Well-being and age in co-housing life: Thinking with and beyond design

Co-housing communities, which are designed to encourage interaction in everyday life and informal mutual support, are often seen as a lifestyle that can improve residents' health and well-being.

This viewpoint considers how spatial design, resident control and home technologies matter to 'successful ageing' in the increasingly popular co-housing communities- both intergenerational and senior. Based on the authors' long-term research into these schemes, as well as on an interactive learning day that focused on the health and ageing dimensions of co-housing, the authors argue that the physical and mental well-being of older populations in the UK could be enhanced through this model's social and material practices. Research, however, is still needed and lacking to determine its true potential for combatting loneliness, increasing social and physical resilience and improving older residents' health.

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Introduction

Co-housing communities, which are designed to encourage interaction in everyday life and informal mutual support, are often seen as a lifestyle that can improve residents' health and well-being. Those who live in cohousing tend to feel this intuitively, but only American social gerontologist Anne Glass[1] has explored these claims in any detail. However, as recognised by the Housing LIN in its ['Growing Older Together'](#) programme, there is now growing interest in the UK from the cohousing sector, policy-makers and practitioners alike for a more informed understanding of cohousing's potential for combatting loneliness and increasing social and physical resilience. The challenge, as Sheila Peace puts it, is to learn how to make 'successful ageing' possible for everyone.[2]

In our research into Older Women's Co-Housing (OWCH) in north London, the UK's first women's senior co-housing group, we have begun to investigate these links and to work towards an evaluation framework for other co-housing communities. We are particularly interested in how the community's social and physical environments interact, and how being part of such a group affects residents' understanding (and practices) of ageing, family and care.

As part of this work, we organised a 'study day'[3] at Forge Mill, home of Lancaster Cohousing, on 14 December 2017. This brought together members of different UK co-housing groups, both established and developing, to think about how they address questions of health, well-being and ageing in their own schemes. Apart from cohousing practitioners we welcomed participants from Lancaster University, Aston University, Open University, LSE and Loughborough University, as well as representatives from architect's practice, Pollard Thomas Edwards architects (PTEa) and Lancaster City Council.

The first part of the day developed some of these ideas, based on recent research and expertise from a range of disciplinary perspectives from sociology and environmental gerontology to design human geography. The second part of the day was devoted to a series of workshop-style discussions between members of various cohousing groups; the best placed to speak to these issues, and learn from one another.

How does design affect interactions?

Patrick Devlin, partner at PTEa, and architect for the award-winning development for [OWCH](#) in North London, talked about how the physical relationship between buildings affects collective well-being. The location of the co-house (where joint activities, like cooking, take place) in relation to the individual dwellings helps determine how people interact, both spontaneously and in a planned way. Its position said something about where the boundaries between the individual and collective lie in each collaborative scheme.

Patrick illustrated the discussion by posting co-designed plans for each of two London co-housing projects, showing various possibilities for the relationship between the common house and individual homes. We talked about how particular co-house locations might affect social interaction during lived-in phases. He also asked what we thought of each arrangement.

Some designs were criticised for being 'claustrophobic' (too densely packed) or 'segregated and introverted' (with the common house buried away from sight), while in other arrangements the common house functioned as a 'natural alleyway' that 'joined' people. We looked at three different visions produced by would-be residents over the course of their co-design workshops, which gave us an insight into the negotiated collective process through which a final scheme eventually develops.

The decision about where to place the cohouse was part of the answer to the question asked earlier in the day by Dr Friederike Ziegler of Lancaster University: 'How can we design housing for later life in a way that enables residents to remain open to and engaged with the world around them?' Based on findings from a multidisciplinary design project she was involved in called DWELL and its resultant influential report[4] where Sheffield residents envisioned housing and neighbourhoods for later life, she argued that the physical spaces of the home and settings should welcome residents' new experiences and different interest, thereby *'informing our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual engagement and activities'*.

By contrast, the institutionalised settings in which many older people live are shaped by stereotypical views of seniors as frail, insecure and in need of protection. In such places, residents 'can be completely fenced in and inaccessible … literally shut off from the world, feeling mistrustful towards a world they don't recognize and feel out of sync with'. Co-housing, which is often open to the wider neighbourhood, reflects a more trusting and welcoming view of society and of older people's aspirations and capabilities.

We also looked at the way topography and site location influence the possibility of designing spaces for spontaneous residential contact. A square, flat site appeared to offer the most favourable 'palette', making it relatively easy to apply classic co-housing design principles that allow individual homes to overlook neighbours or afford views across courtyards. And while hills and large trees can provide desirable green spaces in the city, they can also push new structures to the edges of sites. These locations may be less conducive to interaction, potentially producing a rather traditional, individualistic housing pattern. One of the things that makes cohousing distinctive is the way tangible aspects of the built environment can translate into intangible community well-being benefits.

Beyond the physical

Cohousing communities are not utopias, and members of the various groups agreed that one of the biggest issues was how to address conflict. As one of the OWCH residents put it, *'when you move in it's like marrying 25 people!'* The typically long group formation period (18 years in the case of OWCH) allows time to build relationships and resolve conflicts.

The ethos of a group evolves as new people join and circumstances change, but some principles are constants; for OWCH it is the idea of mutual support. Since the group moved into their new homes this commitment had been put into practice in tangible ways: *'Experiencing the support has been amazing,'* said Shirley. Friederike challenged the idea that independence should be the ideal for everyone. *'What if we saw caring for others as a privilege rather than a burden?'* she asked.

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[4] https://www.housinglin.org.uk/_assets/DWELL_DesigningWithDownsizers.pdf

Val Mitchell of Loughborough University discussed a range of digital innovations studied in LEEDR – an interdisciplinary project on how energy and media fit into domestic life – meant to help older people live independently for longer. Some were designed in partnership with older users and reflected their preferences and habits while others – e.g. the slightly sinister OnKöl, which allows adult children to remotely monitor their parents – were clearly not. She acknowledged that not all older users were comfortable setting up new technology themselves but argued that many chose to involve others (e.g. grandchildren), creating a positive cycle of interdependence and engagement. Members of co-housing groups – whether established or developing – agreed that the relationship between ageing, technology and communication was a key, if under-discussed aspect of their everyday individual and collective home life. The future take-up of certain 'age friendly' media by these communities will depend, amongst other things, on the balance between cost, needs and accessibility.

Mainstreaming

The challenge now is how to move cohousing from the margin to the mainstream. As Henry Cumbers, from Lancaster City Council's Housing Strategy team told us, in a recent public consultation of Lancaster City residents' housing preferences, some 11% expressed an interest in cohousing. That is partly because Lancaster residents are familiar with the concept because of the success of the Halton Mill co-housing project. He argued that establishing neighbourhood plans that were open enough to fit specific local standards – whether this be retrofitting homes or generating new-build for co-housing – would help ease the pressures of supply while responding to people's desires.

Yet, without systematic research on the benefits (and pitfalls) of cohousing, policy makers and housing providers are unlikely to get behind it. In the coming months, we will be submitting a research proposal to the Economic and Social Research Council to examine the potential of cohousing as an inclusive housing form for later life. Our goal is to move the debates on this alternative form of living forward in ways that respond to the socio-material realities and well-being needs of older populations in the UK. This would provide the UK's first comparative, multi-disciplinary study of these communities. If successful, we look forward to providing research updates via the Housing LIN and helping to further grow the learning of the benefits of cohousing for people in later life.

Final thoughts

Our research into the first year of life at New Ground has already demonstrated how this form of community-driven life and design can improve older people's sense of general well-being through an enhanced sense of agency, connection and mutual support. Its principles and everyday practices offer a distinct counter-cultural approach to the UK's typical senior housing development and 'ageing at home'. As we continue to examine the multiple ways in which co-housing's beneficial features can be brought from the margins of later life housing provision to the mainstream, it is important to remember the challenges that this non-traditional development model faces in relation to current planning, built environment and social policy regimes. This has significant implications to the barriers and opportunities faced by future groups and schemes – and we will continue to trace these, and seek out expert and resident recommendations – without losing sight of the crucial health and well-being dimensions.

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About the authors

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Dr Karen West is Reader in Public Policy and Director of the Sociology Department at Aston University. She is lead and founder member of the Aston Research Centre for Healthy Ageing and has played a leading role in numerous externally funded projects on the theme of ageing, including work on extra care housing, choice in later life, older people's care and support, direct payments and personal budgets for older people and extended working life. Karen is currently co-leading pilot research looking at the health benefits of co-housing life in the OWCH group.

About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 40,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England and Wales to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'knowledge hub' on specialist housing, our online and regional networked activities:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing choices that enable older and disabled people to live independently

- provide intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice developments, and

- raise the profile of specialist housing with developers, commissioners and providers to plan, design and deliver aspirational housing for an ageing population.

For more information about cohousing, visit the Housing LIN's dedicated pages at:
www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Cohousing/