

Saving by Sharing – Collective Housing for Sustainable Lifestyles in the Swedish Context

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Abstract

In Swedish cohousing one of the goals is to increase access to attractive indoor space by abstaining from some private space in favour of common rooms. Therefore cohousing constitutes an example of saving by sharing. Facilities shared are common meals, playrooms for children, hobby rooms, guest rooms, saunas and exercise rooms. Space may be saved both by reducing the normal apartment and by accepting fewer private rooms than in non-collective living.

The paper shows how cohouses may be designed to promote both a sense of community and saving through the sharing of resources. Common spaces should be connected to apartments through indoor communication, located where residents pass frequently and provided with glazed walls in order to stimulate spontaneous use. Spatial organisation may influence the level of social control, which in turn may constitute a determining factor for pro-environment behaviour.

In the paper examples are given of communal activities in various types of cohouses in Sweden. The question is raised how to promote cohousing in a society dominated by neo-liberal doctrines, and how to save by sharing more generally in the urban landscape.

The main methods used to write this paper are analysis of literature and practical experience of the author. The author has carried out research on collective housing since 1964. Since 1996 he lives in a cohousing in Stockholm and since 2006 he has been the chairman of the national Swedish organization Cohousing NOW, which keeps regular contact with 50 cohousing and 10 starter groups for cohousing.

Keywords: cohousing, house design, lifestyle, collaborative consumption, neighbourly cooperation.

Introduction

In current research *cohousing* is often defined as housing with common spaces and shared facilities. In line with the analysis made by Vestbro (2010) the term *collaborative housing* is recommended to be used when referring specifically to housing that is oriented towards collaboration among residents, while *communal housing* ought to be used, when referring to housing designed to create community. The term *commune* is used for a type of living without individual apartments (Vestbro, 2010).

In Sweden the most common term used for the same phenomenon is *collective housing*. Originally this concept referred to the *collective organization* of services in building comp-

lexes, which had no aims about promoting sense of community or neighbourly collaboration, but the term *collective housing* was maintained when, in the 1970s, new models appeared with goals such as community and collaboration.

In their book “What’s Mine is Yours” Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers provide a vivid picture of the absurdities of today’s consumer society. The average middle class American consumes 2.5 million litres of water, 1000 trees, 21,000 tonnes of petrol, 220,000 kg of steel in their lifetime. This is five times as much as the planet can endure and twice as much as an average Swede, 13 times as that of a Brazilian, 35 times as that of an Indian and 280 times that of a Haitian. The authors show that 99 percent of the stuff we buy is trashed within 6 months and that a power drill is used only 6 to 10 minutes altogether, while a car is standing still 23 hours of the day (Botsman and Rogers, 2010).

To get away from what the authors call ‘hyper-consumption’ Botsman and Rogers argue enthusiastically for “collaborative consumption”, i.e. saving by sharing. Thanks to Internet this is already taking place at all types of levels. Much of the collaborative consumption can be done and is being done at the neighbourhood level.

In this paper the focus is on cohousing. This type of living can be assumed to facilitate behaviour change on the grounds that community cooperation is already established and that consumerist lifestyles are often not highly valued. Collectivists usually favour ‘post-materialist’ values – those that give weight to time with children, meaningful leisure time activities and care for qualities in nature rather than in consumer products (McCamant & Durrett 1988; Woodward 1989; Vestbro 2000).

The Tullstugan cohousing

To sort out how cohousing may contribute to saving resources I start by explaining how it works in my own cohousing. It is called Tullstugan and is situated in a central part of Stockholm. Most important are the common dinners. We eat together four evenings a week. This gives us a sense of community and it saves time. We are 50 adults, 16 youngsters and four children under 12 years. Of the adults 33 are women and 16 are men. 14 of the women are single.

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

Besides a dining room (with an outdoor terrace) and the common kitchen (see figure 1) Tullstugan has a playroom for children, a TV room, a storage room and a guest room. Those who initiated the collective at the beginning of the 1990s considered these common spaces to be sufficient. The common spaces constitute 5 percent of the total dwelling area, which deviates from most other cohousing, which on average have common rooms accounting for 10 percent or more.

In Tullstugan it is compulsory to cook and clean the staircases. Having dinners is not compulsory. Some come to the dining room all four evenings a week while others come more seldom. In the community there is a book club, a small library and a group in charge of cultural programs once a month. The apartments have normal kitchen equipment and everyone has the right to her/his private life. The dining room can be hired for private parties. House meetings take place about four times a year. We also have two repair and cleaning days and one annual party.



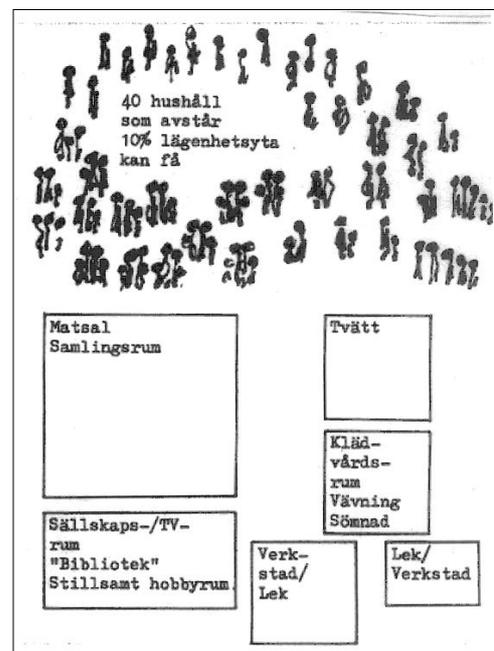
Fig 1. Left: *Tullstugan* consists of 23 apartments in two staircases plus 12 households in the neighbourhood. Right: A special exercise in Italian cooking lead by a professional chef.

The Swedish self-work model

Tullstugan is typical of the model that was developed in Sweden during the 1980s. Earlier there was a model of collective housing based on services through employed staff. This model – of which 17 building complexes were implemented in the period 1935 to 1969 – was gradually undermined because of changes in society. The new model – called the self-work model – was developed by a group of women called Living on Community (in Swedish: *Bo i Gemenskap*, BIG) at the end of the 1970s.

BIG argued that cooking and child rearing together with others is enjoyable, and that it saves time. Between 15 and 50 households was considered to be an appropriate size for the new type of cohousing. If each household would abstain from 10 per cent of the normal apartment space, the collective would get a substantial amount of communal facilities without increasing costs. The group proclaimed that its model “*saves on material resources and liberates human resources*”. More concretely it was proposed that the private kitchen and living room could be combined into one room, and that kitchen equipment could be reduced since residents would eat their main meals in the common dining room (BIG-gruppen 1982:30, 99).

Figure 2. The sketch shows how 40 households may get access to a central kitchen, a common dining room cum assembly hall, a laundry, a TV room, a workshop, a children’s play room, a library and other spaces at no extra costs by abstaining from 10 percent of normal space standards in private apartments.



The BIG group could have chosen to implement its ideas with the limited goal to satisfy its own needs. However, it wanted the new model to be an asset to wider social groups. Therefore, it proposed that municipal housing companies should take the lead. Earlier these companies had focused on the provision of housing for nuclear families from a rather

patriarchal perspective, but at the end of the 1970s the time was ripe for them to produce cohouses (Woodward, Vestbro & Grossman, 1989).

In the 1980s about 50 cohousing projects of the BIG model were implemented. Most of them were realised after decisions in municipal councils and municipal housing companies, often at the initiative of independent groups, but usually not built solely for these groups. Rental tenure in public housing made the cohouses accessible for groups who did not want or could not get bank loans.

Half of the projects were implemented in Stockholm. Sizes varied from 5 to 133 apartments. The City of Stockholm instituted a special waiting line for people interested in cohousing and allocated apartments after interviews about the applicant's motivation (to prevent applicants to bypass others in the often very long waiting line). Most cohouses got local agreements stipulating that the cohousing association had the right to select those that were really motivated to participate in common facilities and fit into the desired age profile. The Swedish cohousing model deviates considerably from the situation in other countries where independent groups often act as developers themselves (Vestbro, 2008).

Contrary to other countries Swedish public housing has accommodated all income groups. So called "social housing" for low-income categories has not been part of the Swedish housing model (but is now on its way to be introduced).

Various examples of Swedish cohousing

The first building in Stockholm of the new model was *Prästgårdshagen* in a suburb South of Stockholm. An association of willing residents was formed and acted as a partner to the housing company during the planning and design process. In agreement with the association, apartments were reduced by ten per cent of the normal space standards. Kitchens were not provided with space for a dining table (Woodward, Vestbro & Grossman, 1989). When entering one of the two entrances residents pass the common rooms. Several of the common rooms are provided with glass walls, a fact that facilitates overview and spontaneous use of common rooms.

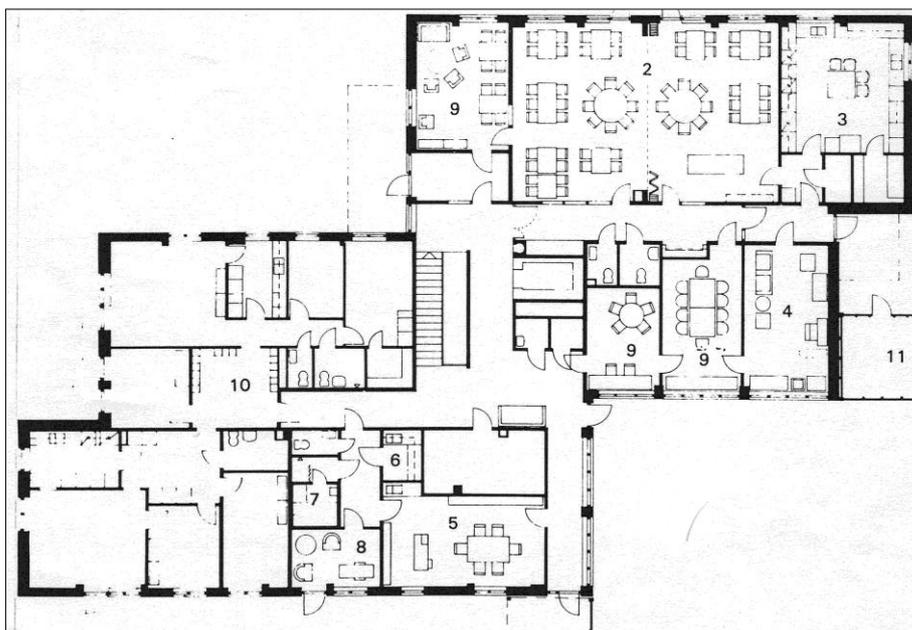


Figure 3 *Ground floor of Prästgårdshagen, built in 1983 by the municipal housing company Familjebostäder. Legend: 2. Dining room, 3. Kitchen, 4. Laundry, 5. Ceramics workshop, 6. Photo lab, 7. Sauna, 8. Relax room, 9. Common spaces such as children's play room, workshop, office (later TV room), 10. Day-care centre (run by the municipality), 11. Storage.*

activities internally and is also the cohousing with most external activities. It is well known all over the world and has served as a prototype for Japanese collective housing.



Fig 6. *Färdknäppen* consists of 43 apartments. Common spaces are dining room, kitchen, library/assembly room, weaving room, wood workshop, exercise room, laundry, computer room, sauna, guest rooms and a roof terrace combined with a ‘cosiness room’.

Färdknäppen has been followed by three other projects in Stockholm and five in other Swedish cities, all of the model ‘second half of life’. Also cohousing for mixed ages are on their way. Many cohousing have long waiting lists. There are nine starter groups who want cohousing of their own. Three NGOs help such groups with advice and consultancy.

Today there are 43 well functioning cohousing in Sweden. In about half of them not all residents participate. Almost all consist of multi-household urban blocks. Only two are clusters of one-family houses. 33 are new developments while ten consist of rebuilding older buildings. After some recent conversion from rental to private ownership 25 of the 43 units have rental tenure, while eleven have cooperative ownership (a special legal form which has very little to do with cooperation) and seven are cooperative rental (a legal form that promotes self-administration without the burden of ownership). A list of Swedish cohousing is found at www.kollektivhus.nu (many of whom have their own websites).

The total number of apartments in cohousing amounts to less than 2000 apartments, i.e. less than 0.05 percent of the total Swedish housing stock. This figure does not include smaller communes or eco-villages. If these are included the total figure would still not exceed 0.1 percent (Vestbro, 2008). This proportion can be compared to the situation in other countries. In Denmark, which is considered to be the leading cohousing country, the share is thought to be almost 1 per cent, i.e. ten times as high as in Sweden. The figure for the Netherlands is also likely to be higher than for Sweden. According to Williams (2008), the share of people living in cohousing in USA is estimated to amount to 0.001 percent of the total population.

Saving space through sharing

A study of Swedish cohousing from the middle of the 1980s shows that of seven investigated units the proportion of common spaces varied from 3 to 21 % of the total amount of floor area, representing 1.5 to 17 sqm per household. It was found that three of six studied units had smaller apartments than normal. Between 23 and 70% of the residents expressed a willingness to reduce apartment sizes, while 10 to 53% were ready to reduce kitchen equipment (Woodward, Vestbro & Grossman 1989:171f). The apartment sizes were in the range 55-100 sqm.

The reduction of space probably goes further in youth communes. In a master thesis from the 1970s about communes in Stockholm it was found that individual members in nine studied units had access to 21-45 sqm of dwelling space each, a figure considerably lower

than the national average (which is about 50 sqm per person). Residents often shared facilities such as TV, video, cars, electric tools and newspaper subscriptions (Fång, 1978).

To save by sharing is not only a question of keeping to space standards. It is also an issue of accepting fewer rooms. For the purpose of exploring this issue the present author asked a young couple in his cohousing whether it is easier to accept less space in cohousing. The answers were:

F: *“That is exactly what we do! We have a one-room apartment and find it relieving to have access to common spaces. This does not mean that we spend most of our time down there /in common rooms/. But the feeling is that our space is bigger.”*

N: *“We feel as if we have a bigger home than we actually have. The common meals mean that our home does not have to be as chaotic as it usually becomes when cooking. In the common kitchen there is much better order.”* (interview, February 2004)

The number of households per 10 000 inhabitants is higher in Sweden than elsewhere in the world. The reason is that young people move from their parents at an early age; that long life expectancy is combined with independent living, and that divorce rates are high. Thus the number of one-person households has more than doubled in 25 years, while households of more than four persons have been reduced considerably. About 75% of Swedish households are one or two-person households. Overcrowding has been more or less eradicated. Instead over-consumption of space is prominent. In a study from the 1980s it was estimated that 66% of Swedish households had one room or more per person, living room and kitchen not counted. The researcher assesses that the equivalent of 200 000 houses could be ‘saved’ if households in overstandard dwellings would move to houses matching their needs. The main problem to achieve this is that old big houses are cheaper than new small houses (Sanne 1986) and that restrictive regulations fall outside the neo-liberal political hegemony.

The so called ‘household explosion’ is a global phenomenon. Urbanisation, a mobile labour market and other structural changes lead to an increased number of one and two-person households, which in turn means that conventional methods to provide housing become obsolete. An increasing number of people experience isolation in their residential environment in a situation when neighbourly cooperation becomes more important to solve the problem of excessive use of resources. Also in countries where family values have been strong the development is going towards gender equality and new urban lifestyles.

In cohousing a moderate level of community provides for security and valuable social contacts at the same time as individual privacy is maintained. The sharing of meals and common spaces provide for more efficient use of space and for a type of collaboration that promotes environmental-friendly ways of living.

What is the role of design?

How can design promote a more efficient use of space? In a study of Swedish cohousing from the 1980s it was concluded that compact solutions are desirable in order to facilitate easy access to common spaces and that common spaces should be located where residents pass frequently and be provided with glazed walls in order to promote spontaneous use (Woodward, Vestbro & Grossman 1989).

In another study (of the Stolplyckan unit) it was noted that intermediary spaces between private apartments and common rooms constituted important social elements. It was concluded that the corridor (in this case 400 m long, see fig 5) became a free zone for children and youngsters, a place where *“they can develop their social life within their own group”* – a space that *provides excitement at the same time as adults feel that it is a safe environment for the children*” (Pedersen 1991:134-135).

Swedish cohousing is usually multi-family apartment blocks in an urban context. This distinguishes Sweden from the situation in Denmark and the USA. The Australian architect researcher Graham Meltzer has made a comprehensive study of US cohousing as an instrument for sustainable development. The studied cohousing units range from 88 to 173 sqm, the average being 120 sqm. This is large according to Swedish standards but deviates considerably from the US average one-family house of 205 sqm (new houses built in 1993). When moving to cohousing settlements the investigated households left houses of an average of 142 sqm behind. The reduction by only 22 sqm may seem small, but becomes more impressive if we consider that many of the cohousers are middle class people in the process of forming a family, i.e. persons who probably would build 200 sqm houses if they had been part of the mainstream. That people made a conscious choice in favour of smaller houses is supported by the fact that residents expressed a willingness to reduce dwellings and room sizes with reference to their access to common facilities and the conviviality associated with shared facilities (Meltzer 2000:115).

Meltzer also found that green belts were preserved and that buildings usually clustered so as to limit vehicle access. Furthermore, of the 18 cohousing units 8 had recycled building materials, 8 had super insulation, 7 had refurbished existing buildings, 6 had programmable thermostats and heat exchangers and 3 had passive solar design. Meltzer found a strong improvement in recycling and composting practices, compared to earlier residence, while repair and reuse as strategies to reduce unnecessary consumption and waste, were not well applied (Meltzer 2000:116-118).

Swedish cohousing has to a much lesser degree experimented with eco-design, the main reason being that the cohousers have not acted as developers. This situation is in contrast to eco-villages. The fact that most Swedish cohousing units are part of dense urban structures is often considered to be a considerable advantage compared to eco-villages, which have much higher proportion of car ownership and energy leakage because of their suburban or rural location.

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Can cohousing be designed to promote the sharing of spaces and other resources? The PhD thesis of architect researcher Karin Palm Lindén constitutes one of the most comprehensive studies of cohousing design principles. The purpose of her study was to clarify how the various spatial systems in cohousing provide for community versus privacy (Palm Lindén, 1992a, summarized in English in Palm Lindén, 1992b).

The author classified 24 Swedish and one Danish cohousing unit according to a) residential building type, b) type of communication (stairs, corridors or loggias) and c) location of communal spaces in the building (see figure 7). The analysis shows that the selected cases are distributed across 12 out of 20 possible theoretical options. The wide distribution means that there is no typical model of cohousing design. One may note that a cluster of row houses with outdoor communication to shared spaces – the most common model in Denmark and the USA – is missing (Palm Lindén, 1992a).

Palm Lindén used Space Syntax as a method to measure the depth and integration of each room in the whole spatial system. The method may also be used to trace the “ringiness” of a spatial system, i.e. alternative ways of moving around in the building (through stairs, corridors and lifts). Spatial rings do not only connect spaces but also provide possibilities for individual choices to find one’s way and to avoid social control. The opposite of ringiness are spatial systems with many cul-de-sacs (which limit possibilities to move around in the building).

The spatial system is very much related to the possibility of social control. How this may work is illustrated by reflections by members of the Tullstugan cohousing unit:

N: *“If we have a dust-shute in the backyard we will of course not throw tins in the one for organic waste. It works better if shelves with signs are put up in the garbage room. Wasting is part of society. It is impossible to have an entirely sustainable lifestyle”.*

N: "At the beginning one gets to know a number of unwritten rules that one has to comply with. Before internalising those rules one feels a bit nervous".

F: "It is obvious that a certain level of social control exists. There is nothing wrong with that. It usually feels good to be a little controlled (laughing). It is difficult to be anonymous. I sense that there is no ugly gossip about anyone in the collective".

(Focus group interview, February 2004)

	LOCATION OF COMMON ROOMS		
	All common rooms at bottom floor	Common kitchen and diningroom at bottom floor	Common kitchen and diningroom at upper floors
HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS			
One staircase system - without corridors and galleries (A)	 Orion x 7 Tunnan Puljesta gård	 Katthuvudet Trädgården Bergsviken Täljan	 Stacken
- with corridors or galleries (B)	 Jakobsberg C Mårsta dal Söderåkra	 Prästgårdsbacken Blenda Lina Haga	
Several staircase systems - connected on bottom floor (C)	 Mårsta Fyrtårna	 Fortuna	
- connected on several floors (D)	 Yara	 Skottet Ångviksgården	
Central hall/yard (E)			
LOW-RISE BUILDINGS			
Corridor systems (F)	 Regnbågen		
Central hall/yard (G)	 Björkåsa	 Jernstøberiet	

Figure 7. An overview of cohousing, classified according to the building type, communication system and location of common spaces (Source: Palm Lindén, 1992b).

Palm Lindén's study shows that the location of common spaces has an important role for the spontaneous use of these spaces. In addition, the nature of "transitional zones" (entrances, elevator and stairs) are crucial for social interaction and also important for the cohousing to function as a whole. An interesting observation is that the residents may be attracted to these spaces in tower blocks with common rooms on the ground floor, when they pass the entrance, but not when they have reached their private apartments (Palm Lindén, 1992a).

In a later study Palm Lindén investigates the spatial structure of two Swedish eco-villages on the assumption that social contacts and pressure are important for environmental-friendly behaviour. One of the communities is planned in rows facing the sun, which according to the researcher disperses people, while the other has a lively street towards which houses have their entrances, which makes residents meet face-to-face. Palm Lindén finds that the spatial structure affects the way people meet and move around, and that the location of parking

spaces, firewood storage, compost rooms, refuse sorting, earth cellars and bicycle stores influences the social functioning of the communities (Palm Lindén, 1999).

Sharing meals

As shown above common meals are usually the core of cohousing in Sweden. Although the main reason for this is to provide for a sense of community and to save time for residents, it is generally assumed that common meals also save resources. There seems to be no study of how much is gained by sharing meals. 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.

At the International Collaborative Housing Conference in Stockholm in May 2010 a special workshop addressed the issue of common meals. Summarising the experience of the 12 participants in the workshop it was noted that often a team of four persons cook a meal for 60+ rather than 30 individuals cooking meals for small family households. It was also noted that common meals foster trust and consensus – in opposition to arguably damaging, individualistic Western fast food dining practices. An added benefit of having a communal kitchen and dining room is that it allows a variety of spontaneous breakfasts, pot-lucks and barbecues to occur (Vestbro, 2010:178).



Fig 8. Common dinner in Vildsvinet, Örebro.

Other things that may be shared

In the Swedish context no systematic study has been made of other resources that are shared in cohousing. After having visited almost all of the 43 functioning Swedish cohousing I can say that sharing is common of power drills, garden equipment, subscriptions of journals, weaving hand-loom and lend-out foldable beds. Some cohousing are attached to car-sharing companies.

In my cohousing 12 out of 34 households (34%) have a private car, which can be compared to the Swedish average of 85% (of which 1/3 have two or more cars).

In cohousing it is much easier to arrange Local Exchange Trading System (LETS). Residents know each other well enough to be aware of who is in possession of what type of skill or equipment and the fact that the residents are organised means that it is easy to arrange flea markets, exchange of children's clothes or other types of swap markets. It should be interesting to find out how resources are saved in this way. Of course, such sharing does not have to be limited to cohousing. In their book on collaborative consumption Botsman and Rogers (2010) give many examples of already existing sharing systems in conventional residential areas.

Collaboration at neighbourhood level

The Swedish self-work model was worked out in contact with the Nordic women's network on 'Housing and building on women's conditions', which gathered to its first conference in 1979. The conference came up with the idea of a new supportive infrastructure for a better everyday life for men and women. The idea developed into a vision of a society consisting of varying self-governing units that are responsible for the use of local resources. Important elements are work (paid and unpaid), care and housing, the separation of which was to be replaced by their integration in the living environment (Forskargruppen, 1987).

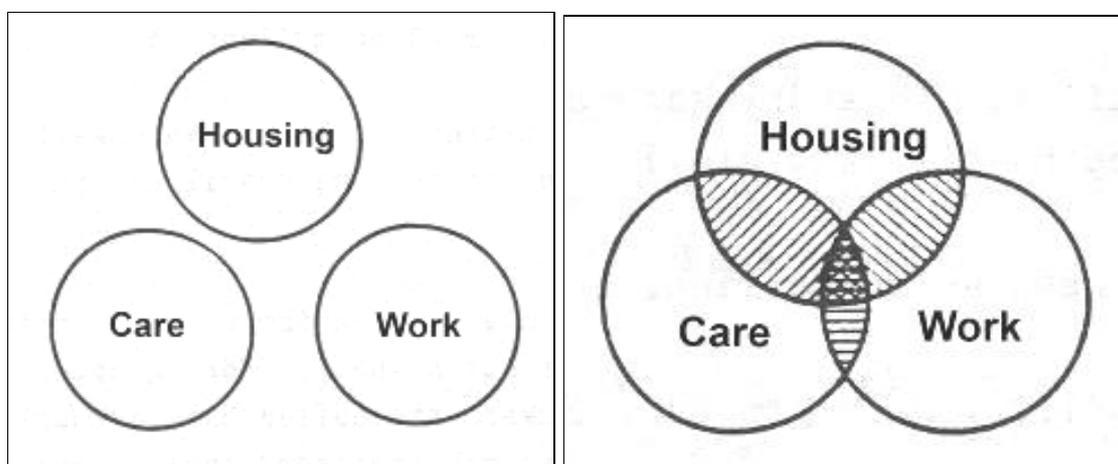


Fig 9. Left: *The situation of today.* Right: *The vision of The New Everyday Life group.*

An important aspect of the vision was the idea that an intermediary level is required as a mediating structure between individual households, and the public and private sectors in neighbourhoods. The model comprised the bringing to the neighbourhood of some daily tasks normally located in different sectors and places. The care of domestic chores and children could be transferred from private homes to communal spaces, as in cohousing. Environmental planning and management, as well as care of older people, would be delivered in the neighbourhood and not in centralised institutions of the public sector. These transactions were to result in new activities, called the local housework, local care, local production, and local planning and management (The Research Group for the New Everyday Life, 1991).

The vision of The New Everyday Life approach has resulted in a range of examples, such as a well-functioning housing area with shared spaces, like the neighbourhood of Tinggarden outside Copenhagen; collective houses similar to the ones that the BIG group has proposed; service house communities with both cohousing and an exchange of unpaid and paid services; and lastly communities in which members work in the same residence in which they live such as Svaneholm in Denmark, kibbutzim in Israel and the eco-village Findhorn in Scotland.

Conclusions

A study of the Swedish situation around 1987 (when many young families had moved into the new self-work units) showed that there was a dominance of well-educated people, born in the 1940s with jobs in the public sector. They came from categories that were politically active and had intensive social contacts. They moved to cohousing, not to represent middle class values, but to make experiments that were interesting also to single parents and other groups that are isolated in society (Woodward, Vestbro & Grossman, 1989). The cohousing inhabitants are still judged to belong to the new groups of “post-materialists”, who turn their backs to the consumer society and favour values, such as time with children, good social contacts, cultural and recreational activities.

In Swedish cohousing households save both by reducing the normal apartment and by accepting fewer rooms than in non-collective living. Other design and planning factors of importance for behaviour change are land-use, density, infrastructure and location. Location determines the need for travel, access to public transport, and walking and biking. Compact house types facilitate easy access to common spaces, which in turn stimulates more efficient use of space. Common spaces should be located where residents pass frequently and be provided with glazed walls in order to stimulate spontaneous use. Spatial organisation may influence the level of social control, which may promote pro-environment behaviour.

The main obstacle to the implementation of cohousing has been patriarchal society. Housing with communal facilities has often been conceived as a threat to the nuclear family. The main reason for the small share of cohousing in the total housing stock is the lack of information about alternative ways of living and the prejudices about cohousing, especially among men. The expansion of this supportive form of dwelling needs a new strong movement that is willing to act for models on the neighbourhood level that are accessible to all classes.

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