

Introduction

Dick Urban Vestbro is a Professor Emeritus of the School of Architecture and the Built Environment, The Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) Stockholm, and chairman of Kollektivhus.NU, the cohousing movement in Sweden.

In September 2012 Vestbro visited the Degrowth Conference in Venice, Italy, (<http://www.venezia2012.it/?lang=en>) and was leader of a workshop on cohousing. There were 600 visitors, mostly Italian at the conference. The workshop about cohousing was attended by 38 participants.

This gave cause for me to ask him some questions about sharing and cohousing. What can be shared, what kind of relations you need for good sharing, and how about sharing care for not-so-vital-elderly people?

At first I ask Dick Urban Vestbro about his own experiences with sharing: He lives in a cohousing since 1996, so he has a great experience.

ABOUT SHARING

What do you share in your cohousing?

Shared meals

The most important in my cohousing is the sharing of meals. I participate as much as possible. When I'm at home, I eat in the cohousing together with the other people. I eat there whenever I have a chance. Sometimes I have meetings in the evening and then I can't go. But it is possible to order food from the dining room. My wife and I do that quite often. You can take your meal in a little lunchbox. I do that a lot when I'm too late, the dining service has finished after half past seven.

In the paper for the workshop on cohousing at the Degrowth Conference, Dick Urban Vestbro made clear which are the benefits of shared meals. The main reason is to provide a sense of community and to save time for the residents of the cohousing:

SAVING BY SHARING MEALS¹

"All adults must belong to a cooking team. There are five cooking teams consisting of 9 to 10 persons in each. The team is responsible for dinners during one week. Each member carries out two work slots (shopping, cleaning or cooking/dishwashing) in her/his own week. This system means that each one of us can sit down to a set table 18 out of 20 evenings. Those days we do not have to shop, cook or wash the dishes. Two out of 20 evenings we cook for the others. One work slot requires about four hours (Fridays five

¹ http://www.venezia2012.it/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/WS_13_FP_VESTBRO1.pdf

hours). This means that we save very much time, which is important also for pensioners, since most of them are very active.”

In my own cohousing the savings can be assessed according to the following. Common dinners are served 160 out of 365 days (vacation periods plus Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays excluded). In average 30 members eat communally each of these 160 days. This means that 4800 meals are replacing individual household meals each year. If we take into consideration that five persons each day take left-over meals in a box to eat the next day the number increase to 5600. A rough estimate is that communal cooking in Tullstugan replaces the number of food shopping trips by 1000 (assuming that households shop every 3rd instead of every 2nd day because of the common meals, and that the average household size is 1.7). Similarly the use of private stoves ought to be reduced by 2500 use occasions (assuming that communal cooking is equivalent to the use of four private stoves). It can furthermore be assumed that less food is wasted. In our cohousing we freeze left over dishes to be used during days when more than average diners come for meals.

Other common spaces

Apart from the dining room and the kitchen, we have a guestroom, a TV room, and a playroom for children in common.

We also share a guestroom. So we don't need extra space in the apartment when we have guests. This means that people can live in a smaller apartment than they would otherwise do. I use the guestroom quite often. Earlier, when my grandchildren were smaller, they liked to play in the playroom for children. Now that they are 8 and 9, they don't enjoy this anymore, because it is for smaller children. I never use the TV room. We have a private TV. The most frequent users are the children who sit together after dinner, knowing that their parents are in the dining room. Sometimes it happens that people in their private apartment want to see different programs and then, one goes downstairs.

Other sharing

We also have a bookclub in the cohousing. At the beginning of the year, the book club buys 40 books, so anyone can read 40 books for the price of one. We rotate the books, we don't have organized discussions. At the end of the year we distribute the books to the ones who want it, one each.

And then we have cultural events, when either one of our members or one from outside come a Sunday afternoon to show their pictures from a trip or tell about their profession or something special. This is at least once a month. This is a way to use the capacity of the inhabitants and their contacts.

When someone in our cohousing has clothes or books that he or she wants to throw away, they put it on a special table next to the dining room. In other cohousings this is more organized but we have it too. These sort of things **can** be arranged in normal housing areas, but it is easier to do it in a cohousing.

Other cohousings have more common spaces, 10 – 15% of the total dwelling area, our cohousing has only 5% of the total dwelling area as common spaces.

Smaller private apartment

There is no scientific study about this, but my strong impression is that quite many people satisfy themselves with a smaller apartment (fewer rooms), because they have access to a common TV room, common guestroom, common playroom for children.

ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

You live in a cohousing with mixed ages?

Yes, I like it very much. We had a little problem, because a few families with little children moved out and some middle aged couples moved in. But we recently accepted two new families to join our cohousing.

For me it is important to have people of all ages. Perhaps not for everyone, but for the majority of the residents of our cohousing. We are afraid of becoming a pensioners cohousing. There is the other model, for the "second half of life". I understand their situation and I visit them quite often, but I don't want to live in one myself.

A moderate sense of community

In your paper for the degrowth conference you mention "a moderate sense of community"? What do you mean with this?

In the modern societies and particularly in some western societies in modern Europe there are more one and two person households and many of them are quite isolated from others.

Some sociological studies in Sweden show that people want some, but not too much contacts with their neighbors. People in Sweden are very keen to have their right to close the door of their private apartments, without neighbors interfering. That is why I use this term moderate sense of community. We can use common spaces when we want, but it is not imposed. There is a free choice.

But the sense of community is very important. We studied what is the reason that people move to cohousings. The first priority is *"a sense of community between residents"*. And this is especially so for women. So the cohousings have a little problem in the balance between men and women. In our cohousing we had some single men, but at the moment all the men are married and many women are single. I think this is rather common in Swedish cohousings.

individualism

On the other hand, I would say that to live in a couple, even among those who are single, there is still a rather strong ideology that you should find a partner to share your life with and to have a permanent relationship. Nuclear family is rather strong in ideology.

I would say: individualism means literally 'to be an individual'. Since people dream about the happy couple, it means that they have to give up some of their individualism. My idea of a couple is that people are different anyway and that in a nuclear family or in a couple, they have to adapt more than in a cohousing. I believe the chance for real individualism is bigger in cohousing: I can quote my neighbor. They are married for many, many years, they are older than me, and the wife said one day: *"I would never been able to live with this man my husband, if I wouldn't have lived in a cohousing. I have so many other contacts in the cohousing, that we get along very well."*

How about the selection of new members?

This is an important question. Residents have to be selected carefully in order to provide for long-term survival of the cohousing. On the other hand it is important not to discriminate and bar anyone from joining because of class, ethnic origin or other type of selection. Swedish cohousing addresses this issue differently. Some are quite strict, while others are more liberal (and may thus risk to get less of participation)

In my cohousing we have a special situation. Our cohousing was converted from public rental to private ownership. So now people can sell their apartment for a market price without the consideration of who moves in. But so far we have had good luck, there are only 5 of the 23 apartments who do not participate. We have accepted people from outside the building, in the neighborhood, as full members of the association. So we don't restrict ourselves to the two staircases.

Do you think you have to be friends in cohousing?

This is a good question, and I would say 'no'. We don't have to be friends in that sense, that we have common ideas, and be a homogeneous group. I think this is a general idea outside cohousing, that people in a cohousing have a common ideology or belong to a certain association of group before moving in. But this is very rare in Sweden.

We need to be friends in another sense. Meaning, as you move to a cohousing, you can't expect to live exactly as you lived before and have all your individual freedom. You must adapt a little bit, and accept majority decisions and be respectful to others. I think this is a good socializing principle for citizens in general, in countries and in the world, to learn how to respect others.

I personally like very much to talk to people in the dining room who have different political opinions. And I meet people here that I would never meet normally. I mean, I'm an architect, belong to a political party. So I meet too many architects, too many academics, too many people with the same political opinions. I want to meet others!

ABOUT CARE

How do you think about care giving among members in the cohousing?

I think that cohousing with its moderate level of care for others is very important.

For instance, in our cohousing, we have one person who has pains. She is not well, so she can't come to the dining room every day. The people in her staircase have decided to take turns, to bring food from the dining room to her apartment. That I think, is a moderate level of care.

Another example is in the cohousing for the second half of life Färdknäppen, they have schemes of people knocking at the door of the apartment of an ill person. "Are you okay today?" Just the thought of someone caring for them, makes people feel more healthy.

I have a friend, who actually died of cancer there in Färdknäppen, and they took turns in coming to read some books, or just sit next to the bed, and that is a type of care a neighbor can do.

But of course not medical care and more advanced kinds of care. But these other types of attention is very important, I think.