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Co-designing Senior Co-housing

Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia and Kathleen Scanlon describe the collaborative process behind Featherstone Lodge



co-housing) or cater specifically for older people or particular groups, notably women.

One important part of the co-housing process is that (future) residents participate in the planning and design of their communities, working with architects and each other in a non-hierarchical way. The weeks and months spent discussing and developing ideas may result in strikingly original designs, but also help to introduce groups to the processes of negotiation and compromise that will be required when they live as communities.

Here we describe aspects of the design process of one London co-housing community still under development, and briefly discuss examples from elsewhere in the UK and abroad. Finally, we comment on the lessons that the collaborative process of co-housing design offers for urban design more generally.

THE FEATHERSTONE STORY

Featherstone Lodge, built in 1858 in the inner London suburb of Forest Hill, is one of a scattering of neo-Gothic and neo-Baroque mansions constructed on Sydenham Ridge in the early and mid-19th century. Built as country retreats for wealthy London families, many of these houses later became institutions. Featherstone is distinctive because its large walled garden – more than an acre – remains intact.

The house was used in the 1960s as a nurses' hostel and later as a drug rehabilitation centre. When that closed, at the depth of the financial crisis, the site was offered for sale. A local couple interested in co-housing approached Hanover, a not-for-profit retirement housing provider, who agreed to buy the site and develop one of the UK's first senior co-housing communities, if the couple could recruit a group of residents. Typically co-housing groups come together first, then look for a site; the 'site-first' model followed at Featherstone is relatively rare but has clear advantages, as some established groups have searched for years or even decades for suitable sites.

In 2011 Hanover and the couple hosted a well-attended open-house at the house. With a core group of interested participants in place, the design work began a few months later.

What is co-housing? To live intentionally as a group. To share resources and meals. To design collaboratively. To create and maintain collective living spaces. These are all core elements of the co-housing concept, developed and made popular since the 1970s in Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany and the United States. The model arrived more recently in the UK, where there are currently around 18 communities (and about 50 in formation).

Most co-housers are motivated by a desire to live as a community that actively participates in its own creation and sustainability. Some communities form in a bottom-up way because of shared ecological or social visions (in Sweden, for example, co-housing is viewed as an ideal environment in which to raise children), while others are assembled in a top-down fashion by housing associations or even for-profit developers. Communities may be structured as owner-occupied, mutual home ownership, rental or mixed-tenure. They can be rural or urban. They may accommodate households of all ages (intergenerational

1 Featherstone Lodge
2 The communal garden and trees



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CO-DESIGNING

Pollard Thomas Edwards (PTE) architects were appointed by Hanover to work with the group to design about 30 homes, some in the existing house and some new-build. The site had many advantages: dramatic views, a beautiful garden, an impressive existing house. There were also constraints—the dramatic views went hand-in-hand with a steeply sloping site, challenging for older people with mobility problems; the existing house, locally listed, was indeed striking externally but internally had been altered and reduced to institutional anonymity; while the beautiful garden contained a number of protected trees.

Over the course of several months, the group met many times to talk about the design. They considered the configuration of individual flats, solar aspect, kitchen layout, the provision of washing machines. More importantly, they discussed movement through the site, and it was quickly agreed that everyone should enter the community through the main door of the existing house, and that the social and communal spaces would be a 'common house' and the large garden. This common house (also known as a co-house) is one of the anchoring elements of co-housing, typically a space for residents to share a kitchen and dining area. Depending on the group's budget and interests, the common house can be more than one space and it can incorporate facilities like craft studios, workshops, music rooms, etc.

The Featherstone group discussed where the common house should be located: should there be a stand-alone structure nestled in the garden? This would obstruct the expansive green it currently offered. Should it be one corner of the existing house? This could passively exclude those living at the bottom of the sloping garden. In the end it was decided to place the co-house just to one side of the main entrance, so that residents coming and going might see and interact with each other. This encouraging form of architecture, commonly practiced in co-housing design, strives to blur or at least challenge the traditional boundaries between public and the private home spaces.

There was also debate about what would happen in the common house, and the possibility was left open that it could host not only group-specific events like dinners or films, but also activities open to neighbours and the wider community such as yoga classes or children's play groups. Various members of the group also expressed interest in using the bottom end of the garden for green activities like allotments, workshops or even raising chickens or pigs.

Besides the physical constraints imposed by the site itself, two other factors conditioned the group's design possibilities. The first was that the final product had to be affordable. Most of the group members intended to buy their units. Some owned London homes that they could sell, but several were not home-owners and expected to draw on savings or enter into



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3 Working closely with the architects
4 Residents' design aspirations

shared ownership. This affected the size of dwellings, construction materials and methods, and the extent of sustainable technology to be used. Second, the developer, Hanover Housing Association, wanted to ensure that the scheme could be sold as traditional market housing if the cohousing group was to fail. Thus the designs that finally emerged were beautiful and suited to community living but not particularly radical.

OTHER EXPERIENCES OF CO-DESIGN

At LILAC, a recently completed multi-generational cohousing community in Leeds, the collaborative design process produced a somewhat less conventional development. The group was strongly motivated by a concern for sustainability and the 20 dwellings, built with a straw-bale construction technique (residents themselves helped make the bricks), reached the highest energy-efficiency standards. They are clustered tightly around a reed-filled unfenced pond, while a communal play area and allotments take up a large part of the site. The LILAC group developed the site themselves; group members pooled their financial resources and took out a mortgage to fund construction. Without the need to satisfy an external developer they could take more risks with their design.

In Berlin, co-housing (known as *baugruppen*) is now a standard, albeit minor, element of the local housing market, accounting for up to 5 per cent of new dwellings constructed. Households moving into *baugruppen* consciously choose a community-oriented lifestyle, but residents haven't always been involved in early phases of the project. There is commonly a core group of a few households, usually including an architect who may or may not plan to live in the development. Other households are recruited later, and may not have any input into the design apart from choosing the finishes of their own flats.

LESSONS

What lessons can co-housing teach us about housing design more generally? Our visits to functioning co-housing communities elsewhere in the UK and across Europe suggest that they can be intensely appealing places to live; not for nothing are they often characterised as utopian. In terms of community they are the ultimate antidote to the anonymity of modern urban life. In terms of design, many incorporate cutting-edge sustainable construction techniques such as straw-bale construction and passive house standards, thus acting as test beds for solutions that may become more widespread.

Most importantly, the process of working through the design with a group rather than with an individual client



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places the focus strongly on those elements of the design that foster community and neighbourliness. Recent thinking about the social sustainability of urban spaces posits that spaces that are designed for social interaction work better for residents and other users. The co-housing design process allows designers and end-users to spend time thinking about how best to create such spaces; American architects specialising in co-housing design will typically spend a few weeks working with the group on the design of the co-house alone.

But as that example and our own research in London suggests, collaborative work can be extremely time-consuming. In the case of Featherstone, from the group's first meeting to submission of a planning application, it took nearly two-and-a-half years, and it was more than three years before planning permission was granted. While not all of this time was consumed by the design process, which indeed was completed within six months, it did last longer than on a standard development, and longer than the participants envisioned. Why? The reasons are primarily about the novelty of the process for everyone involved. For both group members and architects it was an unfamiliar process with many non-expert participants. The group's membership kept changing, and even the core members didn't necessarily agree on what they wanted. The importance of the cost and marketability constraints was not understood until late in the process. Finally, although the housing association was working simultaneously with several co-housing groups, it did not systematically collect or disseminate best practice that could have reduced delays.

Was the end result worth it, that is did it differ in important ways from what might have emerged from an architect's studio without input from the group? The design clearly isn't a standard housing association or for-profit development: it has a co-house and there are relatively few parking spaces, all on the margins of the site, leaving the large garden more or less intact as a car-free communal space. But judging from our observation of one design process, the group's input was not decisive—the architects, with a wide knowledge of co-housing in the UK and abroad, would very likely have included these elements in any case. At the same time, Hanover's insistence that the units should be saleable on the general market ruled out unconventional resident-led design solutions (some put forward by members who were themselves architects).

The results of collaborative design may sometimes be more measurable in social than blueprint terms. Whatever the final outcome, the collaborative design process uniquely contributes

5 The LILAC cohousing community in Leeds, and its private gardens

to forming group identity through an initially individual but then collectively articulated vision of what homes and community spaces should be like. This takes time and in London, where land values are very high, once a site is found and purchased, time is money in a very real sense. Designing a bespoke co-housing development from scratch may work better in lower-cost areas, and indeed many of the best UK examples are found in places like Leeds, where land is relatively cheap.

That doesn't mean that co-housing has no place in high-demand cities, but rather that the process may need to be modified there. One way is standardisation and the reduction or removal of the group-participation element. In Berlin, for example, there are more than 300 urban co-housing developments and a cadre of specialist professionals with experience in design and finance. There is also a critical mass of people who are familiar with co-housing and want to live in such communities. Many seem happy to enter these communities when construction is complete, rather than taking part themselves in the design process; this is perhaps a signal that the sector has matured.

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There are other possibilities as well. Prospective urban co-housers might consider using existing (not necessarily residential) buildings and modifying them internally with the same overarching goals of living as a community, social interaction and sustainability. Several redundant office blocks in the London Borough of Croydon have already been converted to residential use; why not for co-housing? In this sense, working with more constraints might actually be helpful, as it can help focus people's attention on those aspects that they can shape and change rather than leaving everything up for grabs. More generally, if co-housing is to offer a viable alternative in expensive urban areas, we need to recognise and address the problem of land prices and the general suspicion of non-mainstream models. ●

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