

## COHOUSING COME STRUMENTO DI RIQUALIFICAZIONE URBANA

### COHOUSING AS NEW INSTRUMENT FOR URBAN REFURBISHMENT

#### **Mariagiulia Bennicelli Pasqualis**

Università di Firenze

[mariagiulia.bennicellipasqualis@unifi.it](mailto:mariagiulia.bennicellipasqualis@unifi.it)

#### **Costanza Quentin**

Ipostudio architetti

[costanza@ipostudio.it](mailto:costanza@ipostudio.it)

#### **Esra Bektas**

TNO - Organisatie Voor Toegepast  
Natuurwetenschappelijk Onderzoek  
[esra.bektas@tno.nl](mailto:esra.bektas@tno.nl)

#### **Jeroen Brouwer**

TNO - Organisatie Voor Toegepast  
Natuurwetenschappelijk Onderzoek  
[jeroen.brouwer@tno.nl](mailto:jeroen.brouwer@tno.nl)

Despite the real estate crisis, one housing trend is still developing, enhancing new way-of-life and principles. The end-users' requirements are changing and a new consciousness is forming; people is striving for more affordable, EeB and social value-based districts.

This housing sector is represented by self-organized and community-based processes as cohousing. The potential of cohousing sector is mainly represented by the private initiative and the high involvement and participation of inhabitants, as they are both the end-users and the clients of their projects. We can then assume each cohousing process as a unique one, entailing different project scenarios, design approaches and tools to be applied, depending on different requirements rather than constraints related to the specific context of intervention.

However, each process always undergoes some precise phases, which represent the constants of the system (Community Building, Development, Design, Implementation, Operation/Maintenance). The variables of the system instead display themselves in the development of contents and chronological aspects of each phase. At the SOTA it is possible to define three kind of processes according to the active/passive role of actors involved (end-user, municipality, SME): bottom-up and top-down. Through the active role of end-users, community role becomes crucial in order to create social-affordable districts as basis of a value-chain of social neighbourhoods development, enhancing the urban refurbishment.

This paper wants to underline how social and EeB value-based communities represent a potential for urban renovation, but it is important to enhance the role of municipalities in initiating or catalysing the processes. This would be possible by the means of e-tools that help municipalities in exploit processes, offering an interchange platform between the different actors, filling the gap between the professional (municipality and SME) side and the unprofessional one (end-users). This paper refers to the on-going EU research project PROFICIENT, under the Energy-efficient Building (EeB) programme.

#### KEYWORDS

Cohousing  
Urban refurbishment  
District scale  
Participatory and  
concurrent processes

## INTRODUCTION

One of the urgent matters of the contemporary city is to solve the housing demand without increasing the territory consumption. The last decades has seen changes in the demand needs, due to the changing way-of-life caused *inter alia* by the new nomadic phenomenon, the disintegration of the traditional family unit (Blangiardo & Rimoldi, 2006), entailing a larger number of households but at the same time a decrease in the average number of family members. This new demand side cannot find a response in the real estate market, both public and private, as it results inadequate from many points of view: typological, technological, and also social. Moreover, there is an economical factor, worsened by the crisis, that influence this demand: a target of end-users is not either allowed to enter the public housing stock or the private one. This is mainly due, on the one side to the very strict parameter that regulate the public housing sector, and on the other side due to the high costs, often combined to a general low quality of the private real estate.

Beside this lays the assumption that sees territory as a frail resource [1] that cannot be consumed anymore. We cannot keep enlarging horizontally our cities, as it entails infrastructural and social costs, but we need to provide accommodations that respond to the new social and environmental requirements. Thus, we need to operate on the urban territory reducing the land consumption, and that implies refurbishing the existing building stock. In this frame, and despite the real estate crisis, there are some emerging phenomenon through which end-users want to bypass the traditional housing market (big developer; top-down processes; and houses not really reflecting the end-users need and a general loss of money as a result) able to solve the housing demand with tailor-made and affordable housing. This kind of movements, that can be listed under the more general name of *self-organised processes*, is generally characterized by private initiative, participatory processes and, due to the commitment of the end-users and depending on the level of their awareness, environmental values.

## THE COHOUSING RELATED-FEATURES

Cohousing is a specific kind of *self-organised processes* that adds to the set of characteristics listed above a *collective* value that can assume a crucial role in creating social affordable districts because of social value-based communities. In fact, the potential offered by cohousing essentially lies in allowing end-users to realize their-own houses, saving costs, increasing the quality of interventions and offering shared facilities so that social-based housing districts. Besides this, evident barriers that impede cohousing and collective movements in general to grow needs to be solved. NaSBA (2011) identifies some *key obstacles* holding back the growth of the sector of *self-build* in the non-professional profile of end-user's communities, difficulties in finding suitable plots, and the impact of regulation on project risk and feasibility. This brings to a waste of time and a high risk in project failure, because people involved are likely to abandon the community. At the same time, these grassroots movements are seen as promoters of localism and boost the wider economy, creating new jobs in the construction sector and enhancing the SME business opportunities (ibid.). In fact SMEs, the supply-side of the market, play a crucial role as they could be interpreted as the vehicle for innovation technology in the housing market sector. Furthermore, the homeowners are the client and the end-user at the same time, so they fulfil a crucial role in cohousing movements, as they represent the vehicle for driving the housing market sector towards a quality growth and, possibly, EeB interventions at a

district scale. This paper, referring to the on-going EU research project PROFICIENT focusing on Collective Self-Organised (CSO) housing processes, wants to illustrate the opportunities that these movements can bring in the urban development strategies. The general process flow, the actors and their role, and the stakeholders of *collective self-organised* interventions are then described explaining how the municipality could support playing a catalyst role for the growth of this specific housing sector.

Cohousing is actually an internationally accepted term to represent, not a housing typology, but rather a specific way of approaching the housing market. It entails the development of a specific process in order to achieve the realization of the housing intervention. As stated, the term “cohousing” refers to a housing model characterized by a high level of self-organization and participation of the end-users in the processes of formation, requirements definition, planning, design, implementation and maintenance of their own housing project. Indeed, cohousing is a process in which a group of individual organizes itself within a contractual agreement on a collective level for the realization of their settlement, in both cases of new construction or refurbishment interventions (Di Giulio et al., 2014). Due to the principle of self-organization, the leading role of the client, the specificity of each community in terms of objectives and functional, financial and legal requirements, and the local context of intervention (e.g. specific laws, prescription, such as geographical, social and cultural conditions), the cohousing process is characterized by a high level of variability. However, each process always undergoes some precise phases, which represent the constants of the system: Community Building phase, Development phase, Design phase, Implementation phase, Operation/Maintenance phase (Scotthanson, 2005). The process can be a bottom-up kind or a top-down one depending on who takes the initiative and who drives the process. The process is bottom-up when it is end-users driven, meaning that the initiative comes directly from the end-users, who organize themselves to develop the project autonomously. This generally happens when a group of people shares a similar vision or objective to build its houses and seeks for opportunities together. The process is instead top-down when it is Municipality-driven or SME-driven. In Municipality-driven processes, the municipality initiates the process allocating lands/buildings, either public or private, in which it is necessary to implement a regeneration scheme that could be pursued with the settlement of a project like CSO Housing. Therefore, people acquire the site/building to develop houses/districts within the respect of the conditions established by the municipality. In SME-driven process, instead, SMEs, seeking for business opportunities, promote and initiate a process accordingly to the service they can provide in the perspective of their gain (Di Giulio et al., 2014). At the moment, in many countries of Europe, the cohousing process still needs to be programmed by local governments. Only few countries has already integrated these kind of processes in regulations that establish sets of rules for the development of the cohousing model (i.e. Germany). In other countries, cohousing still represents an autonomous process developed case to case by the specific group of interest, with no organized support from the municipality and regulation system, apart from the one provided on circumstances or opportunity (i.e. Italy).

## **COHOUSING AS AN ANSWER FOR URBAN REGENERATION**

In this frame, the cohousing model and its process could turn out to be an answer to the set of problems that puzzles the contemporary housing market, providing benefits both on the individual, social and urban

levels. From the individual perspective, cohousing offers the possibility to the clients to realize tailor-made houses due to the participation of the end-users during the design phase. This entails, on the one hand, to realize houses expressly designed according to the specific needs and requirements of each household, enabling the new typology of families raised due to the pulverization of the typical households to obtain adequate housing solutions. On the other hand, living in tailor-made houses triggers a higher individual satisfaction which has positive repercussions on the social sphere. Moreover, cohousing could promise savings in terms of costs as it generally denies the presence of an investor, being the community the investor itself. This enables the ones who cannot afford ordinary housing to enter the housing market through a lighter investment. From the social and urban perspective, cohousing reduces the waste of territorial and environmental resources, as it implies the use of these resources only when a concrete and actual demand for housing occurs. Moreover a cohousing project has the chance to increase the social potentials of the area of intervention on district level due to its inherent characteristics, as previously defined. This last consideration becomes more true in the case of refurbishment interventions as it achieve a renaissance of abandoned or ruined buildings, which probably are the cause of the degradation of some urban areas. In this scenario, the role of the municipality in cohousing processes turns out to be crucial as it could work as catalyst or driver for cohousing project aiming to the requalification of urban areas identified as degraded.

## EXAMPLES OF COHOUSING INTERVENTION IN THE EXISTING BUILDING HERITAGE [2]

Here follows some examples of cohousing refurbishment interventions in which the role of the municipality has proved to be crucial and beneficial. These examples illustrate a case of bottom-up process end-users led, a case of top-down process SME led, and finally a case of top-down process municipality led.

The first case is cohousing numero Zero. It is a cohousing community that between 2007-2013 built-up its own project through a refurbishment intervention in an abandoned building near the market area in Piazza della Repubblica, Turin. The community itself has its start in a cohousing association, CoAbitare, addressed to promote a more ecological and less consumerist way-of-life, as well as collaborative neighbourhood intervening in socially problematic urban areas. Cohousing Numero Zero defines itself an intentional-community, and it perfectly reflects the ideology of the core association. In facts the intervention involved an abandoned building located in a multi-ethnic and socially depressed area of the city, near the city centre. Eight households with different ages and professions formed the community, which is characterized by a democratic and non-hierarchical structure. This case is well-representing a bottom-up process as it was entirely end-users driven. In the project delivery process, the Municipality had had an important role, as in 1996 it developed an experimental urban renovation program named *The Gate – living not leaving*, aimed to improve life and work conditions through the involvement of public and private partnership. The community had the chance to exploit this opportunity, but, in absence of national regulations for cohousing, it had to respect all the national building standards for traditional housing. Being two member of the core groups architects had surely facilitated the community in finding the appropriate solutions. Seen the complexity of the process, the Community is now offering its experience in helping other groups in the first phase of the process in order to allow them to internally develop the competences to drive the process autonomously.

“Coholonia” is the reconversion of the Villa Rosa Maltoni Mussolini (Calambrone, Pisa) built in the 1930s by

the Italian engineer and architect Angiolo Mazzoni. It is a well-known great example of Italian architecture of the fascism decades. It reveals the possibility for cohousing to settle itself within the historical heritage. The project is the result of the collaboration between the municipality and the SME Newcoh s.r.l., a service provider's company active in the Italian cohousing market. It is part of the plan developed by the municipality for the regeneration of the ex-colony, completed in 2010. Thus the municipality resulted to be a crucial vehicle through which the implementation of this project has been made possible. This is an example of top-down process for which the service design has been elaborated by the developer (Newcoh s.r.l.), who made the main decisions regarding spaces and facilities. The project consists in 60 dwellings and many shared facilities: living area with common kitchen, gym and wellness area, 20000 sqm park with swimming-pool, laundry, media library, office spaces, playground, guesthouse, laboratories). The result is a value-based community in which the opportunities of sharing are many. Duinstraat project is a municipal initiated retrofitting project of a former school building located in The Hague, The Netherlands. The building was constructed around 1880 and characterized by many authentic details and elements. It was re-used temporarily as a police station and offices, then became vacant. The municipality of The Hague decided to sell the building to a group of self-builders, and divided the building into ten plots with providing "plot passports" accommodated necessary information such as dimensions, possibilities, and restrictions. The Municipality also supported the process with taking some renovation actions such as fixing the roof, and splitting the individual plots according to the regulation (fire, noise, construction safety). This support included coaching and advice on both the energy efficiency issues and potential subsidies. The municipality self-building process needed to include collective organizing, as the prospective end-users are obliged to form a community (home owners association) that undertakes retrofitting process for the common spaces (i.e. façade, common entrance hall, garden etc.). The organized community became responsible for the maintenance of both the building envelope and other common spaces. In order to buy and thus be the member of the community, the end users needed a bank statement showing their financial capability. Via this statement, they could enrol to the project. The municipality also demanded a strict deadline. After purchasing the plots officially, the end-users were required to finish retrofitting within one year. They also were not allowed to sell the apartments within the first 3 years (with a penalty of 25.000 for no compliance). Currently, all the plots have been sold and the refurbishment construction has not yet been started.

## CONCLUSIONS

Municipalities, like this of The Hague, have to cope with many different types of run down real estate. Similar real estate projects can be found in various municipalities in the Netherlands. It offers future owners a very well situated, historical building with great aesthetic appearance, and the opportunity for end users to create the ideal home and living environment eventually. This way, people are given possibilities to act pro-active in establishing new dynamics in urban neighbourhood.

Thus we could assume that the role of municipalities could be crucial as driver or catalyst of cohousing and more in general Collective Self-Organised processes. To help and facilitate the exchange of information, the creation of new business opportunities for SMEs and to increase the suitability of results fitting with the end-users' wishes, a tool of interaction is needed. This tool can be a CSO Housing platform that enhances that

role and eases the processes. This system will operate through a connection between the actors involved (end-users, SMEs and Municipalities), providing mutual benefits. These benefits are substantially referred to the opportunities these movements can offer to municipalities in terms of urban regeneration; and then also to the high potential in offering housing interventions characterised by a higher standard quality, with higher end-users' satisfaction resulting in more socially affordable districts. Furthermore, the private initiative, with private investments, can boost the local and wider economy (NaSBA, 2011) and enhance new opportunities for SME networks. In addition, the end-user's commitment and awareness can offer important results in terms of energy efficiency, both due to the community-vision and in due to cost-savings during the operation phase. Despite this, there are current barriers to solve, in order to give access and availability of financial tools; to simplify building regulation for CSO processes; to give access to suitable sites for interventions in the urban area; and to improve of design strategies in order to integrate non-professional side with professional actors. The e-tool can be used as a platform where interested people can find results, experiences, advices and available financial/regulation tools, as a place where municipalities can present and offer sites for renovation. In addition it includes an e-marketplace where the supply side can offer services and products while the demand side can find the most suitable solutions for its specific purpose; and an e-platform with tools for end-users' participation and professional concurrency, in order to allow also remotely work and information exchange.

[1] European Soil Charter, Council of Europe Committee Ministers, Adopted on 30 May 1972; art.2.

[2] The information has been gathered by the authors through interviews and site visits.

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