidation of common use rooms on a single level or sometimes spread across more levels but generally maintaining spatial continuity. The private apartments are distributed across upper floors. In addition to the indoor common spaces, cohousing may also include open or outdoor communal areas. At the "Sargfabrik"¹ in Vienna, interior common spaces - such as a restaurant, a multiple-use space, a play area, a swimming pool, and seminar rooms - are located on the ground floor and mezzanine level. Outdoor spaces shape green areas, play and sports zones, and a water feature. The 75 private apartments are arranged in rows and accessed via corridors. The building culminates in an accessible rooftop garden designed for socializing among residents. In the case of horizontally arranged cohousing complexes, common spaces are usually placed centrally or near the entrance of the settlement within a common house. In "Marmelade Lane"² by Mole Architects, 2018, in Cambridge, UK, the individual dwellings - each fully equipped and functionally independent - are organized around a shared garden and along a pedestrian-only common street. The common house is positioned at the intersection of the settlement's outdoor collective spaces and includes a large kitchen, a lounge, laundry, playroom, and flexible spaces for meetings and wellness activities.

¹ <https://www.buildingsocialecology.org/projects/sargfabrik-vienna/>,
<https://architectuul.com/architecture/sargfabrik>

² <https://www.marmaladelane.co.uk/>

In all cases, the key element is that the common-use rooms are gathered in a unified space that serves as the common area of shared spaces for the building or housing complex, accessible to all private homes. The strategic placement of the unified collective space encourages residents to pass through it before reaching their private dwellings, which is considered to foster its use, in general or until the moment they reach their apartments [16]. However, the common area of shared spaces creates the cohousing as a single entity, emphasizing the singularity of the shared space for the whole settlement and promoting community formation.

The cluster arrangement. Cohousing enhances the distribution of every day-use shared spaces within the building or the settlement to better support private homes. This leads to a cluster arrangement, where private apartments are grouped around shared spaces such as kitchens, dining rooms, or even multi-purpose spaces, often assigned per floor or group of houses. Additional shared spaces for the entire setting may also be provided.

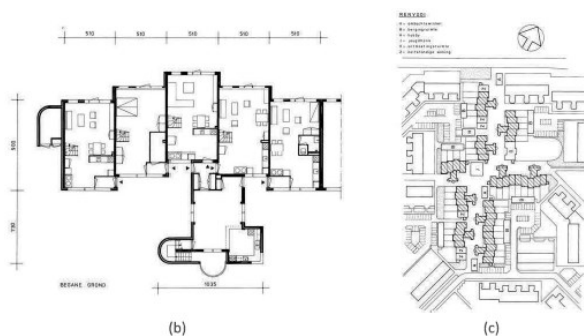


Figure 1 - Wandelmeent Cohousing in Hilversum. (b) Cluster plan, (c) Site plan. Source: De Vos, Els and Lidwine Spoormans. "Collective Housing in Belgium and the Netherlands: A Comparative Analysis". *Urban Planning* 7, no. 1 (2022):336-348.

<https://www.cogitatiopress.com/urbanplanning/article/view/4750/2604>, available under CC BY 4.0, The original figure has been modified by removing subfigure (a).

The cluster arrangement within a larger setting is a choice for functional communities [17]. The "Wandelmeent"³ cohousing, in Wandelmeent, Netherlands (Figure 1), designed in 1976 by P. Weeda and L. de Jonge, consists of 50 residences organized into 10 clusters of five terraced residences, each with a shared unit containing a communal kitchen and dining room, along with a shared rooftop terrace. Beyond the cluster-specific spaces, additional collective area includes a workspace, café, sauna, and gym. The "Tinggarden"⁴ cohousing, designed in 1978 by Vandkunsten Architects, in Køge, Denmark, a settlement of 78 homes, is structured into six clusters, each with a communal house for shared activities and meals. In addition to the cluster-specific spaces, the settlement includes a large communal hall for all residents.

This subdivision of collective space into smaller collectivity zones ensures proximity between private

dwellings and shared areas while also creating a spatial gradient from private to collective. Between the private space of residences and the collective area on the ground floor or the common house and courtyards of the cohousing, are semi-private and smaller scale-collective spaces created. This spatial organization encourages collective life within smaller groups and may better secure cohesion, especially in cases of big structures, but it may also foster greater introversion and create exclusivity between clusters. Organizing the collective within the smaller scale of the clusters, that means in groups instead of communities, may further distance the collective from the polyphony of the public space.

The flexible room. These are autonomous spaces within the structure, usually with private bathrooms, located near circulation areas on apartment levels or within the common area of shared space, the common house or the clusters. They are versatile in use, users and organization and serve as supplementary spaces for enhancing the capacity of the private dwellings, in a spatially interrupted mode. These rooms, also defined as satellite rooms [18], are not intended for continuous daily use but rather for temporary usage based on residents' needs and mutual agreements. The "Wandelmeent" cohousing, in addition to its general collective space and cluster-specific areas, offers flexible rooms that extend the functional capacity of the private dwellings. Similarly, the "Marmelade Lane" includes scattered guest rooms within the settlement, allowing private residences to expand as needed. Rather than being permanently assigned to individual dwellings - resulting in underutilized private spaces - these rooms are provided as collective spaces made available for private use by all residents.

In this case, the collective space of the flexible room is used entirely privately. It is a private space, though for more users. The key factor here is time-sharing. The commonality lies in the fact that the space is shared sequentially rather than simultaneously, meaning there is no actual co-use or social interaction within the same space. Nevertheless, flexible rooms in cohousing require coordination and a willingness to share. Furthermore, they exist alongside genuinely communal spaces used simultaneously by residents enabling collective life. As such, they play a supplementary role, primarily aimed at providing occasional expansion of private apartments rather than fostering collectivity.

IV. COHOUSING, COLLABORATION AND PUBLIC SPACE: DYNAMICS OF INFORMALITY

The typologies mentioned above reflect the ways in which collective space is organized in cohousing and, to this extent, indicate the distinct quality of collective space concerning the private-public relationship. When discussing housing, we take its private nature for granted - a space fully controlled by its rightful user. However, in

³ <https://www.spring-architecten.nl/portfolio/de-wandelmeent/>

⁴ <https://vandkunsten.com/en/projects/tinggaarden>

the case of cohousing, the specification of its collective character suggests a particular condition in which the private nature of housing is adulterated with qualities of public space. This mix, however, does not necessarily mean opening the housing to public space.

Cohousing is criticized for providing a space for interaction only among its residents, fostering a kind of introverted sociality that contributes to the weakening of public space [19]. The common area of shared spaces within a building or the shared house within a settlement serves as a field for collective life among the specific, identified people who reside there, thus creating a private-collective space. Furthermore, in the case of clusters, a second level of private-collective space emerges within cohousing, which, depending on the circumstances, may exclude parts or the entirety of the cohousing from the daily life and functions of the cluster. The quality of privacy is even more pronounced in the case of flexible rooms that serve private apartments exclusively and privately for each residence, leaving no room for any notion of collective life.

For example, in the cohousing “MissSargfabrik”⁵, designed by BKK3 and built in 2000 across from “Sargfabrik”, the common spaces are located on an upper floor rather than in continuity with the outdoor space and the street. Unlike the parent building, they are not open to the broader community but are reserved solely for the collective use of the 39 apartment residents. Social interaction among residents is further encouraged through furniture arrangements in the wide corridors leading to their apartments [20]. In “Marmalade Lane”, the common house is positioned at the intersection of shared outdoor spaces, the car-free street and the garden uniting the residences, and faces inward towards the community. Both the common house and the outdoor spaces serve for collective interaction and shared living among the residents. In “Wandelmeent”, common spaces exist for the entire cohousing complex, yet individual clusters function autonomously, organizing their communal meals independently.

In other cases, the collective space is open not only to the residents but also to the neighborhood and the city. Then, the collective space is typically situated on the ground floor, establishing a spatial continuity with public space, enhancing accessibility, and welcoming the community into cohousing. Additionally, rooftop terraces are sometimes opened for public use. Both in “Sargfabrik”, Vienna and “Spreefeld”⁶, Berlin, the collective spaces on the ground floor are accessible to the wider community, while the accessible green rooftop is reserved only for residents' gatherings and socializing. Furthermore, Baugruppen in Berlin frequently feature open courtyards and terraces for public use [21]. Here, it is important to distinguish between cases where collective space is open to the broader community for social interaction and

collective engagement, fostering a quality of public collectivity, and those where the public nature of the ground floor is restricted to commercial activities such as cafés, restaurants, and shops, which cater to individual or small-group consumption. Although these spaces enable human interaction and fulfill neighborhood needs, they don't serve the city in collective way.

Undoubtedly, housing carries a catalytic transformative dynamic in shaping social relationships. Within this context, the role of architectural and urban design is particularly significant: architectural space organizes our movements and practices, and, in turn, it is a fact that these, to their own extent, shape our habits, desires, and thoughts. However, cohousing is more than just an alternative spatial housing system, as it accommodates innovative social mechanics of self-organizing that cultivate an ethos of sharing and may provide a pathway to overcoming challenges in public space [22]. This distinguishes it from ‘master-planned’ neo-traditional neighborhoods, positioning it within the discourse of social architecture beyond collective property [23].

The key feature that justifies recognizing contemporary cohousing as fundamentally collective - without radically altering the concept of the collective - is the fact that its program usually responds to activities carried out through collaboration among residents to meet their shared daily living needs. Depending on the specific type of collective housing, collaboration among residents can extend from the initial decision-making stages regarding location, legal framework, financial repayment, to the design and construction of the project and to its maintenance and the execution of daily tasks. Collaboration goes beyond mere participation in the project's creation processes which involve external stakeholders, and it may include them. In cases where collaboration entails continuous engagement among residents for planning and carrying out daily living responsibilities, it establishes a framework of mutual familiarity with one another and a culture of respect to the other. It is worth noting that this collaborative aspect of cohousing initially faced societal skepticism, as it challenged the dominance and beliefs of patriarchal society and was perceived as a threat to the nuclear family.

For Sennett [24], collaboration is the pivotal process that allows strangers to coexist and interact peacefully. A type of active coexistence where participants commit to the joint production, construction, or execution of a product, object, or service, taking place within a framework of free association and behavior. This setting allows for dialogical exchange processes with unpredictable outcomes, creating an open social space. Collaboration defines a program for achieving a goal, while its social aspect evolves informally, flexibly, and spontaneously, as the perceived risk of others diminishes when everyone works toward a common goal within a structured

⁵ <http://www.bkk-3.com/portfolio-item/sargfabrik-community-housing/>

⁶ <https://fatkoehl.com/en/housingmixed-use/spreefeld-berlin/>

framework. In this sense, collaboration can be understood as a critical openness to the other: it involves setting a goal, a form, a boundary that, through free and unscripted communication during collaboration, remains open to the possibility of evolving in unexpected directions. Sennett's collaborative diversity combines formality and informality to ensure a viable coexistence among different people based on a form of free individuality with responsibility and awareness of others. This idea could inspire the design of collective space in cohousing to foster a kind of collective life that enhances urban coexistence and the city, if being complemented by Bakhtin's [25] conception of the constitutive and creative dynamics of the polyphonic collective carnivalesque.

When the collective spaces of cohousing are exclusively reserved for residents and remain closed to the city, they establish a clear boundary identifying them as private-collective. At the same time, however, they retain their public quality for the residents of collective housing, who enjoy free and indiscriminate access to them. In addition, when these common spaces are opened to city people through the organization of events and activities, this openness is decided unilaterally by the cohousing residents and can just as easily be revoked by another decision. In this sense it is neither continuous nor absolute. In many cases, cohousing function with remarkable cooperation between the cohousing community and city associations or local authorities, serving the enjoyment of all and fostering sociability and coexistence [26]. However, the right to open or close access to the collective space of cohousing remains in the hands of the residents.

This creates an ambiguous border where the flow of people is based on the preferences of the residents [27]. To the extent of its ambiguity it falls short of the qualities of a truly open boundary that would enhance public dynamic of the city, which is even more deprived of the unpredictable, unscripted, informal, and even conflicting aspects of its already shrunken public space. Indeed, the informality, that Sennett advocates, characterizes public space, which hosts encounters between strangers that are always random, unstructured, and unpredictable in their development. In contrast, collective spaces, which are restricted to specific uses and groups of people, foster repetitive behavior patterns and predetermined ways of using and moving within space. The lack of informality in the collective space of cohousing can be mitigated by infusing it with public qualities intensifying heterogeneity.

In the perspective of publicness of collective housing, a significant role belongs to a spatial organization that gathers collective spaces in a common area in the housing complex, while simultaneously providing freely accessible pathways from public space to the internal collective space, enhancing the invitation for people to engage with cohousing. The provision of common spaces within a spatial framework that ensures continuity between inside and outside, connecting the collective

with the public space, introduces a architecture of openness, which allows public space to enter the building and cohousing to extend into the city through their meeting at the shared field of collective space. Thus, collective space is constituted as the-private-within-the-public, introducing a field of free collectivity that combines the formal and the informal, escaping the dichotomy of parts and wholes, while acknowledging the constitutive quality of the private and the public, the individual and the social, each being fundamental to the existence of the other.

A spatial organization that ensures public access to the collective space of cohousing points to an understanding of the boundary as an open *peras* [28]. As such, it is understood as a common area between the private space of residences and the public space of the city and is enriched by the intensity of informality and unplanned communication. In this sense, it is perceived as a boundary that, rather than marking the endpoint of private space, signifies its continuity into public space. Understanding collective space as an open *peras* between distinct private and public domains can introduce a judicial poetics of architecture. The realization of cohousing in pursuit of enhancing publicness and urban dynamics is inseparable from a spatial ethos of justice, which perceives space both as a field of experience and critique. After all, if one considers that the critique of architectural space is a multifaceted affair, not only concerning critics and architects but primarily shaped by time and the people who experience it daily [29], then the cultural and pedagogical quality carried by the boundary becomes evident.

The openness of space introduces a carnivalesque perspective, a polyphonic participatory process of meaning-making. The collective space then magnetizes a public sociality within the interior of the settlement and places the private and public spaces in a constant reworking of their meaning. The conceptualization of collective space as the-private-within-the-public sets the conditions for expanding collaboration into a transformative collectivity, a condition of continuous engagement with urbanity. Collective space as the-private-within-the-public, along with unplanned cohabitations and unforeseen encounters among different people, creates a field for critical reconsideration, adaptation, and re-signification while being enriched by the social osmosis among individuals who become specific within each unique relationship that develops among them.

Indeed, a collective space with public quality opens up different perspectives of meaning compared to public space. This is because here, a field of an intimate coexistence of otherness can develop. The collective space of cohousing that invites the people of the city into everyday collaborative processes with the residents of the cohousing would create a space where the informality of freedom that characterizes public space is combined with the formality of commitment that primarily distinguishes collective spaces.

V. EPILOGUE

The safeguarding of public space and the public quality of urban life must be understood as an inviolable condition in the prospect of a just city. Collective housing introduces collective experience, which, in the modern metropolis, is often absent from people's lives. Through this, it confronts the uncertainties of everyday life. However, as a private collective space, it contributes to the erosion of the democratic dynamics of public space. It differs from gated communities in that it is not surrounded by hard fences and gates, nor based on a desire for elitism and the exclusion of otherness [30]. Instead, it aims to conserve resources and energy to address the shortcomings that arise from the weakening of people, imposed by neoliberal society. However, like gated communities, it splits urban space into small islets and replaces public space with collective space, ultimately contributing to urban fragmentation and inequality.

The creation of a collective space with public qualities is not limited to architecture; rather, the context and social practices that shape the relationships between the cohousing residents and the people in the neighborhood and the city are crucial. As fundamental material conditions of life, spatial arrangements shape everyday experience, but at the same time the way this - collective - experience is understood depends on the broader context in which we are situated in a specific time and place. The comprehension of meaning is incomplete without the lived experience, yet experience itself is unstable and vulnerable without a framework of concepts and values that untangle meaning.

In contemporary collective housing, the concept of collective space is reconsidered, having shed the public quality associated with the collective. The latter is now understood as a micro-grouped aggregation of individuals, distanced from other groups and people, formalized within the functional boundaries of its own facilities. The combination of formal and informal qualities in collective housing acknowledges the public dimensions of the collective, introducing a blending of the carnivalesque dynamics of public space with the responsible intimacy of the collective. The conception of the boundary as an open peras taps into the dynamics of otherness and, defying the times, preserves the fact that meaning always accompanies the material nature of the world. In this sense, the opening of the collective space of cohousing to public space and its understanding through the perspective of an extroverted cohabitation can enrich the city with publicness and polyphony.

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