

FORMS OF COLLECTIVE HOUSING, FORMS OF LIVING ALTERNATIVES

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Abstract

Recent examples of collective housing in Sweden offer new concepts of organizing everyday life. Three main objectives characterize the collective housing, namely rationalization of housework, informal mutual support among the inhabitants, and an interactive social environment. Those objectives should, according to the intentions, be achieved through common work and shared responsibilities by the residents. The number of collective houses is small, and the housing type is still a marginal phenomenon on the total housing market. Current changes in the national welfare policy might, however, increase the significance of the collective housing in the future.

The paper presents experiences of collective housing and discusses whether qualities in this form of housing might compensate for cutbacks and privatization in the public sector. Relevant issues are associated with target groups and their characteristics, as is the modes of organizing the common activities, and the qualities and values inherent in the collective environment in the building. The discussion is based on the authors' own research on forms of collective housing, as well as other researchers' findings.

Introduction

In the beginning of the 1980s, a new concept of collective housing arose in Sweden. This was a reaction to two phenomena, particularly experienced by many women: Organizational obstacles in everyday life and the anonymous and isolated life in residential environments (Friberg 1993; Forskergruppen for det nye hverdagslivet 1987). The first phenomenon is because women today form nearly half the labour force in Sweden. In the mid-eighties as much as 83 per cent of mothers with young children were gainfully employed. In spite of well-developed child care, provided by the public sector, the organization of the daily routines, trying to combine a job with family life, puts hard pressure on this group of women. The second relates to the well known fact that loose social networks, a low degree of "neighbouring" and a family-centred life-style is what mainly characterizes living patterns of today, especially in the many large-scale housing areas from the sixties (Henning et al 1991; Daun 1974). In these suburbs, community among the neighbours seldom flourishes.

Collective housing has been labelled (Franck 1991) a housing form "that features spaces and facilities for joint use by all residents, who also maintain their own individual households." Private dwellings, similar to those in ordinary housing areas, are complemented by common rooms, among which a big kitchen and dining-room are the most important shared facilities. According to the new concept, collective housing is based on the principle of people eating together regularly, and also sharing the work of meal preparation and other domestic responsibilities, including upkeep and management of the building (Berg et al 1982). The new concept meant a transformation of an earlier form of collective housing, introduced in the 1930's, which was based on the division of labour; i.e. domestic services were provided by employed personnel (Schoenauer 1991). The new concept proved very popular. During one decade about fifty collective housing units were constructed in different parts of Sweden (Woodward 1991).

The new collective way of living, now practiced by about 5000 individuals, show a range of variations in group sizes, building design and social organization, but they also have some strong common features. Research has documented that this form of living so far attracts people from the same social strata, middle-class people, and mostly rather young families. A large group is single mothers who experience it as a safe and supporting environment for themselves and their children. Inhabitants of the collective houses express their appreciation of the intense social life and the development of social relations. In general, collective living seems to encourage solidarity and mutual support in everyday life, making daily life easier. It must, however, be underlined that in no case have the obligations or responsibilities undertaken by the collectives been programmatically articulated or formalized.

Collective housing in the light of changes in society

Sweden, like other welfare states, has steadily declining government resources, and is thus moving from systems of public health and care toward private entrepreneurs or other private solutions. Lately, the economy of the local governments has been extremely difficult to manage, due to great cutbacks initiated by national government. This has had a special impact on the provision of child care and care for the elderly. Less public control and insight into the organizations, larger groups of day-care units, reduced staff for home-service for the elderly, etc have been visible consequences. In public debate, conservative opinions have put forward care systems where families and relatives take a greater responsibility, or informal organizational models where volunteers play a larger role.

It is obvious that although collective housing never meant to be caring institutions, intrinsic in its functioning lie elements of caring and cherishing. These elements are not programmed, but might emerge informally as a result of the shared everyday responsibilities and physical proximity. How and to what extent this takes place in different collective houses is the subject of this paper.

The paper is based on research (some unpublished), carried out and reported by the Department of Building Functions Analysis (Pedersen 1992; Palm Lindén 1992; Krantz 1993) and findings reported by other researchers (Vestbro 1982; Woodward et al 1989; Michelson 1990; Franck & Ahrentzen 1991; Lundahl & Sangregorio 1992).

The aim of this research was to follow up the implementation of the ideas. Collective houses have been seen as housing experiments. The data is mainly qualitative, collected in structured interviews with carefully selected inhabitants (not a random sample). In the study of Stolplyckan (Pedersen 1992) postal questionnaires and three panel interviews complemented participatory observations and interviews with key persons. In Palm Lindén (1992) the physical structure was analyzed, applying the Hillier Space Syntax Method in relation to the observed use of the building, and the resident assessments of use qualities. Studies carried out by the other researchers referred to, very often use the same combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, with the exception of Michelson (1990), who in his study of experimental Swedish housing used structured interview data, strictly sampled observations and above all time-diary data.

Size, building design, and social organization

The collective housing units from the last ten-fifteen years make up a small number of the total housing stock in Sweden, but in spite of the limited portion they are considered as an interesting alternative for a growing number of house-hunters. They were initially treated with scepticism by planning authorities, but this form of living has gradually become an accepted option on the housing market.

Since the beginning of the 1980s about 60 collective houses were built. There are in principle two different types, according to the organization model. The first type is the one mentioned above, where the tenants themselves share responsibility for the common meal and for the maintenance of the building,

the *tenant-management model*. This is the most common type. Around 50 houses exist today.

There is also a second model, the *service-management model*. This might include elements of tenants' self-management, but is primarily the local government's official form of social care for the elderly. The government provides service and common facilities for the elderly, and costs and management are shared between the collective housing unit and the social care system. The model thus contains a combination of collective housing and service-flats for elderly people. Around 10 houses of this type exist.

The two models of social (and management) organization significantly influence the everyday life of the residents in the respective houses. The tenant-management model was developed around 1980 by a group of ten women with professional engagement in housing and design issues, and labelled by them the "Living in Common" concept (Berg et al 1982). The objective was to lay the foundation for a feeling of fellowship among the residents through shared work, i.e. shared domestic tasks including regular common meals.

Research experiences from both models gives arguments for a discussion of the legitimacy of and reasons for collective housing in a changing future.

Among the tenant-management houses we find variation in size, building design, and social organization. Many similarities exist, mainly connected to the principles of social organization, but also to certain design principles and household characteristics. The tenure form is rental housing or tenant-ownership. Very few private landlords are involved, rental collective housing is mostly owned by the municipal housing companies. The tenant-ownership units belong mainly to branches of a nation-wide housing cooperation. The greater part of the housing units contain 15-80 households with an average of around 30. Some few, smaller exceptions exist as well. These are so called 'collective villas' for five households each. The buildings are located all over Sweden, with a concentration in the Stockholm metropolitan area and the southern part of the country.

The service-management model is larger, with 100-200 apartments. The proportion of apartments belonging to the collective house and service flats for the elderly varies.

The buildings are high-rise as well as low-rise, and they can be new-construction or rebuilt. The most common design has individual flats gathered around one or several stairwells and the common spaces and facilities on the

ground floor. The organization of the common areas in relation to the private dwellings is, it has been shown, essential for the social life among the inhabitants, and must be considered when analyzing the social interaction in the different buildings. How and where people meet and how 'deep' in the spatial system private dwellings are located also have important behaviour effects. (Palm Lindén 1992)

The residents in the collective houses show certain common features. On an average they are young middle-aged, and many of the households have young children. They are often well educated and they are employed in the public sector. Some have independent jobs. Many are teachers, others are social workers and nurses working with social services and health (Pedersen 1992). They are said to belong to the 'post-materialists', defined as persons who are interested in cultural issues, human relations and environmental preservation, "less interested in fundamental material needs than in spiritual ones" (Andersson et al 1993, Woodward et al 1989). There are more women than men among the residents, and a rather high degree of single parents.

Independent of lifestyle, social status and gender, "the collectivists" have been characterized as a strong group of people, rich in initiative and will-power. However, as the ideas of collective housing have gradually been spread, and this way of living has become a real alternative, the elite image is disappearing more and more. At the same time, the popular myth about the extreme and divergent lifestyle practiced by the inhabitants in the collective houses has lost some of its luminosity.

Experiences of the tenant-management model

The tenant-management model has been labelled "the small collective house" because of the limit on the number of flats in the programme: no more than about 50, not less than 20 (Berg et al 1982). The arguments for this were that to share work a certain number of people is required, but too many people makes it difficult to take common decisions.

Follow-up studies show that many of the small collectives have common dinners two to five days a week, with the provision that it is compulsory for the residents to take part in the cooking, but not to eat (!). The common meal is the spine in the communal life, and thus essential for a sense of community to grow. This is confirmed from many interviews (e.g. Lundahl & Sangregorio 1992, Caldenby & Walldén 1984).

There are however some few exception. One comes from some very small collective units, consisting of five households each in a large "villa". The households only occasionally have dinner together, but nevertheless strongly confirmed their intense community (Lundahl & Sangregorio 1992; Krantz 1993; Palm Lindén 1993). The shared work of maintenance and management, such as gardening, handling of garbage and cleaning common spaces helped to establish the feeling of community, which of course also was enforced by their physical proximity and the small size of the group. In these collective villas one also finds examples of integration between generations, such as young couples that arranged for their old parents to live in the same house.

The collective houses have also proved to be a positive environment for growing children. The children are the great winners of this living form, it is said. Parents see that young children become like sisters and brothers. Single mothers talk about the advantages of having baby-sitters, easily practiced as the children are familiar with many of the adults in the house, and the adults are close at hand. The residents also point at the fact that children develop emotional relations to a series of grown ups, not very common in high-rise housing areas in general.

This is specially the case in collective houses with a day-care center in the same building. This is most often organized by the social services of the municipality, but sometimes it is run by the parents as a cooperative daycare center. In both cases, the children benefit from having their playmates in the same building during evenings and weekends and that they do not need to go outdoor to the daycare.

Michelson (1990) compared experimental housing, including two collective houses, with conventional housing through interviews, observations and time-use data. According to his findings, the women residents in the collective houses stated that one behavioural impact of their housing was easier child care. In the small collective house in his study, the women did not spend much time with their children; the reason, according to Michelson, was that they felt their children were in safe and supportive places, together with their fathers or with neighbours engaged in positive activities.

In the 'small collective houses' one aim was to get a representative mix of ages. This, however, has not been fulfilled. There are few people around 55-60 and older, maybe due to an older generation's scepticism about this way of living. Some houses, though, contain old persons. Our findings show that they enjoy being with young families and children, but that they also appreciate having each other as a group of the same age.

Service-integration model - the Stockholm projects

The service-management collective model is intended to overcome the poor representation of older people in many collective houses. With this model the municipalities provide collective housing, and at the same time guarantee, through their normal, formal responsibility, shelter and housing for the elderly.

At the end of the 1970s, when the idea of collective housing gained influence, politicians in Stockholm saw the possibility to combine an interest in collective living and the municipal responsibility for social services, i.e. child care and care for the elderly. This killing two birds with one stone seemed a cunning innovation. Municipality resources in personnel and premises could thus be of double use, i.e. for the collective residents as well as for the pensioners.

Two blocks were built with approximately the same number of collective households and pensioner's households, i. e. 110 and 133 individual flats in the collective housing part and 143 and 165 in the part for the pensioners. There was a strict division in the building between the two groups of residents, with the common space situated at the interface. The "collectivists" were supposed to have their dinners in the restaurant specially designed for the pensioners; other space facilities should be shared between the two groups.

What seemed to be a good idea did not work well, for several reasons. The researchers suggest that the main reason for failure was that the integration between generations and between collectivists and pensioners did not develop. The young families and those who were employed fulltime had a different life-rhythm from the old people. They wanted their dinner in the evening, after work, while the old people preferred it at noon. The pensioners were disturbed by children and teenagers playing in the common premises, a disturbance that might result from the fact that old and young did not know each other. The collective households had no influence on dinner dishes and other meal arrangements. Many unexpected issues appeared, and the conflicts were difficult to solve (Woodward et al 1989).

The researchers also explain the failure as partly related to difficulties in cooperation between the authorities and the inhabitants. They propose that a planning process with joint decisions by all parties involved should take place at an early stage. This did occur in the following example, the collective house Stolplyckan in Linköping.

Stolplyckan - a combination of tenant-management and a social-integration model

Stolplyckan is an example of a more successful service-integration model than those mentioned above. It illustrates how public resources can be used to support informal structures and vice versa, i.e. how informal resources can be utilized to strengthen the undertaking of the public sector.

Like the earlier examples, the Stolplyckan project serves as a collective housing complex and at the same time provides service-flats for the municipal social services. What characterizes the Stolplyckan model - because it is quite reasonable to talk about a specific model - is that the different resident categories are physically well integrated and that they have developed a social organization for self-management covering a series of tasks. The proportions between the elderly and the collectivists are also different, the latter being in great majority.

The complex consists of seven tower blocks with 183 flats in total, including 35 service-flats and nine protected flats for a group of mentally retarded. At ground level the towers are connected by a winding corridor to which the common spaces and facilities are attached: a restaurant, a cafe, a library, a gym, a carpentry shop, etc. The social services also run two child-care centres, which means that staff and children can use the restaurant and all other facilities in the building.

The residents are organized in an association which has been given some influence on the management of the house. The association sits on a council together with the landlord, the municipal housing company, and the representatives of the social services. One thing the tenants' organization has negotiated is the cleaning of the common spaces and the stair-wells (by the residents in each stair-well together). No obligations are however laid upon the residents, except practical tasks they themselves can decide.

Pedersen (1992) showed that many of the families (even if not all of them) are active in common activities, e.g. preparing meals twice a week, when after tough negotiations they were allowed to use the large, well-equipped kitchen, running the cafe, and organizing creative leisure work for both adults and children.

The residents have developed a feeling of fellowship. Some of them call it the "spirit of Stolplyckan". The elderly are sometimes disturbed by the young children and the teenagers in the dining room and the corridors, but they also

express their pleasure in the intimate contact with young people. The children at the daycare center have the unique possibility of having lunch together with the pensioners.

In daily life in Stolplyckan, our interviews show, there is a stimulating atmosphere of inter-generational contact, mixed of course with the normal conflicts that appear in any community. The particular environment created by collective living can be characterized as a meeting place for the formal and the informal social care. The emotional and practical support the inhabitants give each other is spontaneous, generated by the situation.

What are the reasons behind the success of the Stolplyckan model compared to the Stockholm examples? One is the physical integration of dwellings for the elderly and the collectivists. Another contributing factor is that the old people are a minority and young families with a strong will to fulfill the aims of the collective form a majority. Another reason is the fact that the inhabitants were involved in the planning process at an early stage.

The last example is a new combination of some of the housing elements found in the types above. It combines the small-scale tenant-management model and a new idea of mutual care among the residents, who in this case are only middle-aged and elderly people.

Färdknäppen - a collective housing concept devised for middle-aged and elderly people

As a quite recent housing experiment, the Färdknäppen project, located in central Stockholm, has not yet been systematically assessed. However, the following description is based on informal personal knowledge of the building and its residents during the implementation phase of the house.

The concept of Färdknäppen was formulated by the inhabitants themselves. It aimed to a collective house with room for residents' communal activities and mutual informal care, a way of living for the elderly characterized by both security and intellectual and practical stimulation. The target group was middle-aged people in gainful employment and pensioners. To enable the running of the shared tasks, such as dinner preparation and some maintenance, an even age distribution from 40 and upwards was wanted. During the first year of operation the age span was between 40 and 85. One important, but in some opinions provocative, principle is that no families with children are allowed to live in the house, after experiences from other collective houses

where families with young children are quite dominating. But of course grandchildren are welcome for visits, and they do come to a great extent.

The initiators, a mixed group of pensioners and active people living alone or in couples, managed to convince a large municipal housing company in Stockholm, and the house with 43 flats was built and occupied in June 1993. The group of potential residents, which grew but also changed members during the planning process, had great influence on the design, and thus functioned as a competent party with the architect and the housing company. In general, residents' participation seems to contribute to the development of social interaction in any housing scheme (Lundahl & Sangregorio 1992).

Like the other collective houses, discussed above, common spaces are available for the residents in Färdknäppen, e.g. a dining-room, a kitchen, a library, hobby rooms, a sauna, and guest-rooms.

Since the opening of the house, dinners have been served every week night by resident teams. Observers note that the shared premises appear to be more used in Färdknäppen than in other collective houses and that most of the domestic activities are performed by the pensioners (Sangregorio 1994).

The mutual care takes place on an informal, spontaneous basis and consists of such things as watering flowers and bringing the post, shopping and carrying the dinner up to a private flat when somebody occasionally needs it. It is however not meant to replace the care delivered by the social services, but to complement it, relying on the range of resources this 'grown-up' group of people disposes. Future experience will tell if the model is sustainable when the number of very old persons requiring a lot of help increases or if tensions appear that are difficult to deal with. Independent of the amount of care that can be delivered within the collective group, it is easy to foresee how this non-anonymous way of living will reduce the risk of people being left alone with their physical impairments as they get older.

Discussion

The new version of a collective house - based on the "Small collective house" model - launched in Sweden in the late 1970s, attracted groups of people, many of whom were women, in search of a way of life that could offer possibilities for social contacts in the housing area, encouraged mutual support and informal care, and created a positive environment for children to grow up in.

Experiences of this housing form, documented in a series of research studies, confirm that many of the collective houses that were built meet these expectations, though to a varying extent.

The quality of housing that these collective houses provide is *par preference* important for families with children, and especially important for the many single parents, most of them women, that are found today. But the advantages for all families with young children are significant because the collective houses in most cases have daycare centers, for which the local children have priority.

Informal mutual support in daily life takes place among the residents. This arises spontaneously as a consequence of the inhabitants shared common work. The support is normally based on symmetrical relations among the residents, which means that there is little experience of more demanding, long-term care of specific groups of vulnerable people. But there is a watchfulness among the neighbours to emerging needs for care, that functions as a safety net for the individual members. Extended mutual help and informal care is, however, the basis of the collective housing model for middle-aged and elderly, a model which is not yet tested and evaluated in the long run, but seems to represent an interesting alternative to other kinds of dwellings for elderly people.

The new concepts of collective housing, the one based on common daily work among the residents, the other with a shared responsibility between social services of the municipality and the residents, can be considered in the light of new economic and political changes in Swedish society. They arose as radical alternatives in ways of living in reaction to the lack of social contact in housing areas and constraints on women in everyday life. Now when public resources are reduced by cutbacks and the state seems to throw the burden of care on individual citizens, they might have a future as worthy dwelling solutions. Recent research has shown how housing alternatives meet the original goals; new research has to assess their potential new role on the housing market.

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