

The Role of Cohousing Communities in Shaping Architecture

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of cohousing communities in shaping contemporary urban spaces, focusing on addressing the challenges faced by modern cities. Through an analysis of the architectural and social dimensions of these communities and relevant case studies, the paper demonstrates how cohousing integrates into the urban landscape, emphasizing the importance of shared spaces in fostering social capital and inclusivity. The study reassesses how cohousing practices can be applied to the broader urban fabric to enhance social cohesion and sustainability within urban environments. The research aims to identify ways in which architecture can serve as a tool for creating communities that transcend the conventional individualism of residential spaces. This structure balances theoretical and practical aspects, illustrating how cohousing communities can actively contribute to the formation and redefinition of shared space in urban settings, thereby supporting sustainable development and social cohesion.

Keywords: cohousing, urban challenges, contemporary city, architectural design, sustainable housing

1 Characteristics of cohousing communities

Cohousing represents a private initiative aimed at building communities through intensive resident involvement in all stages of development, fostering neighborly bonds and a strong sense of community (McCamant & Durrett, 2011). Defined as housing with shared spaces that integrate both social and private zones, cohousing combines individual and collective elements (Vestbro, 2014; Darling, 2017; Alfirević, Simonović Alfirević, 2020; Ruiu, 2015). Each household maintains its own income and private living space while sharing resources like tools, appliances, and vehicles, which promotes savings, resource conservation, and waste reduction (Vestbro & Horelli, 2012). Shared spaces typically include common kitchens, dining areas, recreational rooms, and other functional facilities, designed to encourage daily social interaction and mitigate the isolation often associated with modern living (McCollum, 2018). Their size and levels of resident involvement differ, spanning from small (6-15 households) to large (over 30) groups (Williams, 2005; Holtzman, 2014; McCamant & Durrett, 1988). Originating in Scandinavia in the 1960s, cohousing has since spread globally (Vestbro, 2010; Vestbro & Horelli, 2012; Chiodelli & Baglione, 2013).

As unique housing forms, cohousing communities seek to address social isolation through shared spaces and collective activities, reinforcing a sense of belonging and social capital among residents (McCamant & Durrett, 2011; McCollum, 2018). These communities are marked by participatory processes, where residents collaboratively design, manage, and maintain their non-anonymous neighborhoods, aiming for affordable housing and reduced ecological impact (Lietaert, 2010; Tummers, 2015b). Despite variations across countries, cohousing universally emphasizes cooperation, active participation, and spatial arrangements that range from urban and suburban to rural settings (Livingston, 2022; McCamant & Durrett, 1988). Architectural styles vary to reflect cultural differences and local regulations, while target demographics are diverse, from students to retirees (Christian, 2004).

Cohousing communities embody values centered on ecological and economic sustainability, which reinforce community bonds (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2013; Njegić, Mandić & Lojanica, 2022). With design freedom that reflects community identity, these spaces foster intentional social cohesion, contrasting with investor-driven residential developments (McCamant & Durrett, 2011). Unlike mass-produced housing prioritizing uniformity (Neimarlija, 2022), cohousing emphasizes personalized spaces that embody shared identity and values, challenging spatial homogenization. Known for their openness and transparency, cohousing communities often share experiences and visuals online, making their model a compelling area of research.

1.2 Architectural characteristics of cohousing communities

Cohousing communities typically consist of 20-30 homes, bringing together intergenerational residents of various family types and ages (Scottthanson & Scottthanson, 2005). This organization of housing units contributes to affordable living through efficient use of space and shared resources, reducing overall living costs. With diverse amenities in common areas, individual homes can be smaller, eliminating the need for extra rooms for guests, play areas, laundry, or workshops. Shared kitchens also enable smaller individual kitchens by providing space for occasional-use appliances (Livingston, 2022). The location of common spaces directly influences their use—ideally, they should be visible from all homes and situated near main pathways residents use daily (McCamant & Durrett, 1988). Careful planning of these spatial relationships supports the community's social dynamics and

optimizes functionality according to the community's goals and context. Pioneers of the cohousing concept in the United States, McCamant and Durrett (1988; 2011), underscore the importance of the size and positioning of common areas for the community's optimal functioning, recommending maximum resident involvement in their design. Common spaces are divided into three main categories:

- Shared social spaces that facilitate socializing and gatherings, such as living rooms, terraces, and gyms;
- Shared functional spaces, like dining rooms, kitchens, and hallways, used at specific times;
- Private spaces, such as bedrooms and bathrooms, dedicated to individual activities (Alfirević & Simonović Alfirević, 2020).

Flexibility in design is a core principle of cohousing communities, allowing spaces to be adapted to residents' various needs. Using sliding doors, partitions, and modular furniture, cohousing communities offer multifunctional spaces without the need for costly reconstructions, thereby enhancing long-term sustainability and resident satisfaction (Alfirević, Simonović Alfirević, 2018; Njegić, Mandić & Lojanica, 2022).

2 Current urban challenges

The shift in values and behavioral norms from the industrial era to the new millennium has led to large-scale migration of the global population into urban areas, positioning cities as prime locations for social experimentation. This urbanization process has not only transformed cities into central players in addressing global issues but has also spurred the development of diverse spatial solutions aligned with contemporary urban visions. The rise of nuclear families and urban sprawl have detached individuals from traditional communities, resulting in a crisis of connectedness and a weakening of social solidarity. However, this fragmentation has also created space for the formation of new communities built around shared interests and values (Vestbro, 2010; Christian, 2004; Milojević, 2013; Medar & Čurčić, 2021).

Urban expansion, migration, and isolation have fueled a sense of insecurity, highlighting the need for new forms of community capable of addressing these social demands (Lietaert, 2010). These dynamics contribute to the redefinition of housing in an urbanized context, where social bonds and collective responsibility are central to addressing contemporary living needs (Alfirević & Simonović Alfirević, 2024). Additionally, many urban development processes are driven by investor interests, limiting citizens' influence on changes within their environments. This challenge underscores the importance of strengthening civic collaboration and engagement to foster collective action, protect shared interests, and improve urban life quality.

Although there are relatively few practical examples of such collaborative communities (Alfirević & Simonović Alfirević, 2020; Jakobsen & Larsen, 2018; Tummers, 2015a; Jarvis, 2011), they are increasingly recognized for their innovative approaches to ecological and social issues, fostering relationships based on solidarity and shared resources (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2013; Lietaert, 2010). This research is highly relevant today due to the growing need for alternative housing models that address social isolation and the absence of interconnectedness that was once found in traditional communities (Tummers, 2015a; Williams, 2005; Sanguinetti, 2014).

2.1 The role of cohousing communities in shaping the contemporary city

Cohousing communities are proactive in integrating with local settings, functioning as spatial and social hubs within cities. Their role in shaping the contemporary urban landscape is best examined through two interconnected dimensions: architectural integration with the environment and the social impact on community interaction.

These communities connect with surrounding public spaces, enhancing accessibility for both residents and the broader public, and are adaptable to various urban contexts, from dense urban centers to suburban areas, often revitalizing abandoned or post-industrial sites (Vestbro & Horelli, 2012). Architectural design in cohousing encourages flexibility, accommodating diverse lifestyles and social groups (Darling, 2017). They integrate public spaces like gardens and walkways, offering accessible green areas (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2013) while reducing environmental impact through shared resources, energy-efficient construction, and sustainable land use. Unlike typical residential buildings, cohousing communities dedicate spaces specifically for collective activities—such as community gardens, gathering halls, and workshops—often open to the wider public. These design features encourage local engagement in community events, workshops, or lectures, unlike traditional buildings where such spaces are often unused or privatized. Cohousing integration with public spaces fosters social interaction, pedestrian access, and cycling routes, thereby contributing to reduced pollution and traffic. As such, cohousing communities are not isolated entities but vital parts of the urban fabric.

The strong social networks within cohousing communities build social capital, supporting local initiatives such as markets and cultural events (Ruiu, 2015). This inclusivity enriches urban diversity by attracting people from various age groups, professions, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Alfirević & Simonović Alfirević, 2020).

Through participatory decision-making and sustainable practices, cohousing communities provide a model for contemporary urban environments (Vestbro, 2014; McCollum, 2018). Their resource-sharing and spaces for interaction not only enhance residents' quality of life but also promote socially and environmentally responsible urban living, moving beyond the passive approaches of typical residential buildings to lay the groundwork for engaged and ecologically mindful communities (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2013).

3 Case studies

Ecovillage at Ithaca, New York, SAD: EcoVillage in Ithaca is part of the global ecovillage movement and engages the broader local community through educational programs and public events. It is connected with local farms, promotes organic agriculture, and offers environmental education. Collaboration with universities like Cornell provides students with hands-on learning about sustainability. The community incorporates local resources and technological innovations, such as solar energy systems, and employs sustainable architectural practices, which help reduce carbon emissions and promote local energy self-sufficiency. Through these efforts, EcoVillage impacts not only its members but also contributes to ecological education and regional economic development, demonstrating how cohousing communities can empower the wider community and promote sustainable, communal living.



Figure 1 Ecovillage at Ithaca, New York, USA

Vauban, Freiburg, Germany: Vauban in Freiburg, merges cohousing principles with sustainable urban planning, involving residents actively in neighborhood development through campaigns and local eco-initiatives. Through the Vauban Forum, citizens participated in planning with a focus on recycling, shared spaces, and reducing car use, creating a pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly environment. Initiatives like the "solar garage" and other energy-efficient measures enhance the neighborhood's sustainability, while resident involvement strengthens community ties, making Vauban a model for sustainable urban development. This example illustrates how communities can revitalize underused urban areas while promoting social inclusion and environmental awareness.



Figure 2 Vauban, Freiburg, Germany

Christie Walk, Adelaide, Australia: Christie Walk in Adelaide, Australia, is a small sustainable cohousing project that integrates permaculture and organic urban agriculture. Open to visitors, it frequently hosts tours and workshops to raise awareness about sustainability in urban planning. Through partnerships with local institutions, Christie Walk serves as an inspiring model for other communities, demonstrating how cohousing can humanize urban architecture and promote ecological practices in city centers.



Figure 3 Christie Walk, Adelaide, Australia

Cohousing Bijgaardehof, Ghent, Belgium: Cohousing Bijgaardehof in Ghent, Belgium, is a revitalized former industrial site, transformed through green landscaping and soil decontamination. The community is structured around three cohousing groups (Wijgaard, De Spore, and Biotope), each with shared kitchens, dining areas, laundry facilities, children's spaces, a workshop, and an urban garden. Designed with modular units, it accommodates various family types and emphasizes communal spaces. Buildings are equipped with geothermal heating, passive cooling, and rooftop gardens for rainwater collection, operating entirely without gas. Bijgaardehof serves as an inspiring model for sustainable urban living, demonstrating the potential of cohousing to repurpose underused sites into vibrant communities.



Figure 4 Cohousing Bijgaardehof, Ghent, Belgium

Neighbors, Rakovica, Belgrade, Serbia: Neighbors initiative in Rakovica, Belgrade, highlights the importance of collective resident engagement in improving urban quality of life. Through landscaping green areas, installing benches, and creating children’s play areas, residents have fostered a sense of belonging and mutual support. This example illustrates how joint initiatives can transform urban spaces into sustainable and cohesive environments and how cohousing principles can be applied to existing buildings, allowing residents to take an active role in shaping spaces that encourage social interaction and meet their needs.



Figure 5 Neighbors, Rakovica, Belgrade, Serbia

Neighbors 19a, New Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia: The informal group Neighbors 19a demonstrates how local initiatives can drive meaningful change through self-organization and collaboration with institutions. Initially formed to protect green spaces within the block, this group effectively safeguards these areas and serves as a model for adapting cohousing principles in urban settings, where traditional spaces often do not meet residents' needs.



Figure 6 Neighbors 19a, New Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia

3.1 Analysis of examples

Table 1 Analysis of examples

Example	Location type and regeneration	Key features	Contribution to urban fabric
Ecovillage at Ithaca, New York, USA	Rural location, ecological project	Permaculture, sustainable energy sources, ecological construction	Example of sustainable practices that contribute to resource conservation
Vauban, Freiburg, Germany	Former military base, now eco-district	Sustainable construction, minimal car traffic	Regeneration of abandoned urban areas, promotes social inclusion
Christie Walk, Adelaide, Australia	Urban center	Energy-efficient buildings, shared green spaces	Illustrates sustainable practices in dense urban fabric
Bijgaardehof, Ghent, Belgium	Brownfield location	Participatory housing, sustainable regeneration of industrial zones	Enhances quality of life through sustainable revitalization of spaces
Neighbors, Rakovica, Belgrade, Serbia Informal community	Existing urban structure	Improvement of spaces through joint efforts of residents	It adapts public spaces to local needs and strengthens social cohesion.
Neighbors 19a, New Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia Informal community	Urban block	Residents' self-initiative for organizing common spaces	Encourages a culture of care and community in urban settings, protects city green spaces from development

Each of these examples highlights distinct architectural and urban aspects of cohousing, focusing on the regeneration of abandoned or industrial sites and the enhancement of social connectivity through communal activities. For instance, Vauban in Freiburg and Bijgaardehof in Ghent have transformed neglected urban locations into sustainable neighborhoods using innovative ecological solutions, contributing to urban revitalization. Similarly, the Ecovillage at Ithaca and Christie Walk engage the wider community through educational programs that promote sustainable practices beyond their own boundaries. Additionally, initiatives like Komšiluk 19a and Bijgaardehof offer inclusive housing, fostering diversity among social groups and strengthening social capital. Collectively, these models encourage shared responsibility and provide sustainable alternatives to individualistic approaches in contemporary urban planning.

4 Cohousing communities and informal neighborhood associations

Cohousing communities and informal neighborhood associations represent two approaches to collective living and citizen engagement in urban development. Both aim to enhance residents' quality of life and strengthen social ties, yet they differ in organization and impact.

Cohousing communities are formal entities where residents participate in all phases of design and management, fostering a sense of belonging and connection (McCamant & Durrett, 2011). Their collective financing allows for planned and sustainable maintenance of shared spaces, creating a stable framework for long-term projects (Vestbro, 2010). In contrast, informal neighborhood associations operate on a voluntary basis, addressing specific local issues such as improving green spaces or organizing cultural events (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2013). These initiatives rely on donations and community support, often executing projects sporadically based on member interest (Alfirević & Simonović Alfirević, 2020).

Cohousing communities provide versatile, strategically planned shared spaces, while informal groups depend on existing public areas and spontaneous initiatives for maintenance. They integrate ecological practices into their design, contributing to urban sustainability, whereas ecological initiatives in informal associations often depend on current interest.

Social interaction is formalized in cohousing communities, fostering strong ties among residents. In informal associations, social activities are more spontaneous. Both models contribute to social capital, strengthening ties through collaboration (Ruiu, 2015) and promoting stable, supportive urban environments. While cohousing communities are more structured and sustainable long-term, informal associations provide flexible, prompt responses to community needs, making them essential actors in urban contexts.

Table 2 the difference between cohousing communities and informal neighborhood associations

Characteristic	Cohousing communities	Informal neighborhood associations
Legal structure	Formalized organization with contracts, often has legal status	Informal, without legal status, based on voluntary basis
Participation in space design	Residents actively participate in the design of their homes and common spaces	Neighbors participate in decisions about the space but do not have a role in design
Common spaces	Strategically designed common spaces (e.g., shared kitchen, playrooms)	Public areas or existing common spaces are used
Funding	Collective funding through membership fees, donations, or shared budget	Funds are often from donations or contributions, depending on actions
Environmental aspects	Often implement ecological design and sustainable practices	Environmental initiatives depend on the interests and engagement of members
Space maintenance	Organized and planned maintenance through a shared budget and tasks	Maintenance initiatives are launched as needed, with volunteer work
Social interaction and activities	Linked to organized communal meals, meetings, and other social events	Activities are spontaneously organized, e.g., gatherings and joint actions
Community initiatives	Often have formalized projects to contribute to the local environment	Focused on improving the environment, e.g., cleaning or tree planting
Access and inclusivity	Open to new members through applications and selection	Access is open and mainly based on local initiatives

4.1 How to apply cohousing practices to the broader urban fabric?

Informal neighborhood associations can enhance their functionality and impact on the local community by learning from cohousing communities:

Structured Organization: Cohousing communities are often well-organized, with defined rules and responsibilities. Informal associations could adopt a similar approach by forming working groups or committees for specific areas, which would facilitate collaboration, goal-setting, and progress tracking.

Long-Term Planning: Cohousing communities focus on long-term strategies to ensure sustainability. Informal associations can apply this approach by planning activities with lasting outcomes, rather than only responding to immediate interests.

Development of Shared Spaces: One advantage of cohousing communities is the creation of spaces for interaction and connection. Informal associations could identify and adapt public spaces as gathering spots for community activities, working in collaboration with local authorities and professionals.

Education and Empowerment: Cohousing communities often provide educational resources to their members. Informal associations could organize workshops and lectures on sustainable practices or social skills to empower their members.

Connecting with Other Organizations: Cohousing communities frequently collaborate with various institutions, NGOs, and local governments to expand the reach of their initiatives and more effectively carry out projects. Informal associations can apply a similar strategy by seeking partners for resources, knowledge, or promotion. Networking with other organizations can help them take on larger projects, secure long-term solutions, and strengthen their capacity for community engagement.

5 Conclusion: What can architect learn from cohousing?

Given the rise of urbanization and alienation in cities, cohousing communities represent an important model that architects can use to create socially integrated and sustainable urban spaces. When designing, architects can focus their efforts on the following aspects:

Planning flexible shared spaces: Integrating shared rooms within residential complexes can facilitate social interaction and connection among residents. These spaces, designed to accommodate various activities such as kitchens, workrooms, or play areas, contribute to a sense of community and belonging. According to research by Durrett and McCamant (2011), the design of shared spaces is a crucial tool for building strong communities within the cohousing model.

Solutions for public spaces: In addition to residential units, architects and urban planners should focus on public spaces, such as parks, squares, and pedestrian zones, to create frameworks for social interactions. Incorporating elements such as furnishings, artistic installations, and event spaces can enhance the appeal of these areas. Gehl (2010) emphasizes that the quality of public space directly affects social interaction and the quality of life in urban environments.

Encouraging walking and biking: Architects can design environments that prioritize walking and biking paths, improving connectivity between different communities and facilitating interactions among residents.

Ecologically sustainable practices: Implementing eco-friendly solutions, such as solar panels, rainwater harvesting systems, and sustainable materials, can contribute to environmental conservation and strengthen the community's identity through shared sustainability goals. Ruiu (2015) points out that cohousing communities often develop ecologically sustainable practices that are vital for their long-term viability.

Education and participation: The role of architects extends beyond designing spaces; they also have a responsibility to educate communities about the benefits of participatory planning. Workshops and seminars enable citizens to engage in the planning process, further strengthening their sense of responsibility and collective ownership.

Architects are positioned to play a significant role in redefining urban spaces to be more inclusive, sustainable, and socially oriented. By learning from the cohousing community model, they can create spaces that not only meet the physical needs of housing but also strengthen social ties and community in urban environments.

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Internet links

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Vauban, Freiburg, Germany:

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Cohousing Bijgaardehof, Ghent, Belgium:

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Neighbors 19a, New Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia:

<https://blok19a.rs/borba-za-livadu-se-nastavlja/>

Figures

Figure 1: Ecovillage at Ithaca, New York, USA

<https://ecovillageithaca.org/>

Figure 2: Vauban, Freiburg, Germany

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solar_Settlement_at_Schlierberg#/media/File:SoSie+SoSchiff_Ansicht.jpg

Figure 3: Christie Walk, Adelaide, Australia

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Figure 4: Cohousing Bijgaardehof, Ghent, Belgium

<https://archello.com/project/bijgaardehof>

Figure 5: Neighbors, Rakovica, Belgrade, Serbia

<https://www.alo.rs/beograd/beograd/mali-raj-sloznh-stanara/190665/vest>

Figure 6: Neighbors 19a, New Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia

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