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Living together on one’s own: Cohousing for older people, a new housing type in Denmark and The Netherlands

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"Living in housing communities for elderly people is not a way of living for alternative people; it is an alternative for ordinary people."
- Young architect working with a group of older people designing a cohousing scheme in Hoorn, The Netherlands (LVGO pamphlet).

1. Introduction: what is cohousing?
2. Cohousing for older people: origins and characteristics
3. Two communities in detail: (i) de Vonk & (ii) Det Kreativ Seniorbo
4. Concluding remarks: prospects & a cautionary note

1. What is cohousing?

‘Living together on one’s own’ is the seemingly contradictory but in fact entirely apt expression used by Landelijke Vereniging Groepswonen Van Ouderen (LVGO), the ‘National Association of Housing Communities for Elderly People’ in The Netherlands, to capture the essence of cohousing. Cohousing is best understood as a novel kind of neighbourhood, housing a novel form of intentional community, which began to take shape in Denmark in the early to mid-1960s and, independently, in The Netherlands a few years later.¹ For a variety of reasons, the inventors of cohousing wanted to live in a much more communal or community-oriented neighbourhood than was usual or possible in either urban or suburban settings, but they wanted to do so without sacrificing the privacy or integrity of individual families or households, and their dwellings. Could they have their cake and eat it too? It would seem so. As a retired farmer and founding resident of Holtbjerg, a cohousing community in rural Jutland, put it in describing their achievement: “it is good to have something which is mine, and something which is ours.”²

There are now several hundred cohousing communities in various countries, principally in Denmark, where in 2002 there were more than 135; The Netherlands had about 75, and communities can be found in Sweden, Norway and elsewhere in northern Europe. There are at least two communities in the UK and several more in the planning stage. In North America, cohousing blossomed in the early 1990s, following the publication of an engaging book by two US architects, based on their experience of Danish cohousing. There are 95 schemes occupied or in the process of construction in North America, and 65 more in the planning stages.³ There are many intentional communities in Australia
but so far only a few are cohousing - two or three in Hobart and one at Hamilton Hill in Western Australia. Several others are in the planning stages, however, and some are now appearing in Asia. The first cohousing community, Sættedammen, in Hillerød, north of Copenhagen, turned 30 in 2002; and the first Dutch community, Hilversumse Meent, in Hilversum near Amsterdam, turned 25.

Cohousing is generally distinguished by the following characteristics:

(i) **Comprehensive & Democratic Resident Control**
    Households initiate the process, coming together to democratically formulate the principles upon which their community will be based, and to plan and manage the physical and social fabric of it accordingly;

(ii) **Common Space & Facilities**
    Substantial or significant common space and facilities, in conjunction with individual dwellings which are as independent or autonomous as households want; and,

(iii) **An 'Intentional Neighbourhood' or a Neighbourhood by Design**
    A neighbourhood setting for the dwellings and the common spaces, one that has come about by design and agreement (rather than by default).

In cohousing, the individual dwellings are typically modest in size as residents aim to maximise the common space and facilities so as to foster and support the shared life beyond the household they desire. A Common house (or flat) with a kitchen and dining area is almost universal, as is a shared laundry. Common houses often incorporate a children's room, one or more workshops, a guest room, sometimes a library or meeting room, freezer or bulk storage, and various recycling facilities. Outdoors, common spaces are designed for the foot - for gatherings, recreation and play, and for domestic production - fruit and vegetable gardens, chickens, alternative energy, composting and recycling.

The Dutch often favour levels of community. Thus, for example, Hilversum’s 50 households are divided into ten groups or clusters of four or five households each (with a few unattached dwellings). Each cluster shares a kitchen and dining area, laundry and storage. At the level of the whole community, Hilversum enjoys a bar, library and meeting room in a Common house, with garden attached; sprinkled around the site are guest rooms, a well equipped workshop, sauna and other facilities (at various times, a crèche, teenagers’ room, artist’s studio).

The communal realm in cohousing is designed to facilitate social interaction and sharing and to supplement, complement or rationalise the spaces of the individual dwellings, not to displace or marginalise the latter. What is common is thus not an inferior substitute for what people would otherwise prefer to be private, but an extension of the domestic realm to sustain inter-household relations and activities. Together with the material fabric of cohousing, the communities have a formal governance structure of their own devising, usually involving several committees - and in all communities a variety of common practices, jobs, activities and events, as well as various inter-household alliances, spring up. So a community may have a ‘solidarity fund’ to assist people in time of need; a space may be set aside in the Common house for recycling old clothes or a list circulated amongst households of items people are willing to lend; a communal feast with friends to celebrate the summer solstice or a canoeing trip to Sweden may be an annual event; a car may be cooperatively owned by two or more households. Every community determines the nature and intensity of its social interaction. For example, some communities have common meals most nights of the week and every adult and older teenager is expected to contribute on a regular basis to their preparation; in others, common meals are entirely optional - whoever feels like cooking and eating together does so. A working bee in the common garden (with, say, coffee and fresh scones at the end) may be a regular or irregular, obligatory or voluntary affair. Communities also develop conventions to ensure household or individual privacy is respected: sites are typically organised to distinguish public outdoor spaces from private; the position of a blind on the front door, for example, may indicate whether or not the household would mind being disturbed.
figure 1: ottrupgård cohousing scheme in denmark

after 30 years, at least three features of cohousing are, or have remained, distinctive and important: cohousing as a setting for a ‘normal’ life, a (near) failsafe idea or practice, and a housing type consistent with diversity. i will briefly describe each in turn.

(i) a setting for a ‘normal’ life

amongst intentional community or utopian housing types, cohousing probably lies closest to ‘mainstream society’. the general aim of cohousing has been relatively pragmatic: to realise a form or setting for ordinary family or household life which would enable the recovery of community in propinquity (as opposed to shaping how we live to achieve some other, usually nobler, end). cohousing has no charismatic leaders or sectarian commitments and cohousers are not reclusive or internally oriented in ways which exclude or discourage interactions with the local or wider community. their lives and dwellings are no less ‘porous’, no less open to ordinary social interaction, than are their neighbours ‘outside’. school friends and work mates, unwanted relatives and mormons can turn up at their doors; cohousers hold down ordinary jobs, are members of local play groups or soccer teams (or of parliament, in at least one case); they drink at the local pub. this feature of cohousing serves to normalise and integrate what was, prima facie, a radical way of living. early on, cohousing was often met with curiosity or suspicion, even hostility: ‘do you all sleep together?’; ‘do you have electricity?’; ‘do you live in the monkey cage?’, are typical of the remarks cohousers endured. (cohousing for older people has experienced similar, but apparently milder, reactions.) the general acceptance, spread and influence of cohousing, especially in its countries of origin, has undoubtedly been related to this normalising turn. that said, it is equally important not to lose sight of what is distinctively different about cohousing. for example, all cohousing schemes are some form of co-operative, but most housing co-operatives are not cohousing, not being intentional communities their members are members in order to house themselves in a way that the
market or the State cannot do, or do so well. Their goal is thus housing, not housing and community.  

(ii) A (near) failsafe idea or practice
Co-housing communities have been remarkably enduring or cohesive (even as their membership changes). To my knowledge, no established community has disbanded, much less become so riven with conflict as to descend into a “sink estate” - the kind of housing for which owners cannot find buyers or landlords tenants. There are, I think, two principal reasons for this success: firstly, the balance co-housing strikes between household privacy and community engagement on the one hand, and between the community and the wider society on the other, seems in tune with contemporary mores and preferences; secondly, the planning stage in co-housing is sufficiently complex and protracted, and fundamentally democratic, that prospective co-housers come to understand what they are embarking upon, and have ample time to decide whether or not the particular community they are shaping, or this way of living in general, is likely to be their cup of tea. Many households pull out in the development phase, and are replaced by others. The turnover rates in established schemes do not seem to be either high or especially problematic. This was the case in all the co-housing for older people schemes I visited.

(iii) A housing type consistent with diversity
As I have indicated, co-housing is now found in a variety of Western (and more recently Asian) countries, and in a variety of locations within those countries - from inner urban to suburban and rural. Co-housing works for a range of site planning strategies, housing densities and housing types - from blocks of flats to attached or detached houses and rural properties; it can be new-build or a refurbishment and is well suited to the re-use for housing of other types of buildings (such as schools, small farms, and some industrial or commercial buildings). Communities vary in size from a handful of households to 150 or more. People of all ages and household types, across a reasonable range of household incomes, can be found in co-housing; and communities vary significantly in the extent and intensity of their common life (as mentioned above). Lastly, co-housing is surprisingly flexible in relation to tenure: there are privately owned schemes (including some which mix owners with renters), different forms of group title, social housing schemes, and combinations of the foregoing.

What is clear from over 30 years of co-housing, however, is that this housing type will likely only ever appeal to, or be realisable by, a relatively small minority of households (although its influence on housing and neighbourhood design generally has been extensive). Cohousing for older people, however, seems to be taking a different path.

2. Cohousing for older people: origins and characteristics

Whilst older people do live in co-housing, they are not well represented. A recent survey of Danish communities, for example, found that only about 15% of residents were over 50, which is the percentage of people aged 65 and over in the general population. Beatrice Kesler found (when communities were younger) that only 5% of residents in Dutch communities were over 45. Cohousing was initiated principally by young families and, in general, they predominate - it has served their interests well. In Denmark, more than 30% of the population in co-housing are children under 15, compared with less than 20% in the general population, and the proportions are similar for The Netherlands.

What is co-housing for older people (op-co-housing)? As a first approximation, it is reasonable to suggest that it is essentially no different from (traditional or age-unrestricted) co-housing, except for the differences - in outlook or expectations, experience, interests and abilities - that a particular, exclusively older, group of people have brought to refashioning this housing type. (In turn, there are differences in the social policy environment of housing for older people generally which affects op-co-housing.) A simple illustration of difference between op-co-housing and traditional co-housing, for example, is an older woman, having spent most of her adult life providing regular meals for a family, may not then want to start doing the same for others! On the other hand, I was equally struck by the similarities between the two forms of co-housing. The group of residents I interviewed in ‘t Hoefijzer (the
Horseshoe) in Apeldoorn, for example, conveyed the same (youthful) enthusiasm for community I encountered in much traditional cohousing. They said: “[We] talked a lot and agreed to live this way”; their architect produced five schemes before they were satisfied; the final scheme is like a horseshoe in plan, enclosing a common garden, and everyone comes and goes through the generous common room in the middle. No-one had left in five years - except for one couple who wanted to be nearer their children in another town (and one person had died). Some residents spoke of t’Hoefijzer as being “like a family”; they have a (simple) structure of committees for managing daily life and annual celebrations, individual savings programs, occasional outings together and regular working bees to look after the common space and the garden. The few people with cars run others to an appointment for a small fee (about A$4), and so on, just like traditional cohousing. 19

In The Netherlands op-cohusing was, like traditional cohousing, a grass-roots movement or process. With people in Western countries living longer and healthier lives in retirement, changes in family structure, growing individualism and declining family support in old age, many people began to think more openly and creatively about their housing needs in later life. Moreover, as Baars and Thomése, emphasise:

> After the Second World War there was a strong tendency to regulate the living situations of the elderly in the Netherlands. Well into the 1970s, it was customary - to a much greater extent than in surrounding countries - to apply to a home for the elderly once retirement age was reached. 20

Perhaps not surprisingly then, there were several ‘liberation’ attempts by older people, in the late 1970s, to escape this housing trajectory - and they looked to cohousing, or similar ideas. In 1983, the Dutch Federation for Old-Age Policy assembled “about a hundred people” interested in cohousing, and the following year they formed an association, Landelijke Vereniging Groepswonen van Ouderen (LVGO), the National Association of Housing Communities for Elderly People. By 1986, there were only a handful of schemes occupied or under construction, but the movement quickly gained momentum, as Table 1 below indicates. Table 2 shows the size and demographics of my sample of Dutch communities.

### Table 1: Cohousing Schemes for Older People in the Social Housing Sector (LVGO Members) in The Netherlands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupied Schemes</th>
<th>Planning Stage</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 1992</td>
<td>79 (+11 under construction)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2001</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>65</td>
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### Table 2: Size and Demographics of Five Cohousing Schemes for Older People in The Netherlands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Dwellings</th>
<th>Singles</th>
<th>Couples</th>
<th>Total Residents</th>
<th>Female/Male Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Oase Zaandam, Amsterdam</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. de Vonk, Nijmegen</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rijnveste, Apeldoorn</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. t’Hoefijzer, Apeldoorn</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Kruisstraat, Utrecht</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To illustrate the age range of residents, at Rijnveste, for example, people ranged from 55 to 82, with an average age of 67.

Barr and Tomése identify two dominant motives of op-cohousers in The Netherlands: “remaining active and positively preventing loneliness through social contact, togetherness and solidarity”. Op-cohousers are clear, however, that they do not see themselves as informal or unpaid community
workers - a Dutch equivalent of our Meals-on-Wheels volunteers or Blue Nurses - for one another. “[Mutual care certainly plays a part … but it is not their main objective, just as care is not the primary goal of other human relationships. The care stems from an inter-relatedness members feel as good neighbours or friends.”24 Barr and Tomése argue that there is nonetheless a tendency for policymakers to see cohousing communities as “substitutes for professional care.”25

![Figure 2: Unit Plan, Kruisstraat, Utrecht](Source: LVGO)

A 68m² unit for a single person or couple: as one enters, the Living/dining room is off the hall to the left and opens onto a glazed balcony; a spare room & the WC are off the hall to the right; straight ahead is the bedroom with en-suite.

Turning now to Denmark, in the early 1980s a non-profit housing organization, Boligtrivsel i Centrum (BiC - ‘Housing and Well-Being in Focus’), formed a study group with some older people in Copenhagen, mostly women, to investigate op-cohousing. As Ulla Moulvard of BiC explains:

The idea was to avoid isolation and loneliness, the fate of many old people, both in big institutions and in their own homes; to keep their self-determination and to maintain dignity in their old age. They wanted to choose their living conditions before they became so frail that they would have to let other people choose for them.”26

This desire gave rise to the philosophy (now policy) that older people are entitled or should be assisted to ‘move in time’.

A group of nine single women stayed the distance in the original BiC study group and in 1987 they established Midgården an op-cohousing scheme in some existing flats which were grouped around a stair well in a 5 story block of social housing. One flat on the ground floor was converted to serve as the common flat. (A second community formed in an adjoining stairwell; their ground floor common flats adjoin, and can be opened up to form one space.)27 By 1993, there were 26 op-cohousing schemes in Denmark,28 and 113 by 2000, with 55 schemes completed in the 4 years from 1997 to 2000. Communities have an average of 18 dwellings each, and 60% of schemes consist of between 11 and 20 dwellings. The largest schemes (45 dwellings) are smaller than their Dutch counterparts which can be up to twice that size.29 Early on, communities took four to six years to establish themselves in each country, but the process is now typically only two to three years. Tables 3 below provide a sample of op-cohousing schemes in Odense in Denmark which have been well documented.30
Table 3: Size and Demographics of Three Cohousing Schemes for Older People in Odense in Denmark

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Dwellings</th>
<th>Singles</th>
<th>Couples</th>
<th>Total Residents</th>
<th>Female/Male Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Optimisterne Fællesbo</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hammeren</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Det Kreativ Seniorbo</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.25 → 1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Viby</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
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In this sample, the age range was 50 to 82, with the average 68, and was almost the same for men and women.

3. Two Cohousing Schemes for Older People: de Vonk and Det Kreativ Seniorbo

(i) de Vonk
Nimjegen, The Netherlands

“Freedom and privacy are very important to us”

De Vonk lies in a built-up area of Nijmegen, a city near the German border. De Vonk occupies a site vacated by a former school, between a Roman Catholic Church (which some residents attend) and a former monastery (in the process of conversion to housing and artists’ studios). Behind De Vonk is a cemetery! There is a bus stop opposite and a small group of shops, including a pharmacy, around the corner.

A community housing group in Nijmegen initiated the process in the late 1980s, generating interest and educating older people about cohousing. Gradually a group of potential residents formed - all were from Nijmegen or had friends or relatives in town. They formed sub-groups: a building sub-group (including a member from the local council); an ‘introductions’ group; a furniture and fit-out group; and a social activities group. Everyone took some part in the groups. In the planning stage several people dropped out: one person had contrary expectations about what de Vonk would be; some people stayed for one or two years but could not hang on or did not get along with the others. Those who stayed the distance - the development process took six years - “really wanted to be here”. There were hurdles along the way. Building companies in the non-profit housing sector are (or were then) allocated to particular areas and the local council would select the construction company. The group found the company the Council appointed frustrating to deal with, but a compromise was struck: the local council would choose the architect and the residents were allowed to choose the builder - they
selected a company from Amsterdam who specialised in this kind of social housing, and this proved a successful collaboration.

In April 1994, they moved in and one year later everyone was still there. They have a waiting list and five people on this list regularly visit de Vonk, attend meetings and join in activities. The offer of a vacancy will be on a ‘first come, first served’ basis, but the residents control nomination to the list - all applicants are ‘on trial’ for the first few months. (Not all op-cohousing communities exercise this degree of control.) The community holds monthly meetings which everyone is obliged to attend, but this is the only such obligation. There is morning coffee daily in the common space for those who want. Originally it was thought desirable that everyone eat together on a regular basis, but there were disputes and the policy was soon abandoned. Once or twice a month, however, everyone (or almost everyone) gets together for a meal, or to celebrate an event such as a birthday (or, shortly following my visit, the first anniversary of de Vonk!). One eating group of about 15 people have a meal in the common space about once a month, and smaller groups eat in each other’s flats. Different people go on outings together and in general “appreciate the social contact” and the possibility of “help or assistance” in time of need, but they remain keen to preserve their autonomy. Reactions of others to de Vonk have varied: some people have remarked that if you are “still man and wife” why move here? On the other hand, “our children like the fact we are here.”

De Vonk consists of a ‘Street block’ of 9 flats and a ‘Garden block’ of 18 flats, and one flat (with most of its walls removed) in the latter block is given over as the common flat. The Garden block forms an oblique angle with the Street block that improves its orientation and outlook over the garden and produces a wedge of space between the two blocks which accommodates the vertical circulation (lift and stairs). The common flat, with everyone’s letterboxes, is at ground level, adjacent to this wedge and so, coming or going, all residents pass by the common space. Cars are excluded from the site: right-angle parking in a bay on the street edge is provided for residents.

Figure 3: de Vonk
Clockwise from top left: view of Street block (with verandah edge of Garden block visible); view of Garden block from rear of the site; timber verandah on 1st Floor (note bench seat beside entry to flat); view of Garden block (Common flat at the end of the Ground Floor).

The flats are relatively spacious, approximately 11.5m x 6.5m, and this allows for two bedrooms for a couple, or a spare room, study or larger living space, and households have taken advantage of each of these possibilities. Because of the consultation process almost every flat is different, sometimes in relatively subtle ways. The common space is 'funded' by households donating a few square metres of their individual 'allocation', and the scheme as a whole is organised such that if the cohousing arrangement were to fold it would be a simple matter to convert the common space into an ordinary flat and de Vonk revert to conventional social housing.

A generously proportioned and protective timber verandah structure ties the three levels of de Vonk together, and is so designed that it provides a visual connection between the upper levels and the verandah edge at ground level. In Housing as if People Mattered, Clare Cooper-Marcus and Wendy Sarkissian correctly point out that verandah (or balcony) access to flats should be treated with caution. Their design guidelines were formulated largely in response to the social failures of Modernist strategies for public space beyond the dwelling. Balcony access, which is cheap, was often favoured, but it often led to a loss of privacy and security for residents. This made a sense of community harder to achieve (although it was sometimes naively assumed the opposite would occur with such access). In an intentional community, however, where everyone knows their neighbours and is in some measure committed to their well being, verandah access is a useful, gentle device to foster and express those relationships. De Vonk's timber verandahs are not gun barrel straight but make a slight outward 'V' in plan, visually reducing their length and creating a stepped front to each flat. This allows for a small bench at sitting height to be tucked out of the way beside the door to each flat. The bench provides a drop-off spot or a place to display a potted plant; it is a simple device for signalling and assisting neighbourliness. The windows into the kitchens, bedrooms or studies which front these verandahs can afford to have conventional, ‘friendly’ sill heights and so overlook these access spaces, which then contributes to a sense of security.

![Figure 4: Variations in Unit Plans in de Vonk](image)

The unit on the left is occupied by a couple, the unit on the right by a single woman - the oldest member of the community. Note the Bathroom in the latter plan has 3 entries; the former only one. (My field notes also record, inscrutably now, that the wall between Bath/Laundry and Dining/Living in the former was intended as only a “temporary enclosure” - more evidence of user influences on design!) The view (right) is of the single woman’s bedroom.

The lineage of De Vonk is Modernist; Det Kreativ Seniorbo below, on the other hand, exemplifies Danish neo-vernacular ‘low/dense’ housing, which is largely a reaction to Modernism.
In the late 1980s, a social worker in Odense, Linda Høegmark, who was responsible for the allocation of social housing to older people, found that many of them were forced to wait until they “lacked the energy” to move. Influenced by the Copenhagen experience above, Høegmark organised study groups at the local Workers’ Educational Association to interest and inform older people about cohousing. One group, which became *Det Kreative Seniorbo* (DKS), formed around a club of stone polishers and, as their name implies, they are active in (this and other) creative hobbies (weaving, sculpture, painting, carpentry). Overall it took three years for three schemes to be realised (with some interesting social differences between them), though once the list of prospective residents for DKS was finalised it was only 18 months to occupation. Even so, as they emphasise, the fact that the process took time was “good, because people got to know one another and sorted out what they wanted”.

The rules of DKS include: minimum entry age of 55 (several communities also have a maximum entry age of 65 or so); no children intending to live with you; and people must be able to look after themselves. Anyone on the social housing provider’s waiting list can apply to DKS and people are accepted on a ‘first come, first served’ basis, but the residents ensure that all applicants understand the ethos of DKS. DKS is a co-ownership scheme with residents contributing about one quarter of the building cost. The Bank which financed the scheme donated 100, 000 DKR (about A$23, 000) for furnishing the common room; the builder donated furniture for the outdoor common space.

Thursday afternoon is “home afternoon”, when people try to be there, and if so have coffee together - outside the common room in summer, inside in winter. (Originally, they had lunch daily in the common room, but interest fell away.) There are monthly meetings, preceded by a meal in the common room and “everyone comes”. They go for excursions in the summer, such as bus trips, and “everyone goes”. (In the planning stage, they went on a bus trip to Germany together.) Three residents had left in 2.5 years. Ages range from 56 to 76 years. Everyone is retired, although some still do voluntary work. At Christmas, most residents return to their families (most of whom live in Odense) but most residents then return for a New Year’s Eve party “for ourselves”. Celebrations in the common room can be large, for example, a birthday with family and friends has run to 45 people.
Figure 6: Entry to Det Kreativ Seniorbo
Pedestrian path or ‘street’ leading to the common room with its glazed pyramid cap protruding above the ridge lines of the tiled gable roofs of the townhouses.

Site Plan (opposite) ***
P - Car parking; Fællessrum - Common Room, with Guest Flat attached (to the right); skur - shed.

DKS is organised around a short L-shaped pedestrian street with the common room at the crook of this elbow of pedestrian space. The common room visually terminates the approach from the road, its glazed front protruding into the pedestrian street to ensure its prominence in the public space. The increase in height and change in shape, material and colour of the common room roof - with its little glazed cap, a beacon at night - completes the symbolic declaration of the importance and centrality of this space in the life of the community. The common room consists of a kitchen and dining area, with workbenches and storage cupboards for their craft pursuits, organised in bays along the rear edges of the main space. A laundry and guest room, the latter with a separate entrance, are attached. The guest room is frequently used in summer, at Christmas and at Easter. Grand-children often visit and are welcome, but it is “good to have the guest room [for them] - that way they don’t get under your feet and you don’t have to put everything out of their reach”.

The individual dwellings are townhouses or row houses and, because of the generous provision of common space, they are relatively small (without, however, being pokey). Each house has an attractive private rear verandah or courtyard and individual garden sheds are grouped at the edges of these outdoor spaces, improving their privacy. About half the residents ride bicycles which they store either in their own sheds or in the common shed at the end of the pedestrian street. A bus to the centre of Odense passes DKS and is wheelchair accessible. Where de Vonk is both a minimalist model of shared (indoor) space - less than 4% of the scheme - and this space is discrete, DKS devotes 15% to common space and gives it a prominence to match. The idea of an intentional neighbourhood is made visible in DKS.37
Consultation with users, especially when users are empowered, does constrain an architect’s freedom, often in ways some architects have not welcomed. So it is important to note that the kind of understanding - both of individual preferences and the social fabric generally that buildings support, and which only consultation can provide - also opens up possibilities in design. There are several features of DKS which are near counter-intuitive in this regard, and I would be surprised if many architects would have even countenanced them but for the consultation process which generated or nurtured them. The first feature is a common space that is part quasi-industrial workshop, part dining room and socialising space - noisy stone polishing equipment, for example, is close by, and in full view of, the dining tables. More surprising still, is the unusual move of wrapping four of the dwellings around the rear of the common room. This move, apparently suggested by one of the cohousers, puts the workshop close by and under the same roof as these four households, and has the unintended benefit of improving the outlook of the latter across the rear garden and contributes to the sense of spaciousness of the scheme as a whole. But it leaves these four households with front doors which can only be reached through the common room. A fifth household, which abuts the common room, also has its front door - unnecessarily and less conveniently one would have imagined - off this space! This arrangement has not given rise, however, to complaints about loss of privacy, or

Figure 7: Det Kreativ Seniorbo
Clockwise from above: ‘Home afternoon’ coffee, with the common House in the background; view from common room of the coffee drinkers; Entry to dwelling in a corner of common room; and close-up of the work bench to the left of this Entry.
confusion among visitors. One final example: when the cohousers discovered their architect intended a sky-lit, double height space for the relatively small combined kitchen/dining/living rooms in their houses, they requested what Danes call a ‘hempse’ over the kitchen. A hempse (literally, shelf) is a small mezzanine, typically used for storage or sleeping. So now each house has a hempse, reached by a ship’s ladder of a stair. It took six months to convince the local council that such a space could be sensibly used by older people - if they were no longer able-bodied, the cohousers protested, they would recruit someone who was to climb the stair for them, or they would only allow such a person to camp up there!

Figure 8: Det Kreativ Seniorbo
Views of rear gardens.

“We think we have a better life and make fewer demands on social security…. We will never be lonely here. Of course, it’s not for everyone. Friends have said: “You are crazy!’ …For us it’s a release from our children’s concerns.”

- Couple in Det Kreative Seniorbo.

4. Concluding remarks: prospects & a cautionary note

Is cohousing for older people a prospect in Australia? One would think so, but as the Dutch and Danish experience indicate, under much more favourable social and historical conditions, the process is likely to be slow, and require (even more) support. However, in her splendid book, Shelter from the Storm, Siobhán McHugh describes the creation of a community housing scheme for older Vietnamese in the Sydney suburb of Fairfield, which bears some striking similarities to the Odense op-cohousing experience.

The Fairfield scheme began with an initiative of an ethnic health worker in Fairfield Community Health Centre, Anh Tran, who noticed how several older Vietnamese people living with their families were in conflict with them; they were also often lonely or isolated and not in good health. These people were the parents of the “boat people”, the wave of refugees who came to Australia soon after the Vietnam war ended, and they had come as sponsored migrants under the later reunion programs. Anh Tran formed a group of these older Vietnamese to investigate re-housing options, from which process the Van Lang Housing Co-operative emerged. The Co-operative consisted of “seventeen Vietnamese men and women, most of them in their fifties and sixties”. There were “ten family units, two of them with single adult children attached - siblings of the refugees”. The hard work then began: “establishing the co-op on paper was one thing, but seeing it turn into a physical reality [in 1993]” took “four years of commitment”. Each of the ten family units has its own dwelling, and whilst the residents “grow their own herbs and foodstuffs on their individual plots” in communal grounds, they have no internal common space, unlike their European near-counterparts. (Thus, although it may well be what they would have preferred, the residents are nonetheless obliged to hold their co-op meetings, for example, in one of the units.) By 1997, no-one had left Van Lang (one person had died), and 90% of residents reported being “happy” or “very happy”.

13
I conclude with a note of caution, drawing on a recent large postal survey of older people living in cohousing in Denmark, which has produced some *prima facie* surprising results concerning their well-being when compared with a sample drawn from a database on older people in the general population. (About three quarters of the respondents lived in op-cohousing, the remainder lived in traditional cohousing.) Firstly, what was not surprising was that older people in cohousing had both significantly more contact with neighbours and more friends where they live than older people not in cohousing. They also participated more in activities in the wider community and did, or had done, more voluntary work in the community. Single people were asked whether or not they had someone nearby they could confide in about personal problems, and both forms of cohousing showed fewer people without such a confidant (Table 4).

Table 4: Single Older People *Without a Confidant Nearby*\(^\text{43}\)  
(Numbers in brackets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional cohousing</th>
<th>Cohousing for older people</th>
<th>Ordinary housing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>4%* (77)</td>
<td>6%*** (253)</td>
<td>11% (726)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>0%* (11)</td>
<td>17% (53)</td>
<td>27% (305)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(*P < 0.05 \quad **P < 0.01 \quad ***P < 0.001\)

Lastly, as we have seen, one of the fundamental tenets of cohousing - that of offering temporary support or assistance in times of sudden illness as a reliable friend or helpful neighbour would do, was evident in interviews conducted in five communities in conjunction with the questionnaire. These communities were selected for their “relatively high levels of joint activities” and the interviews revealed “several examples of quite comprehensive support and care in cases of serious illness”, presumably a product of their deepening social bonds.\(^\text{44}\)

The *prima facie* surprising results, however, were that a higher proportion of people in op-cohousing reported “often” or “now and then” being lonely (see Table 5), feeling depressed, worried or nervous compared with older people in ordinary housing. In general, these effects was reduced for older people in traditional cohousing.\(^\text{45}\)

Table 5: Older People who “Often” or “Now and Then” Feel Lonely\(^\text{46}\)  
(Numbers in brackets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional cohousing</th>
<th>Cohousing for older people</th>
<th>Ordinary housing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women, living alone</td>
<td>35% (72)</td>
<td>34%* (218)</td>
<td>27% (727)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women, living with spouse</td>
<td>7% (55)</td>
<td>12% (164)</td>
<td>9% (984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men, living alone</td>
<td>30% (10)</td>
<td>38% (48)</td>
<td>33% (305)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men, living with spouse</td>
<td>5% (79)</td>
<td>11%*** (172)</td>
<td>4% (1176)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(*P < 0.05 \quad **P < 0.01 \quad ***P < 0.001\)

It is difficult to know exactly what firm conclusions to draw from this data, however, apart from the important and salutary reminder that cohousing will clearly not prevent loneliness, eradicate worry or cure depression or nervousness. It may be that in relation to loneliness, for example, people with higher demands for companionship or who are even sometimes lonely have been drawn to cohousing to satisfy a need or improve their lot. As the authors point out, the study is not diachronic, that is, we do not know what were the mental states of cohousers before moving to cohousing (or before
reaching the relevant age in traditional cohousing?) and so we simply do not know what effect living in cohousing has had on them.47

One study which does tackle a question of this kind is Graham Meltzer’s recent doctoral study of North American cohousing. Meltzer tracked the (self-reported) changes in material consumption, environmental practice and behaviour of people moving to cohousing (and he inspected and documented each community).48 Meltzer found: modest reductions in the ‘consumption of built space’, even allowing for the additional common facilities in cohousing; a move to more energy efficient housing types; (the expected) reductions in the ownership of consumer durables, such as washing machines, freezers and lawn mowers; as well as improvements in driving moderation, energy conservation, household food procurement, recycling and composting. He also found that the longer people lived in cohousing (reaching a plateau at four years) the more pro-environmental were various of their household practices. Meltzer’s research findings underline the point that cohousing provides people with an arena for more easily and effectively engaging in pro-environmental domestic practices, but he also found its effects go deeper. Cohousers reported learning from and influencing one another in environmental matters; they gained support or reinforcement from their neighbours in doing so and social bonds formed or deepened as a result. In this regard, cohousing has been enabling, even in some measure transformative, for his North American respondents.

It would be a mistake to think of cohousing as an elixir for environmental vandalism, of course, just as it is not a form of therapeutic community for sufferers from depression. Nonetheless, the Danish survey suggests it is an important topic for further research to determine the influence of cohousing on people’s lives. For example, might the communal relations and sharing of space in the immediate neighbourhood of one’s dwelling, even if freely chosen as cohousing envisages, prove to be more stressful than rewarding for a significant number of older people? Are people who are lonely or prone to loneliness likely to improve, or worsen, their lot given the social relations or possibilities cohousing affords?49 (Many people in the Danish survey did not give any communal reasons for moving into op-cohousing, however, but rather were concerned to improve the material conditions of their housing, so the survey may say as much about housing policy and supply.)50

To conclude, cohousing has clearly demonstrated more creative and open possibilities for the provision and design of “appropriate” housing generally.51 And the development of op-cohousing has underlined the inappropriateness of many previous assumptions about housing for older people in its countries of origin and, by implication, presumably elsewhere as well.52 Cohousing for older people should be an option in Australia, but I conclude by reiterating two related points: older people should entertain this option only if, as some of my interviewees stressed, they are attracted by this way of living, not because they (or others) imagine it would be ‘good for’ them. Secondly, cohousing is a bottom-up model. A top-down provision of housing with shared facilities to ‘solve’ perceived problems of insecurity or loneliness amongst older people, or with the thought of economising on service delivery by turning residents into unpaid de facto community workers, might be politically attractive to some policy makers or housing providers, but it would not be cohousing.

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** LVGO, De Aanhouder Wint: 4x het Bouwen aan een Woongemeenschap van Ouderen, 1988, p. 45.


1 ‘Cohousing’ is a term invented by two US architects, Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves, rev. ed. (Ten Speed Press: Berkeley, Calif, 1994), which remains the best introduction to the topic. The original Danish term is ‘bofellesskab’, which roughly translates as ‘living

2 Field Notes 1992 consists of interviews, observation and documentation, based on short stays in three cohousing communities and visits to several others. Field Notes 1995 is based on stays in five communities, ranging from a few days to two and a half weeks, and visits to several others. In 1995, more extensive interviews were conducted, questionnaires administered and children’s drawings collected. With the assistance of LVGO, I visited the five Dutch cohousing schemes for older people listed in Table 2 above and interviewed one person or, more usually, a pair or small group of residents in each community. I visited three schemes in Denmark, including Det Kreativ Seniorbo, where I interviewed a couple. In Utrecht, I visited LVGO and the national cohousing association, Landelijke Vereniging Centraal Wonen (LCVW) - see www.lvcw.nl/indexl.html. Field work was undertaken in late spring to early summer on both occasions.


4 There are cohousing groups in the planning stages in, for example, Maleny, Brisbane, Gold Coast, northern NSW, Canberra and Melbourne. See http://www.cohousing.org.au (accessed June 2004) for an Australian list.

5 When Sættedammen celebrated its 10th anniversary in 1982 they invited people from the other cohousing communities established in those first 10 years and 250 people filled a marquee on their soccer pitch. In 1992, they invited everyone back to Sættedammen who had left in the previous 20 years (Field Notes 1995).

6 McCamant and Durrett, Cohousing, p. 38, list four criteria, but there is no substantive difference from above.

7 As has often been the case with much (imposed, unwanted, unused, debilitating or positively threatening) common space in 20th century housing, especially public housing (mostly under the influence of Modernist ideology and its spatial agendas). See A. Coleman, Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing, rev.

8 Field Notes 1992 & 1995. In CW Deventer, for example, a social housing scheme, 14 households co-operatively own one car.

9 See Meltzer, Cohousing, Ch. 2.

10 Fortunately, cohousing is no Eden, as the following excerpt from a discussion by a (nonetheless enthusiastic) American cohousers indicates: “it is oddly comforting to know that virtually every community has challenges to work out with (choose any two-thirds of this list) pets, kids, getting the work done, costs, noise, personality clashes, values differences, conflict resolution, consensus process, governance, priorities for capital improvements, or a ‘problem’ person who drives a lot of other people nuts.” (see, COHOUSING-L Digest 233 (18 December 1999) at cohousing-l@freedom2.mtn.org). In my experience, cohousers are typically like the above correspondent, reflective and critical. Two interviewees in two communities raised the topic of a (perhaps) avoidable death of one of their members, and each made the point that they thought more could and should have done to help prevent it.

11 For example, Jerngården was established in 1978 and 14 years later 3 households had changed (there are 8 houses in the community); Frughaven was established in 1980 and 15 years later, 10 of the original 12 households remained; 23 years after Sættedammen was built, 30 of the original 55 adults remained (Field Notes 1992 & 1995). Hilversum’s turnover rate was low compared with ordinary housing, see B. Kesler, Centraal Wonen in The Netherlands: A Study of Resident’s Experiences and Social and Spatial Conditions, 1991, p. 497 - English summary provided by LVCW.

12 Holtbjerg, for example, was a small rural boarding school; Jernstoberiet was an iron foundry and Doyle Street a warehouse, see McCamant & Durrett, Cohousing, chs. 8 and 17, respectively. See also Jan Baars & Fleur Thomése, ‘Communes of Elderly People: Between Independence and Colonization’ Journal of Aging Studies 8 (No. 4, 1994): 343. Baars & Thomése provide a useful analysis of the Dutch experience but do not distinguish communes from cohousing, so care is needed in interpreting comparisons between communes and ‘ordinary’ housing. On differences between communes, cohousing and other intentional communities, see Meltzer, Cohousing, ch. 2.

13 Meltzer, Cohousing, p. 117, found in the North American (almost all US) cohousing, 80% had a college degree compared with 30% of the US population; 75% of those in full-time employment were in professional occupations and only 1% were Afro-Americans compared with 18% and 11%, respectively, in the general US population. In The Netherlands, most households are on relatively low incomes, with a high proportion of single people and sole parent families - see B. Kesler, ‘The Communal Garden: An Evaluation of a Dutch Collective Housing Project’ Open House International 17 (No. 2, 1992): 48.

14 Schemes which successfully mix private owners and private renters include Drejerbanken (see McCamant & Durrett, Cohousing, ch. 10, and Holtbjerg (Field notes 1992), and private owners and public renters (Pinakarri).

15 Danish social housing schemes, for example, routinely incorporate common houses, and the planning of the new suburb of Egebierggard in Ballerup in Copenhagen was inspired by cohousing - see McCamant & Durrett, Cohousing, pp. 145-48.


Some op-cohousing communities are or intend to be even more restricted, for example, by ethnicity or gender: see Ambrose, *Co-housing*, p. 13, and the Older Women’s Cohousing Project (London) at [www.cohousing.co.uk/owch.htm](http://www.cohousing.co.uk/owch.htm). Bente Lindstrøm, ‘Housing and Service for the Elderly in Denmark’ *Ageing International* 23 Winter/Spring 1997: 128, says that “some municipalities are playing an active role in the development of new types of housing, often co-housing projects for groups, such as low income elderly, elderly in the countryside, and ethnic elderly.”

Quotes in both case studies are from interviewees.

In 1985, the percentage of older people in The Netherland living in “care-homes” was three times that of the UK and more than twice that of Sweden - see Guus van Egdom, ‘Housing for the Elderly in The Netherlands: A Care Problem’, *Ageing International* 23 (Winter/Spring, 1997): 166.

LVGO pamphlet.

1992 data from Ambrose, *Co-housing*, p. 41; 2001 data supplied by LVGO; Jeroen Singelenberg, in Ambrose, *Co-housing*, p. 43, says, “I would not be surprised, if there were tens of [private op-cohousing schemes]” in The Netherlands.

Baars & Thomése, ‘Communes’, p. 344.

Ibid., p. 352.

Ibid., p. 345.


Ibid., pp. 53-57.

Ambrose, *Etabliring*, p. 98.

Danish Gerontological Institute, [www.geroinst.dk/housing](http://www.geroinst.dk/housing); and Baars & Thomése, ‘Communes’, p. 343.

Ambrose, *Etabliring*.

Ibid., pp. 85 & 98. Female/male ratio change for *Det Kreative Seniorbo*, from *Field Notes 1995*.

*Field Notes 1995*.

Cooper-Marcus & Sarkissian, *Housing*, p. 87.

SBI, *Senior Cohousing*.

*Field Notes 1995*.

SBI, *Senior Cohousing*.

See also W. van Vliet, ‘New Housing for Older People’ *Architecture and Behavior* 9 (No. 4, 1993): 463-74.

In terms of use and meaning, the nearest space in a conventional Australian house to this common space would be a ‘family room’ or ‘games room’, except that such rooms are never ‘front’ spaces.

Siobhán McHugh, *Shelter from the Storm: Bryan Brown, Samoan Chieftains and the Little Matter of a Roof over our Heads* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1999), ch. 17. The instigator of this scheme, Anh Tran, has been “constantly besieged with requests for information from bureaucrats, academics and ethnic organizations, several of whom plan a similar venture” (p. 177).

Ibid., pp. 175-76.
Of these four mental states, loneliness would seem to be the one cohousing would most obviously be expected to ameliorate and, in general, the differences here were less. In relation to feeling often or now and then worried, for example, in op-cohousing 35% of men fell into this category, compared with only 14% in ordinary housing, and 33% of women living with a spouse (41% in traditional cohousing) reported feeling often or now and then depressed, compared with only 20% of women in ordinary housing (though fewer men in traditional cohousing fell into this category), see Gottschalk, *Study of Well Being*, p. 13. The data is not disaggregated in their paper, so we cannot tell what percentage were merely ‘now and then’ as opposed to ‘often’.

For a summary of the findings and an interpretation, see G. Meltzer, ‘Cohousing’.

40% of respondents did not mention communal aspects as reasons for moving to op-cohousing and fewer than half op-cohousers had access to a shared kitchen. Moreover, whilst some schemes that are counted as op-cohousing in Denmark are housing with shared facilities, they do not seem to have (Ambrose, *Co-housing*, pp. 101-102, 111-12) or have not undergone the development process outlined above, that is, a process of self-determination by a community of prospective residents. For example, I visited one housing co-operative near Århus, described as senior cohousing (I do not know if it was part of this study), in which a developer merely formed a reference group which included older people intending to be residents. The scheme had extensive and apparently well used common facilities. My interviewee, a single woman, reported having had “good contact with neighbours” where she previously lived. She knew two others before moving in, but added, “it would be lovely to have friends here” and spoke of the use of the common facilities in the 3rd person. Nonetheless, none of these points apply to *traditional* cohousing, so further research is still needed on this point.

The most recent major housing policy review in Australia, the *National Housing Strategy* of 1992, in its final volume, *Agenda for Action* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1992), underlined the need for “appropriate housing”. Whilst on economic matters or general policy instruments, the *Strategy* was sufficiently sure of its footing to make concrete recommendations, on “appropriateness” it had nothing to say (except in the very briefest, most general and unexceptionable terms). None of the 21 other volumes of the *Strategy* tackle what is “appropriate”, much less appropriate for older people. In this regard, there remains a general assumption that housing is not like, say, unemployment or obesity - *research* is not required. What was needed, apparently, was a ‘National Housing Information Strategy’ [emphasis mine] to inform consumers of their choices, thus implying all the relevant options are available. The Van Lang housing co-operative did not exist at the time, so it would not have formed part of such a menu. Rethinking attitudes to ageing and thus what is “appropriate” in housing requires us to think, amongst other things, about housing types, their design and social implications.

Cohousing exemplifies the unforced sharing of domestic space between households. Sharing domestic space between households is in fact very common in Australia but it is usually a product of contingency and is rarely unforced (and may in part explain the general lack of interest or reservations about sharing domestic space). A
block of flats or townhouse development may share a swimming pool, tennis court or barbecue area, for example, but the prospective residents or owners have not collectively reached the decision to incorporate any such amenity in the scheme. The developer makes a judgement about the market for such a development and the sharing defrays the cost of an amenity (or a necessity) which individual householders could not afford to purchase for themselves. This is true of many other housing types: boarding houses, mobile home parks, caravan parks providing long-stay or permanent residency, retirement villages, nursing homes and sheltered housing. Although sharing under these conditions is a common and in some respects an accepted practice, and may be deliberately sought or preferred by some individuals or households, these conditions lack the characteristics or virtues of cohousing, namely, where community membership and sharing are a matter of either individual choice or democratic decision-making, and self-management. In housing types where the sharing of domestic space is thus not a preference or priority for households, but is nonetheless a fact of life, why would we not look to these characteristics or virtues of cohousing to see how we could improve design and management, and resident satisfaction?