

Jarvis H.

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Towards a deeper understanding of the social architecture of co-housing: evidence from the UK, USA and Australia

Abstract

This paper draws attention to the micro-social practices that self-organising resident groups engage in over the years that it takes to build a co-housing community. This ‘social architecture’ is what distinguishes co-housing from superficially similar shared-space neighbourhoods. Co-housing developments are attracting renewed attention in Anglophone neo-liberal economies against a backdrop of crisis in conventional housing. Discussion draws on the views of co-housing residents from participatory research from the UK, USA and Australia. By engaging with a deeper understanding of group processes, shared visions and interpersonal capabilities – the ‘glue’ binding collaborative community relations, this paper challenges the priority usually given to the material characteristics of home and neighbourhood design.

Key words: co-housing, sharing, capability, solidarity, social architecture

Introduction

The housing crisis that is evident in many parts of the world today is strongly associated with a neo-liberal market model. Moreover, neo-liberal state sponsorship of a dominant system of housing (owner occupation) ripples out in a myriad ways to lock the respective society into a homogenous material cultural landscape. Consequently, debates on ‘housing’ should also highlight the wider implications of inadequate supply and unaffordable demand, to acknowledge implications for social justice, energy resilience and ecological sustainability. This argument is similar to the way that transport scholars have begun to fundamentally critique the dominant system of ‘automobility’ and its negative toll on diverse aspects of life, including friendship, childhood, health, air quality and climate change (Jarvis et al. 2009: 157).

By definition, state investment in one dominant system of housing results in a lack of investment (in ideas as well as funding) in alternative, novel forms of dwelling, as well as the associated lifestyle choices that flow from this as a means to challenge underlying cultures of materialism. Yet, disaffection with dominant material cultural values is witnessed in place-based social movements such as Slow Food, Transition Towns and Voluntary Simplicity. These actively pursue a behavioural transition from material aspirations of ‘having’ (wealth) to post-material

values of 'being' (autonomous), the intention being to preserve intrinsic natural resources and qualities of human flourishing that are exploited in private markets (Hayden 1999: 180; Stevenson 2006). This state of affairs similarly describes conditions in the UK, USA and Australia.

Rather than to reinforce existing debates that highlight the hyper-privatisation of neo-liberal market models, this paper considers the progressive impact that can arise from post-material lifestyle choices when self-organising groups build homes for themselves as a collaborative neighbourhood project. Attention is drawn specifically to co-housing as a living arrangement which represents much more than simply an alternative system of housing. This paper therefore seeks not only to shed light on poorly-understood characteristics of social organisation, but also to strengthen the argument that, if we have any chance of solving the 'housing crisis', we must look beyond an individual viewpoint and a unitary conception of home, household and community. The aim is to expand upon the social architecture, or 'soft infrastructure', that underpins and corresponds with the 'hard infrastructure' that is visible and fixed in the material qualities of home and neighbourhood setting. This social architecture largely functions through invisible affective dimensions (of well-being and motivation), inter-relationships (people and place), thinking, learning, practice and performance. Arguably, co-housing represents a potentially crucial post-material transition in that it represents an integrated setting and system in which to practice the behaviour changes necessary to reduce consumption and wage-based production.

Identifying co-housing on a continuum of shared space and collective practice

Co-housing is an increasingly popular form of 'intentional' community that can be traced in cities, suburbs and rural settlements around the world. It was originally associated with Danish *bofællesskab*- living togetherness, and Swedish *kollektivhus* dating back to the late 1960s. Co-housing fits the profile of an 'intentional' community because the groups involved engage in a common purpose to live together, working to create a lifestyle that reflects shared core values. There has to be an active 'intention' to simultaneously reject the mainstream options and create a better alternative: it is not possible to achieve this degree of coordination and common purpose in conventional neighbourhood situations (Christian 2003: xvi).

A simple classification of the most common forms of shared domestic space highlights a clear distinction between the self-organizing arrangements of co-housing, those indicating involuntary

sharing (boarding/lodging, group quarters and shelters) and those representing commercially managed common-use facilities (Jarvis 2013). To put this into perspective, approximately 50% of Americans live in housing with some form of shared facilities or open space, such as with condominiums where there is private ownership of the dwellings and common ownership of the land (Fromm 1991, 158). What distances US condominiums from US co-housing (even those legally governed by the condominium entity of a Home Owners Association) is the way the former is built with privacy rather than communality in mind (Fromm 1991, 158).

Co-housing in the UK, USA and Australia

The Anglophone neo-liberal context in which co-housing has attracted a new reflects three discrete waves of development. The first wave emulated the original northern European urban ideal, with a view to improving the lives of working parents and their children through more efficient and egalitarian housekeeping (Vestbro and Horelli 2012). While the co-housing moniker was not consciously adopted in the UK, USA or Australia in the 1970s, there was widespread experimentation in communal living at this time, including many small housing co-operatives in the UK. The second wave developed since the 1980s in the USA, largely in ‘cosmopolitan’ metropolitan areas, with a view to recreating ‘neighbourly neighbourhoods’ as a sustainable alternative to low density suburbs. According to the US national network there are six ‘defining’ characteristics of this model of co-housing: participatory process, neighbourhood design, common facilities, resident management, non-hierarchical structure and decision-making, no shared economy (Co-housing USA, 2013). The latter is significant to mainstream popularity where collective self-governance is distanced from any sense that living in co-housing is equivalent to living in a commune. The ‘look and feel’ of this type of co-housing is characterised by the clustering of 10-40 modest homes with a common house in a largely car-free environment, with ‘surplus’ private amenities (such as guest and hobby spaces) ‘stripped out’ and replaced with extensive common facilities and shared outdoor space. Clustering typically follows the principles of social contact design whereby homes are arranged (in a traditional street, horseshoe or courtyard pattern) to create a landscape of naturally occurring encounters and interactions. A third wave (simultaneous with the second), is more typical in Australia in accessible rural areas, as an expression of collaborative community combined with strong environmental conservation and self-reliance, especially with respect to local food production (Williams 2005).

The concept of co-housing remains contested, not least because meanings differ between specialist fields, national planning regimes and different social and cultural settings. It is currently estimated that there are 130 completed projects in the USA (with a similar number of groups ‘getting started’), most of them suburban, transit-oriented and typically associated with places where there is an active post-material low-carbon culture (walking, cycling) and efforts to promote a sense of community (Margolis and Entin 2010). These attributes have led commentators to interpret a reinvention of traditional neighbourhood values and aesthetic. Critical interventions raise doubts that co-housing can ever be genuinely inclusive and low-impact because it outwardly suggests ‘gentrification by another name’ (Chiodelli and Baglione 2013; but see Jarvis and Bonnett 2013). Completed projects in the UK are fewer in number (14, with 45 more at various stages of development and new groups forming at the rate of one per week). A lag in development that corresponds with economic austerity has resulted in a mix of purpose-built and re-purposed development, including experiments with mutual home ownership models intended to make co-housing more accessible to young people living on a low income (UKCN 2013; Chatterton 2013; <http://www.lilac.coop/concept/affordable.html>). In Australia there are 9 completed projects (with 28 proposed or forming) with a mix of schemes that also suggests concern to innovate beyond owner-occupation (Co-housing Australia 2013; <http://murundakacohousing.org.au/>).

When considering the wide variety of co-housing ‘types’ to be found across the UK, USA and Australia, it is important to recognise that the underlying concept is essentially socio-spatial rather than specifying a particular legal and financial model of land purchase or construction. It is possible to deliver co-housing in a number of ways: in the form of a cooperative; through shared ownership; or in conjunction with a not-for-profit housing association. The strangle-hold of owner-occupation in these neo-liberal economies is such that most of the co-housing projects so far have been built by groups that continue to rely on conventional bank lending secured against wage employment. However, this picture masks high levels of unmet demand and post-material aspiration to eschew debt-driven private ownership (Bourne 2010). Since the early 1990s, self-organising groups have faced far greater financial barriers to the development of co-housing projects than similarly motivated intentional communities faced in the 1970s (Metcalf 1984). Maintaining group solidarity and momentum over the 5-7 years it can take to establish a shared vision, develop group processes, access land, secure funding and navigate a hostile building regulatory system, typically results in 70-90% of groups failing to achieve their goal (Buck and Villines 2007). Experience of group failure is militated, to an extent, by the rising number of

professional ‘full service’ co-housing consultants actively educating groups in principles and methods of collaboration (Co-housing USA 2013; www.co-housingpartners.com). This professionalization of group formation and project management is evident in the proliferation of ‘how to’ books and workshops by highly respected activist-practitioners (Fromm 1991; McCamant and Durrett 1994; Christian 2003; Field 2004; Winn 2005; Scotthanson and Scotthanson 2005).

Research design and conceptual framework

The remainder of this paper draws on first hand ethnographic observations; oral histories, conversational interviews and archival data from visits with 15 co-housing communities located in selected regions of the UK, USA and Australia. The data was collected between 2008 and 2012 as part of three inter-related projects. The communities involved are listed by location in anonymised form (as an identifying code), by size and date of origin in Table 1. Interviews and conversations have been recorded and disseminated on the basis of informed consent. Interview subjects are also referred to by pseudonym to preserve anonymity. Ethnographic data is analysed thematically to illustrate commonly identified characteristics of micro-social organising. A number of the listed communities fit the characteristics of ‘second wave’ co-housing; others in the UK have more recently embraced the cohousing ideology; while some in Australia do not so easily fit the ‘wave’ typology. By exploring the inner-workings of communities from three ‘similar yet distinct’ neoliberal economies, the aim is to generate a fuller, deeper account of the mixed realities of micro-social organising. This methodology contrasts with comparative studies which seek to highlight or differentiate the strengths and limitations of one national regime relative to another. Consequently, it was never the intention to directly compare intentional communities in Australia, say, with the UK and USA.

A key aim of the analysis is to challenge the priority usually given to the material characteristics of home and neighbourhood design by taking account of multiple meanings and practices of collaboration. A ‘capabilities approach’, first developed by Martha Nassbaum and Amartya Sen in the 1980s, is adapted from recent applications in progressive planning. For example, in a study of age-friendly cities, Booth and Gilroy (1994) suggest a series of five domains that intersect the social and material landscape, using these to highlight the plurality of life activities and the support mechanisms needed to fulfil them:

- (i) home and neighbourhood
- (ii) making ends meet

- (iii) sources of support
- (iv) having a say
- (v) enjoyment (including meaning and spiritual fulfilment).

In a study focussing on informal settlement and poor populations, Speak (2012: 350) suggests a modified ‘four in one’ approach to show that domains of life activity function within the setting and system of home and neighbourhood. This also resonates with existing analysis of community empowerment in co-housing in which Meltzer (2005: 154-5) identifies four discrete circuits of knowledge and learning:

- (i) circumstance (setting, systems)
- (ii) interaction (influence, exchange)
- (iii) relationship (sharing, support)
- (iv) engagement (belonging, efficacy)

The following analysis further refines a ‘four in one’ to emphasise the affective dimensions of group processes that open up spaces of learning, feeling, being and doing (Jarvis 2011). The four domains of ‘intentions’, ‘inter-personal relationships’, ‘shared governance’, and ‘collective work’ are situated in relation to their integration and coordination (in time and space) in the setting and system of home and neighbourhood.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The setting and systems of co-housing

Ahrentzen (1996) identifies three types of sharing as being co-constitutive to collaborative neighbourhood arrangements. These provide a useful frame of reference for ‘mining’ the data for evidence of myriad sharing practices, teasing out the socio-spatial dynamics involved. The first type, *co-presence*, is evident in the way that shared physical spaces (within common buildings, between private dwellings and in group activities further afield) make it possible for neighbours to swap and share a whole variety of goods and knowledge and to establish the enduring social relations necessary to lubricate this process. While proximity is necessary for residents to practice sharing, it is not sufficient as a means for mutual support to flourish. A strong case is made against belief in the possibility of engineering ‘mutuality by design’ by observing different degrees of mutuality in communities with ostensibly similar material arrangements. As Nussbaum (2003: 53) observes, social interactions within any family, community or society are asymmetrically dependent, not least because ‘people begin their life as helpless infants’ and over the life-course ‘encounter periods of extreme dependency’ which may put them in need of care by others. This

asymmetry is evident in the data not only between projects but also with respect to changes that occur in response to periods of crisis. Established residents of YORKS 1 cite examples of marital breakdown, mental illness and an ageing membership as reasons why the delicate balance of collaboration is not always mutual or harmonious. Yet over four decades this community has practiced methods of open dialogue and conflict resolution that provide both the social skills (key individuals who are known to be effective communicators) and the social space (common meals and workshops) in which to explore solutions.

This links to the second type of sharing, *affiliation*, which is evident in the way each group has collectively arrived at a core set of values, or mission statement, that represents a tacit if not explicit ethic of care. Again, the data reveals a deep expression of affiliation in some but not all of the communities. Variations are explained by a third type of sharing, *endeavour* which is arguably the most crucial (but least understood) manifestation of the way co-presence and affiliation are performed and experienced. The data reveals repeated reference to the way mundane tasks (cooking, gardening, making and mending) are transformed by the sociality of work as a ritual that is performed and endowed with a sense of occasion: swapping stories while working together in teams at the weekends; basking in the glow of achievement at producing a meal for the whole group.

Crucially, all three types of sharing are evidently intertwined and co-constitutive in a process of evolution; the landscape of proximity and social mechanisms for reciprocity and exchange are similarly subject not only to personal growth but also highly reflexive deliberations and changing group dynamics. This is illustrated in the case of OR1 where Mr F claims that it is possible to experiment with energy reduction strategies in co-housing that would fail in a conventional street setting. He explains that the collective design and implementation process engages all the residents who would be living in this environment in conscious dialogue and high levels of trust:

Amongst our duplexes we have a shared set of utilities; there's the single heat system, a single domestic hot water system, a single ventilation system, and that was an intentional decision; it makes splitting our electricity bills very approximate, but it means that we have less hardware, less impact on the earth and more efficiency.

He goes on to explain that priorities change over time whereby 'there is a lot more discussion now about shared gardening, driven by the high cost of oil and food prices' and this impacts both on levels of consensus (and conflict) over shared values and specific arrangements, such as splitting electricity bills in ways that may seem unfair to one party. While co-housing communities appear to have the social capacity, through dynamic and conscientious participatory

governance, to keep practising degrees of collaboration that would be impossible in a conventional neighbourhood, the depth of democracy depends on four overlapping domains of social architecture.

Intentions and community 'glue'

Crucial to whether a particular co-housing community remains inclusive, autonomous and innovative is the notion of shared intentions functioning as the 'glue' that binds and endows meaning to community relations. All of the shared activities, rituals and socialising associated with co-housing, including taking turns to prepare group meals; contributing to the working-groups tasked with managing the finances, maintaining common property, facilitating group meetings, and hosting visitors who want to learn from the project- all flow from a core sense of purpose and meaning that is contingent upon habituated practice. While the content and format vary, all 15 of the co-housing groups observed have produced a statement that serves to keep them 'oriented' toward a shared vision. Some groups begin their common meetings by reading (or singing) a statement of what their community is about: this helps them to stay focussed and to hold each other to account.

While it is difficult to generalise about intentions and core values, a common narrative is the idea of the 'examined life', expressed in terms of 'a meaningful life, to live responsibly....to be closely involved in other people's lives' (Mr L, OR2), and 'to reduce our environmental footprint' (Mr J, TAS2). Significantly, well established communities recognise that to have meaning (beyond a recruitment strategy) visions and values have to be enacted or 'performed' in collaboration with others. This resonates with the way Nussbaum (2003) emphasises an Aristotelian 'virtue ethics' to explain 'capability as empowerment'. Accordingly, the virtuous character does not thrive on individual acts of conformity to moral rules but rather draws inspiration from belonging to a larger community. The analysis reveals repeated stories of personal growth that derives from a 'meeting of minds' in communal encounter, described by one interviewee as 'an orientation of being open-hearted...(living) a meaningful life with people who care' (Ms C. QLD 1). The suggested significance of intentionality cannot be over-stated.

At the same time, there is also evidence that expectations of intentionality can exceed the way shared values are held and enacted in practice. Differences in the way group values are interpreted in private can harbour conflict to the extent that the group experiences a form of arrested development (Jarvis 2011). There are examples of individuals socially withdrawing and

of others leaving permanently. Mr K (OR 1) describes a period of crisis in his marriage, several years after he and his wife moved into the co-housing community they helped to develop. This coincided with diverging orientations whereby his wife became increasingly disappointed that the group was not more communal: she outgrew the modest intentions of the group. In this way, intentions and values remain dynamic not only through resident turnover, but also by the way they are shaped by asymmetric interpersonal relations.

Interpersonal relations: Sources of support

The sources of support most frequently associated with the setting and system of co-housing are those of care-giving and care-receiving. Significant but less tangible support also flows through circuits of learning, peer influence and affective awareness of a wider ethic of care (for non-human and wider social and political issues). Sharing a vision involves highly reflexive deliberations and a manner of conversing that not only empowers individuals who might otherwise be excluded, but also entails a creative process (Burr and Larsen 2010). For instance, Richard Sennett (2012) differentiates between dialectic and dialogic conversations. While dialectic conversations tend to exchange oppositional views, associated with hierarchical socio-spatial relations, in dialogic conversation ‘misunderstandings and cross-purposes come into play; doubts are put on the table; people then have to listen harder to one another’ (Sennett 2012: 19). Participant observations indicate that while the majority of the co-housing groups espouse respectful dialogue and conscientious listening, competencies typically remain asymmetric. As a respondent at QLD1 observes:

‘it’s not enough for people to live together to make the transition to low carbon lifestyle unless they are seeking a purpose.....when (a co-housing group) loses that sense of purpose that they began with, there’s this lazy tendency for them to head back to sort of suburban urbanism, or rural suburbia. Some intentional communities lose that intentionality, that goal and drive to do things differently’.

Essentially this social architecture relies on ‘highly evolved’ people skills that are taught and valued but not always fully developed in the co-housing communities observed. This relates directly to the domain of engagement in collective governance, below, but it also indicates that interpersonal relationships that are relied upon to expand the possibilities of sharing might also at times become ‘toxic’ and thus undermine a sense of community and purpose. Indeed, interview participants repeatedly refer to the ‘invisible labour’ of co-housing as being ‘like a marriage’.

Engagement (having a say) within and beyond the co-housing community

In existing research there are numerous ways of distinguishing ‘types’ of co-housing such as by wave of development (Williams 2005), or by the location (urban, suburban, rural) or legal structure. By exposing the less tangible elements of social architecture, including the ‘invisible labour’ of affective interpersonal relations, this paper suggests a more subtle source of identity and purpose that emanates from stories of how particular groups got started. A broad distinction can be made, for instance, between those that are ‘self created’ (a core group of friends), inspired by a social movement (building on previous experience of ‘living together’ in a festival or political campaign), and those that are assisted to grow and develop with the support of professionals and third sector organisations. Across the sample there is considerable evidence of professional assistance and the power of expert influence. This can improve the quality of interpersonal relations and perceptions of inclusive governance (through training in non-violent communication and, where necessary, mediation or conflict resolution). But it can also create enduring power asymmetries, whether these are real or perceived. In three groups (MELB1, SYD1, and WA3) one or more founding member played an instrumental role in the acquisition of land/property and project management. In others, passive engagement in collective decision-making appears to reflect subtle but significant differences in feelings of attachment and belonging. Engagement is rooted in a sense of belonging and this in turn shapes the way members feel they have a voice and respect in their community. In practice the evidence reveals differential influence such as between founding members and newcomers, owners and renters, those making their living in a business or enterprise linked to co-housing, and those whose identity is largely constructed in paid occupations elsewhere.

In the early stages of group development a culture of openness appears to be crucial to enable participants to transcend their own prejudices, habits and narrow interests. This is not simply a matter of conducting regular meetings in a respectful manner but instead about experimentation-allowing plans to change in unexpected ways. Balancing a creative culture of openness with a drive to keep the group moving ‘forward’ appears to be a major cause of conflict and unravelling in the early stages of community development. For example, the group processes elaborated for QLD1 have been shaped ‘by the experience...of (the core group) living in shared housing situations’ where consensus decision-making is an ‘education process’ as much as it is a framework of governance. It is in order to combine experimentation with meeting objectives that some co-housing communities adopt dynamic governance (developed as ‘sociocracy’ in the Netherlands in the 1980s) as an alternative to consensus. In sociocracy, the goal is ‘a harmonious

organisation (of group dynamics) based on; equality of voice, transparency, and effectiveness' (Christian 2003: 7; Buck and Villines 2007). Whatever the basis for collective decision-making, all of the 'after-hours stuff' that comprise and maintain self-governance also operates in tension with the demands and absence (hollowing out) of long hours spent away from home and community engaged in paid employment. This intersects with the final domain of livelihood which is revealed from the analysis to be the least well developed co-housing domain.

Livelihood (Making ends meet) and movements toward solidarity economies

Co-housing advocates typically credit the absence of a shared economy or income pooling as a distinction that promotes neighbourliness without the compulsory income pooling associated with a commune. Yet, in practice, this absence is less clear-cut. A number of the interviewees acknowledged the irony that while their intention was to consciously pursue a post-material work/life balance (to reduce working-time, avoid commuting, purchase fewer time-saving products and services), they remained locked-into full-time employment, with all the external travel commitments this entails, to service mortgage debts on their own home and for the common house. Commitment to wage labour impacted on their participation in community life. Again, state sponsorship of a dominant capital system stifles the creation of novel alternatives—even in autonomous spaces that have been imagined for this purpose.

On closer analysis, the ethnographies do reveal evidence of multiple and diverse non-capital economies. None of the co-housing communities practice any form of income pooling but several utilise informal systems of local economic trading (exchanging an hour of carpentry for a box of vegetables, for example), to redistribute capabilities and wealth to an extent and to manage unpaid social reproduction work more collectively. On the one hand, Barbara (WA3) observes that 'lots of people are drawn to co-housing because, at its best, it's a beautiful blend of community and capitalism- it's not a commune'. On the other hand, she admits that participating in co-housing requires that you 'not only blend your physical spaces but also your money' in the sense of shared risk and investment in pooled resources as well as the foregone income for the expected regular contribution of unpaid work to maintain the community. Similarly, most of the communities practice some degree of self-provisioning, whether through direct food production (vegetables), the efficiencies of shared meals (time-saved, less food waste, less energy used to cook and wash up collectively), purchasing food wholesale as a co-operative, or exchanging goods and services on a non-monetary basis.

Evidence for communities formed since 2008 suggests that lifestyle choices for young people living on a low income are challenging key principles of second-wave (US) co-housing. Both QLD1 and SOUTH1 have a 'business arm' that functions in parallel to the co-housing to cultivate a measure of income-generating activity. This model resembles a mixed-use hamlet-but on a scale too small to be traditionally self-reliant. Community space is used for fund-raising events (meditation weekends, conferences and workshops, weddings and 'encounter' holidays for paying guests). Those who contribute to business activities typically record the hours they work for the 'business' against their expected contribution to the community; some draw a community wage from these not-for-profit ventures. These examples suggest an emerging 'solidarity economy' within co-housing whereby members in the future might choose to reduce or eliminate conventional wage employment as a strategy of work/life reconciliation (Rintjas 2003).

Concluding remarks: new developments in co-housing research

Until recently, co-housing research tended to focus primarily either on design characteristics which promote social interaction (Torres-Antonini 2001; Williams 2005), evidence of sustainable environmental practices (Crabtree 2006), or the political economy of shared property (Sargisson 2010). On the one hand this academic interest has raised awareness of the role co-housing might play in delivering sustainable housing and low carbon lifestyles. On the other hand, a gap remains in our understanding of the social phenomena of mutuality and collaboration in practice (but see Meltzer 2000; Renz 2006; Korpela 2012).

Arguably, we are entering a new phase of co-housing research and development. This emerging agenda, which is not yet reflected in the published literature, suggests a plurality of interest across different scales of actor-networks loosely connecting individuals, friendship-networks, social movements, community empowerment networks (such as cooperative associations) and umbrella co-housing third sector organisations (notably UK Co-housing Network; Co-housing USA and Co-housing Australia). Moreover, co-housing is attracting considerable political interest as a niche source of social and engineering experimentation. Although unlikely to contribute a significant source of new home construction, co-housing is the fastest growing type of intentional community worldwide (Williams 2008). Moreover, the UK National Association of Estate Agents estimates a 25% increase in people expressing a desire to live in some form of co-housing community arrangement (BBC 2013).

This paper tackles the need to better understand the social and cultural barriers to communality. It does so by introducing co-housing as a living arrangement which represents more than simply an alternative system of housing: the social dimensions reveal a setting and system that cultivates an intentional, negotiated ethos of sharing. The more we understand the social mechanics of sharing in an intentional setting such as this, the better informed we will be to overcome the wider challenges in urban planning and practice. The shared vision and values that motivate and propel self-organising projects are largely social and by nature hidden from any simple reading of the material landscape. This is parallels have been drawn here between the ‘soft infrastructure’ (social architecture), of mutuality and sharing, and the ‘hard infrastructure’ that is visible and fixed in the material qualities of home and neighbourhood. Doing so highlights the significance of what we are missing from a partial picture that denies the invisible labour and lived experience that girds the affective interpersonal relations of mutuality and sharing. Identifying and differentiating co-housing on a ‘privacy to sharing’ continuum also usefully highlights the intangible characteristics that distinguish co-housing residents from those inhabiting ‘master planned’ neo-traditional neighbourhoods (such as the ‘gated’ common interest community).

Building on feminist theory, progressive planning and participatory practice, a conceptual framework is advanced that deconstructs this social architecture to examine four key capability domains. The suggestion is that each capability domain intersects with the other in habituated practice. For instance, engagement in shared work (meals, maintenance) and participatory practices of self-governance rely upon feelings of belonging and a common sense of purpose. While we must not romanticise autonomy and empowerment (recognising conflict, as well as cooperation), it is the *intention of sharing* and conscious dialogues of learning in co-housing that distinguishes this collaborative living arrangement from conventional neighbourhoods. The findings indicate that while the social architecture of co-housing satisfies popular disaffection with dominant material cultural values, it fails to radically challenge dominant capital systems of wage employment and mortgage debt. At the same time, recognising that innovation is embedded in the dynamic social practice of interaction and engagement, arguably the potential exists for co-housing communities to evolve in the future to better support alternative solidarity economies.

Table 1: Data Collection and Research Methods

Ethnographic data comprising 38 digitally recorded interviews (with individuals, couples and small groups) for 15 established co-housing community projects visited and studied between 2008 and 2013. In many cases contact/communication remains on-going via on-line blogs.

The communities are located and coded as follows:

UK: North and South of England

YORKS 1 (occupied since 1979) 12 unit co-housing

YORKS 2 (occupied since 1997) 4 unit cooperative

SOUTH 1 (occupied since 2008) 14 unit co-housing

In addition, for context, field notes from participation in workshops and promotion events mostly organised by ‘umbrella’ co-housing organisations, local authorities, third sector organisations, and regional activist groups.

Australia: Tasmania (TAS), Victoria (VIC for rural; MELB for Melbourne), Queensland (QLD), SYD for Sydney metropolitan area.

TAS 1 (occupied since 2000) 11 unit co-housing

TAS 2 (occupied since 2001) 15 unit co-housing

MELB 1 (occupied since 1993) 30 unit developer-facilitated co-housing

MELB 2 (still forming when observed; occupied in 2012)

NSW 4¹ (occupied since 1996) 13 unit ‘community trust’ co-housing

QLD 1 (occupied since 2008) 8 unit community land trust co-housing

SYD 1 (still forming when observed; occupied in 2012) 15 unit developer-facilitated co-housing

USA: Washington (WA for Seattle area) and Oregon (OR for Portland area)

WA 1 (occupied since 1992) 30 unit co-housing

WA 2 (occupied since 1994) 23 unit co-housing

WA 3 (occupied since 2000) 23 unit co-housing

OR 1 (occupied since 2002) 26 unit co-housing

OR 2 (occupied since 2007) 35 unit co-housing

Note 1: Number out of sequence because NSW1-3 published elsewhere, not included in this paper

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