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Exploring how different kinds, and varying degrees, of co-creation have shaped cohousing, and how they might contribute to strengthening a sense of belonging and community in the future.

# Co-creating Danish cohousing

*Michael Asgaard Andersen and Mette Boisen Lyhne*

*In Denmark, people frustrated by the available housing options have developed a new housing type that redefines the concept of neighbourhood to fit contemporary lifestyles. Tired of the isolation and impracticalities of single-family houses and apartment units, they have built housing that combines the autonomy of private dwellings with the advantages of community living.*

> Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, *Cohousing* (1988).[1]

The idea of multi-family housing developments with shared facilities is not new. This type of housing began to spring up in the late 1800s and evolved throughout the twentieth century, both internationally and in Denmark where it became known as collective housing.[2] In the same vein, the first *bofællesskaber* appeared on the scene in the early 1970s. This Danish term refers to a group of dwellings, each with their own kitchen and bathroom, where residents share a range of facilities and participate regularly in joint activities. McCamant and Durrett coined the term 'cohousing' for this type of housing.[3]

There are considerable differences in the types of cohousing built over the past half century in Denmark. They are found in cities, suburbs, and rural areas, there are newbuilds and renovations of existing buildings, and they vary greatly in expression, size, and spatial organisation. Although they are a well-known housing option, it is estimated that only around 1% of the Danish population live in cohousing.[4] However, despite their limited prevalence, the diversity of the architecture and everyday lives of the residents is relatively broad.

In this article, we will explore how different kinds and varying degrees of co-creation have shaped Danish cohousing over the past fifty years. Further, we discuss how the experience accumulated may be used in strengthening a sense of belonging and community in future cohousing projects. There are three parts to the study: the first concerns ownership and establishment; the second deals with the role of the architect; and the third discusses resident mix and community life. The article concludes with a general discussion about co-creation, both during the process of making and inhabitation. The article is based on architectural analyses of twenty Danish cohousing communities, from 1970 to 2019, which were selected from around two hundred cohousing communities on the basis of date of construction, type of ownership, location, number of residents, resident mix, community life, daily life, and architecture.[5] The analyses are based on written and visual sources from the entire period as well as informal visits to the cohousing communities. The themes in the three sections were selected based on architectural analyses and with Lars Lerup's concept of 'participatory architecture', Tim Ingold's term 'open-ended design', and Ingrid Gehl's notion of contact in living environments as the frame of reference.[6]

Both Lerup and Ingold address Martin Heidegger's well-known statement 'to build is in itself already to dwell', interpreting that housing built by the people who will be living there is closely interwoven with their lives.[7] In other words, the process of living already begins during the design and construction phase, when the building is made to fit the daily lives and needs of its residents. Therefore, the making of the future home plays an important role in how, and by whom, it will later be inhabited, and this appears particularly so for cohousing.

## Ownership and establishment

The establishment and type of ownership of the cohousing influence the subsequent sense of community, since both have an impact on the feeling of belonging that develops in residents. They also have a bearing on the options and limitations residents have for impacting and evolving within the communities.[8] In this section, we will examine processes related to the residents' connection to the cohousing itself as well as to the other residents in a number of cohousing communities with different establishment and ownership structures.

While the student protest movement of 1968 was at its height, Danish daily *Information* published an article by Jan Gudmand-Høyer: 'Det manglende led mellem utopi og det forældede enfamiliehus [the



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1 Sættedammen, 1972, was established with the intention to live closer to one another than in single-family house neighbourhoods that were common at the time. The community house and housing units are placed around a field that is free of cars, where the kids can play.

2 Skråplanet, 1966, is a low-rise high-density housing complex with numerous communal facilities, such as a swimming pool and tennis court. It is located on a sloping terrain, where the vegetation creates transitions between private and common.



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missing link between utopia and the outdated single-family house].'[9] In this article, Gudmand-Høyer criticises the Danish housing market for being outdated and stereotypical. In his opinion, it can be boiled down to three types of dwelling – the apartment, the terraced house, and the single-family house – none of which fitted contemporaneous needs and expectations.[10] This article marked the start of the establishment of numerous cohousing communities in Denmark, including the pioneering Sættedammen *[1]* and Skråplanet *[2]*.[11]

The driving forces behind these projects were two groups looking to create an alternative to single-family housing, where they could live closer together and relate to one another. They wanted their cohousing to include a range of shared facilities such as a communal room, a playground and sports facilities, which would have been beyond the means of most families in an ordinary residential area with single-family housing. However, both groups were faced with substantial challenges during the process. The Skråplanet project encountered stiff resistance from the local community, which obstructed the group's first attempt to build the cohousing by joining forces to purchase the only access route to the site. The local community was concerned with changes in the neighbourhood that this new and unknown type of settlement could cause, which was not an uncommon concern during this period. The group behind Sættedammen, on the other hand, were met with problems when they tried to take out a mortgage for the building. This was because no mortgage companies were willing to run the risk of financing what was for them an unfamiliar type of housing.[12] One of the first residents of Sættedammen explained how they made 'every possible mistake' at the beginning.[13] Not only was it difficult for the first cohousing communities to obtain the necessary funding from banks and mortgage providers, they lacked political support from the local authorities, which had no experience of, or procedures for, dealing with cohousing.[14]

However, the challenges, resistance, problems, and mistakes were not in vain. Although it meant that the dream of cohousing did not materialise for many of the initiators, the residents of the ones that did, said that their efforts resulted in greater cohesion within the group. This cohesion strengthened the community when they moved in, and the feeling of belonging to a community plays a part in the residents' opportunities for development.[15]

In the cohousing of the 1970s, dwellings were usually owned by the people who lived in them. This was the most accessible model legally and financially, although the non-profit housing (in Danish: *almene boliger*) in Tinggården *[3]* was a



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3 Tinggården, 1978, consists of six communities; each has their own community house, which together form the cohousing of seventy-eight housing units. The use and composition of materials is intended to provide a relaxed and familiar atmosphere.



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4 The three buildings at Mariendalsvej 14–18 are connected by bridges that give access to the apartments. On these bridges there are room for chairs, tables, and plants, and this gives the residents the possibility to meet informally during the day.

notable exception. As a result of changes in legislation, much of the cohousing stock from the 1980s was established as cooperative housing (in Danish: *andelsboliger*). The legislation was meant to stimulate the construction industry, but as it offered publicly funded low interest rates for cooperative housing, it became the preferred way of establishing cohousing. Cooperative housing was considered a more equal form of ownership because it gave more people the opportunity to purchase a housing unit and move in. Subsequent changes in legislation have resulted in a return to owner-occupied housing, and there have been non-profit housing associations building some cohousing as well, making this type of housing available for low-income families.[16]

In the early 1990s, a cohousing community for the elderly was built at Mariendalsvej on Frederiksberg by a pension fund *[4]*. Residents rented the dwellings,[17] and this marked the beginning of a trend. There are now numerous senior cohousing communities with this type of ownership all over Denmark.[18] Previously, the senior residents were the property owner, but this is not the case here, and it places them in a situation with less influence. However, there are also advantages to rental senior cohousing, since the residents do not have to maintain the building themselves. Furthermore, it offers a high degree of personal independence as the financial and time commitment are less dominant here. While the residents in these kinds of cohousing communities do not take direct part in key decisions during the making, there are examples of involvement of residents in the process. For instance, the residents of the Kamelia Hus senior cohousing were offered some influence on the physical and social structure of their shared facilities, the aim being to strengthen relations between the new residents and, thus reinforce a sense of community *[5]*.[19] It is too early to say whether the efforts have been a success, but they indicate active resident involvement.

Architect Lars Lerup argues that an involvement, to the extent that we see in Kamelia Hus, only works as a first step towards full understanding of the resident's situation, and that one of the problems of such involvement is that it is presented as part of a facilitating process, in which the architect stands at a distance from the resident and invites them to participate in the project.[20] This trend is, according to him, particularly evident in industrialised societies and on a housing market where it has become the norm for property owners to construct buildings for other people to live in. This alienation of residents during the construction process, anthropologist Tim Ingold considers a problem as well, since it results in housing constructed as generic containers for future residents, rather than housing arising from the preferences and needs of the residents.[21]

In recent years, the possibilities of *baugruppen*, or the related *bauherrengemeinschaften*, have been tried out in Denmark. These can be described as resident-driven housing projects, initiated by a group of



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5 On the rooftop of Kamelia Hus is a terrace for the residents. There is a green house where they grow vegetables and herbs, and it has become one of the most important places in the everyday life of the community.

6 Byfællesskabet Thomas B. is in the centre of Odense, where there used to be a four-lane road running through. It consists of nine housing units, some of which are terraced houses and others are apartments. The communal space is on the top floor along with two shared terraces.



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private individuals.[22] *Baugruppen* are common in a number of central European countries, and experience shows that they both cut building costs and increase opportunities for future residents to take part in decisions during the design and construction.[23] Furthermore, they have the potential to become more socially sustainable and to provide a framework for strong communities. In Byfællesskabet Thomas B., an urban community in Odense, a small group of people succeeded in creating the financial and legal framework needed to build urban cohousing without the costly developer as an intermediary *[6]*. Similarly, the residents of Fællesbyg Køge Kyst have also had some influence on the design of their future home.[24]

As the above cohousing projects indicate, there are several ways of making community and ownership. Sættedammen and Skråplanet both took a bottom-up approach. The residents were the initiators of the projects and were intricately linked to it throughout the process. Kamelia Hus, on the other hand, took a top-down approach but with some resident involvement. In the case of the top-down approach, it seems necessary to involve residents when the cohousing is initiated. Otherwise, there is a risk that a sense of community will not develop.[25] Byfællesskabet Thomas B. and Fællesbyg Køge Kyst have attempted to combine the two approaches, albeit from different angles, by taking participation of residents from the bottom-up approach and a well-structured organisation from the top-down approach. In a best-case scenario, this allows the residents to be co-creators of the housing development and promotes a feeling of ownership.

Our studies indicate that legal ownership is not the only factor that is decisive for residents' feeling of ownership. Involvement in the actual creation of the cohousing community is just as important, as it is also seen in early non-profit cohousing, such as Tinggården. It appears that ownership has less to do with formal ownership and more to do with the connection residents feel. A feeling of ownership creates a basis for a stronger sense of belonging and community, and this is demonstrated by residents taking responsibility for each other and their buildings.

## The architect's role

The work of the architect has undergone considerable change in the twentieth century and continues to do so. Part of this is associated with new types of housing, including cohousing, which have presented architects with numerous challenges and opportunities. In this section, we will take a closer look at two aspects of the development, both originating from the then SBi Danish Building Research Institute.

One relates to psychologist Ingrid Gehl's book *bo-miljø* (living environment), which was published as an SBi report. The term *bo-miljø* became a nationwide buzzword at the time, and the book was an influential bestseller. Inspired by Henry A. Murray and Abraham H. Maslow, as well as Christopher Alexander and Kevin Lynch, Gehl writes about 'living processes' and psychological needs concerning the built environment,[26] which at the time was an overlooked and, for many architects, unknown field within housing. She argues that the design of new housing and its surroundings should not merely address physiological and safety needs; psychological needs should also be considered. While the first two are covered by building legislation, there is, in her view, far too little focus on the latter. In short, Gehl divides psychological needs into eight categories: contact, privacy, experiences, purposefulness, play, orientation, ownership, and aesthetics.[27] Especially, the category on contact becomes a key concept in cohousing. From her analyses, she concludes that it is urgent to define qualitative requirements with clear objectives for building projects, and that research should be strengthened and focus on 'correlations between human beings and their physical and social environment'.[28]

Gehl's groundbreaking book has a vision to interpret and promote psychological needs in architecture, and many architects embraced this vision in their work. Equally important was her role back then in raising Danish architects' awareness of the social sciences, not least the relation of psychology to architecture and housing as a significant part of an environment.

Ingrid Gehl explains in the section about contact, that it is difficult to establish a contact situation at distances greater than ten to twelve metres, since it is not possible to read facial expressions from further away, and so she argues that contact between people in dwellings and shared spaces is only likely in housing developments with no more than three storeys.[29] This argument speaks for low-rise buildings in residential areas.

The other aspect of the development that originated from SBi was the competition entitled *TÆT LAV – en boligform* (dense low – a housing type), which they ran in 1971. It was based on issues analysed and discussed in a range of their reports, including Gehl's book.[30] An instance of this is the call for low-rise buildings in the competition brief. The competition was won by the architectural firm Tegnestuen Vandkunsten, and in the subsequent years realised as non-profit housing in the Tinggården cohousing community in the town of Herfølge.

During the course of the building process, Tegnestuen Vandkunsten wrote an article entitled *Det ka' la' sig gøre!* (It can be done!), which, in alternating between a descriptive report and a socially critical manifesto, illustrates their radical working methods.[31] They understand the project as an experiment in realising dreams of a community with collective accountability, direct democratic decision-making processes, a settlement type with large plots of land, and a housing type with flexible dwellings. So-called family groups are the focal point, and the architects' experiment with a large degree of self-determination and autonomy as well as the 'balance between shared and private, content of the shared spaces and size of the private dwellings'.[32] The architects' working method reflects these visions, and although the project concerned non-profit housing, there were many long meetings with the numerous



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7 Lange Eng consists of one continuous building that surrounds a large common field. Towards the field the building has a translucent façade and a wood terrace all the way around, and towards the surroundings it is clad in black-painted wood.

parties, not least the future residents. This was not a case of user involvement but genuine discussions among the parties, and it seems that they were both rewarding and exhausting to conduct.[33] At the time, the working method of the architects was radical: they transferred responsibility and power to the residents, contractors, and other advisers, and they took on the role of contributory organisers. Building on their ideological notions of collective accountability and direct democratic decision-making processes, Tegnestuen Vandkunsten and other young architecture firms helped develop a working method at that time, which allowed various professional groups to participate and the future residents to have their say.[34] Although Tinggården did not turn out to be the utopia the architects had imagined in their competition project,[35] the visions resulted in an innovative and more inclusive approach.

This approach was widely adopted for the establishment of new cohousing. However, it did have its challenges. As one of the architects behind the early cohousing project Sættedammen, Theo Bjerg, explained:

> *During the creative process, as architects, we were also involved at a psychological and pedagogical level, so our remit extended far beyond our usual architectural activities, drawings and design, which are complicated enough in themselves.*[36]

In those days, architects were not trained to work with open design processes or large groups of future residents, and it was a steep learning curve for many of them. Today's open design processes are better organised, and architects are better prepared to facilitate them. However, the experiments of that time, with the architect in the role of contributory organiser, had an exploratory approach, which seems to have been systematised beyond recognition in the streamlined role of a facilitator. While there is more focus on open design processes today, with various parties and residents' groups involved, this has not necessarily changed the architect's mindset, since architects – just as the building industry as a whole – still tend to be rigid in their thinking when it comes to the phases of the process: a building is planned and constructed and then taken over by the residents once these phases are completed.[37] It is this ingrained perception of separate design, construction and living phases that we wish to challenge by reintroducing the quality of experimental, unfinished, and co-creative processes, which we further discuss in the following section.

## Resident mix and community life

According to Tim Ingold, the construction of an environment continues as long as people live in it. It cannot be reduced to a single process, beginning with a plan and ending with a finished object. In Ingold's argument, the end product is a fluid concept; not rigidly tied to a given housing environment at one specific time. Among other things, people go through various phases in their lives, and because we are constantly in a degree of transition, we negotiate changes in our physical



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8 Autumn at Overdrevet, where pumpkins from the surrounding fields are collected by three generations of residents.

surroundings. The environment in which we live will therefore never assume a constant state. It will instead be continually 'under construction'.[38] In the case of cohousing, where not one but many families live, this results in an accumulation of living phases. Thus, negotiations in the physical surroundings are further intensified.

Contrary to the original intention to create cohousing with a diverse resident mix, resident groups often end up being homogeneous for mostly financial reasons. An example of this is Skråplanet, which has become known as 'Luxury Christiania' even though the original idea was for it to be affordable for the working classes, too. However, the buildings turned out to be more expensive than estimated, and, as a result, only the upper-middle classes could afford to live there.[39] In a rather recent example, something similar happened, as the residents of Lange Eng prioritised a diverse resident mix in their fundamental values, but they ended up with a homogeneous group of well-educated families with young children *[7]*.[40] Although cohousing communities are often characterised by values such as openness and tolerance, these and other cases demonstrate that, ultimately, resident mix is mainly determined by the price of the dwellings. However, income level is not the only thing residents of cohousing communities have in common. Cohousing often arises from shared interests, and in this context sustainability and ecology have often been key factors.

Many cohousing communities have a desire to think beyond the community itself to their broader environment. It is not merely a question of human resources; material resources are also relevant, and this includes recycling and reuse. Some cohousing communities are also eco-communities: they engage in the entire process of food production – from growing their own produce, through preparing and eating meals together, to disposal of leftovers in a sustainable manner – to ensure the smallest possible footprint on the surrounding environment.

A sustainable lifestyle is a fundamental and natural element at the Overdrevet cohousing community in Hinnerup *[8]*. Seventy per cent of their meat and vegetables are the residents' own produce from the community's domestic animals and kitchen garden. Everything is organically grown, and they assign teams to handle the animals, crops, and cooking.[41] The farming life at Overdrevet is also reflected in the buildings, which are inspired by the classic Danish farm, built around a quadrangle. Although here, three of the wings are two-and-a-half storeys and the fourth is a large, square communal building with a pyramid-shaped roof. This is where the residents eat together six times a week.

In Danish cohousing, cooking and eating together is usually of great importance for community life, and it is not uncommon for residents to shop, cook, and eat together several times a week.[42] Therefore, the communal building typically has a large, shared kitchen and eating area, big enough for all of the



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community's residents, and this building is usually located at the heart of the development. According to Ingrid Gehl, opportunities for contact between housing residents can be promoted by placing shared spaces and facilities in visible locations, close to everyday functions, to make them visual and social beacons. This principle increases the potential for spontaneous shared activities, which many cohousing communities have incorporated.[43]

The residents of Overdrevet established their cohousing based on clear ideas about the community they wanted. Drawing on experiences of other cohousing communities that lacked the funds to establish the shared facilities they desired, Overdrevet chose to give these first priority. They wanted the communal building located in the middle of the development and to include many of the functions, the residents needed in their everyday lives. The idea was to not merely see it as an option but as a necessity; a way of strengthening the sense of community. As is usually the case, the cohousing community exceeded the budget, extinguishing the dream of being financially independent, staying at home with the children and cultivating the community spirit.[44] Another consequence was that the residents had to finish the buildings and interiors themselves. As a result, the interiors of the dwellings are all different from one another. Overdrevet has been described as:

> *The architecture of unfinished aesthetics, unpretentious, a starting point for a continuing process* [...] *that things are constantly evolving, that we are eternally under way.*[45]

Or as one of the residents phrased it: 'moving into cohousing is like making the unfinished your lifestyle.'[46] In other words, here the process of co-creation continues, with the residents as its driving force, and in this case it has strengthened the community.

Lars Lerup makes a point of the problem of architecture as finished buildings, where 'the dwellers move in to "start" their lives.'[47] He points out how absurd it is for a rigid, inflexible environment to provide a framework for residents' social and personal changes, and instead he advocates 'building the unfinished'.[48] By unfinished, he means an environment which residents can continue to create. And it is precisely this unfinished process that numerous cohousing communities have aimed to adopt, including Overdrevet.

This is in line with Ingrid Gehl's concept of living processes, which considers living a continual process that goes on after the buildings are constructed. According to Gehl, human beings have a need to identify with both their physical and their social environment, and these two types of identification are mutually dependent, since they reinforce the overall sense of belonging.[49] This seems especially apt to cohousing communities. Here, often residents' engagement in the physical environment gives rise to strong communities because they work together, and activities such as garden days enable residents to get to know each other better.

However, the co-creation process does not always have a happy ending. In one of Denmark's first cohousing communities, Toustrup Mark, the existing buildings were in such poor condition that it took many years for the residents to renovate them *[9]*. The process was not made any easier by the residents' pronounced and widely divergent points of view, which made it difficult to agree on which building projects to prioritise and how much time to spend on each. In fact, the conversions and extensions created such deep-rooted conflict that the community split into two irreconcilable groups after a few years.[50]

Thus, the practical challenges associated with cohousing can both strengthen and divide, and many factors determine whether the project will be a success. It is vital that the community functions well. But is a community strengthened by diversity? Or is it true that 'birds of a feather flock together'? Architect Theo Bjerg writes:

> *Sættedammen exudes exceptional openness and tolerance, even though the development builds a ring around itself both physically and ideologically – I guess that's the paradox of the collective.*[51]

The tension between coherence and diversity is also evident in the relation between the cohousing community and the surrounding neighbourhood. It is not uncommon for cohousing communities to be



9 Toustrup Mark was established in 1971 as part of the hippie movement. Today, it is a cohousing and eco-community with twenty-six housing units.



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described as small societies, and even if they aim at being open and inclusive, that is not always the case.[52] The mutual impact between cohousing communities and residents forms a living process that continually shapes the communities, and hence they remain an arena for co-creation even after the construction of the buildings is complete.

## Co-creation

In our view, studies of the making process for cohousing can bring experiences, methods, and objectives to the development of tomorrow's cohousing, and in the sections above we have explored this concerning ownership and establishment, the architect's role, as well as resident mix and community life. In this last section, we further reflect on how, during the process of making, co-creation can promote residents' senses of ownership and belonging in a variety of ways. As discussed above, it is important to understand cohousing ownership from a broad perspective, maintaining that ownership as a result of resident engagement and residents' potential to influence the development is just as important as legal and financial ownership.

Co-creation does not merely require collaboration between architects, contractors, etc. Collaboration with and between future residents is also needed. This is where the sense of community often emerges, and the community therefore depends on the unfinished design process. If the design is fully developed, residents have neither influence on the physical environment nor incentive to enter discussions with the other residents or create a community prior to moving in. Co-creation becomes possible in cohousing if the design process is open and unfinished, allowing residents to leave their mark – not just the final mark but continuing marks – on the buildings and the community, as the physical environment impacts the social environment.[53]

Yet, it is a challenge for architects to illustrate 'the unfinished project'.[54] The often mandatory visualisations, which today are an important element of project documentation, are particularly difficult to carry out if the final result cannot or should not be defined precisely. As mentioned earlier, architects have become better prepared to accommodate open design processes. However, while in the process of establishing cohousing communities, it is important that architects are also able to relinquish the role as facilitator in order to give residents the opportunity to participate in decisions and to create the community they want. Although several parties are involved in open design processes, these are not open in the strict sense of the word unless the project is left open for future residents.

In the case of cohousing, it becomes evident how vital it is for all the involved parties to participate in co-creation in order to successfully build and for some live in them. In this context, co-creation is a prolonged and demanding process – and, at best, also a creative process where everyone is welcome to offer ideas, thoughts, and suggestions. As Tim Ingold and others have argued, being creative is not confined to a single professional group or residents. There are different ways of being creative, and anyone can produce results that can become part of the process.[55] This means, for example, that various professional groups and residents can alternately be contributory organisers. This allows for the residents to make the project their own – to use one of Ingrid Gehl's concepts, they are given the opportunity to create a project with which they can identify.

Over a number of decades, the prevailing process for establishing cohousing communities has changed from bottom-up to top-down, meaning that previous direct participation has been reduced to limited involvement. One of the outcomes of this is that residents do not participate in creating the cohousing, and this can have long-term negative consequences for community life after the construction work is finished. Organising a *baugruppe* prior to the construction of the cohousing project might be one of the answers to this issue, partly because it gives residents the opportunity to become an integral part of the architectural and financial construction, and partly because it offers new potential for collaboration between residents, architects and other parties engaged. When working at its best, *baugruppen* combine engaged participation of residents from the bottom-up approach with an accountable organisational structure from the top-down approach.

It is a challenge today that the distance between the professional groups and the residents is too great. This prevents architects from gaining an adequate understanding of residents' preferences and needs. Proximity and direct exchanges between residents and professional groups have been essential for co-creation in cohousing communities for several decades, and we suggest that they could form a cornerstone of future sustainable communities. In central Europe, in particular, there are examples of *baugruppen* that have succeeded with this process. Experiences there also show that they contribute to social diversity and functional mix in a neighbourhood.[56] This is an effect that is rarely seen in cohousing communities in Denmark, where they often become semi-isolated, small societies.

The main tendency in Danish cohousing today is towards more top-down processes, and there is little pointing to more exploration and co-creation. This development weakens the possibility to achieve genuine, multifaceted ownership throughout all phases of a cohousing project that could otherwise strengthen the sense of community and belonging for each resident. In our view, the top-down processes too often result in housing that, in Lars Lerup's words, is built according to a 'modus operandi' approach and then handed over to the new residents who must present themselves as 'elements of the grid'.[57] Counter to this tendency, we believe that co-creation in cohousing could contribute to a more diverse and affordable development of mainstream housing and neighbourhoods.



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