The Architectural Language of Togetherness: Spatial Patterns in the Design of Cohousing Communities

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Abstract: Cohousing communities represent a distinct housing model that integrates private and shared living, with the aim of fostering daily interaction, mutual support, and a sense of belonging. This paper seeks to identify the characteristic spatial principles that enable the formation of community in everyday life, as well as their potential applicability in other urban contexts. Through an analysis of physical structure and spatial logic, the paper explores how architectural form can serve as an active agent of social cohesion.
The case study focuses on the Marmalade Lane housing development in Cambridge (UK), with particular attention to spatial patterns that support a balance between individual space and communal life. Special emphasis is placed on the design of transitional zones, shared courtyards, informal gathering areas, and the organization of movement, examining how these elements enable spontaneous and unobtrusive social dynamics.
The aim of the paper is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of architectural design in creating sustainable and socially oriented housing models, and to offer a critical framework for rethinking contemporary practices of collective living.

Keywords: cohousing, architectural typology, social sustainability, community-oriented design, spatial patterns, collective housing

1 Introduction

Cohousing has developed as a response to the increasing isolation and fragmentation of contemporary urban life (Lietaert, 2010; McCollum, 2018; Medar and Čurčić, 2021; Vestbro, 2014). Processes of urbanization and rising residential density often produce a paradox: physical proximity combined with simultaneous social distance among residents (Gehl, 2010, p. 19611; Jacobs and Appleyard, 1987). The lack of shared spaces and spatial logics that foster chance encounters generates a sense of alienation, while the anonymity of large housing blocks can further diminish feelings of safety and trust among neighbors (Bauman, 2000). At this intersection, the significance of architecture and urban design becomes evident, as they can reduce social distance and enhance subjective perceptions of safety by creating legible, active, and shared spaces.

Cohousing offers a housing model that combines private units with shared facilities and the active participation of residents in community organization (Alfirević and Simonović-Alfirević, 2020; Darling, 2017; Ruiu, 2016; Vestbro, 2014). Unlike conventional housing typologies, cohousing emphasizes the social dimension of everyday life, where spatial elements—transitional zones, communal courtyards, and meeting areas—become key mechanisms of social cohesion.

Although cohousing differs from related models such as coliving (Alfirević and Simonović-Alfirević, 2020; Medar and Čurčić, 2021) or gated communities (Ruiu, 2014), comparative perspectives reveal a broader need for housing forms that mitigate loneliness and economic pressures while simultaneously reinforcing a sense of belonging. In this respect, cohousing can be regarded not only as a distinct typology but also as a source of principles applicable to conventional housing blocks.

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of cohousing architectural principles in improving typical housing blocks, using Marmalade Lane in Cambridge as an illustrative model. By analyzing its spatial patterns, the paper considers the potential of architecture, even in contexts where community was not originally planned, to mediate everyday encounters and strengthen social sustainability.

Structurally, the paper first outlines the theoretical framework and relevant literature on cohousing and the problem of alienation in contemporary cities, followed by a case study analysis of Marmalade Lane. The discussion then proposes ways of transferring these principles to typical housing block design.

2 Theoretical frameworks: spatial principles of communality

Cohousing communities develop specific spatial patterns that transcend the basic function of housing and become active agents of everyday social dynamics. Their distinctiveness lies in the fact that architectural form operates not only as the physical framework of life but also as an instrument for fostering interaction,

cooperation, and a sense of belonging (Ruiu, 2016; Williams, 2005). These principles demonstrate that cohousing can be understood not merely as a housing typology, but as a spatial language of communality (Alexander et al., 1977; Lietaert, 2010), whose elements may be reinterpreted within conventional housing blocks.

2.1 Transitional zones and patterns of encounter

In the literature on shared housing design, particular emphasis is placed on the significance of transitional zones and everyday patterns of encounter. Transitional zones—porches, verandas, front gardens, or semi-open entrances—function as "soft boundaries" between the private and the communal domain. These spaces enable gradual transition and spontaneous communication among residents, thereby softening the rigid division between public and private realms (Alexander et al., 1977). Jan Gehl (2010) highlights that such spaces create conditions for spontaneous and unobtrusive communication, as they allow for brief "passing encounters" that may subsequently evolve into deeper forms of interaction.

Furthermore, pathways, staircases, and shared corridors in cohousing communities are not conceived merely as technical conduits, but as social spaces where daily contacts unfold naturally. Kevin Lynch (1960) and Gehl (2010) emphasize the importance of visual connections and points of contact—locations where everyday routes intersect or where views open onto communal courtyards. These visual and spatial nodes not only reinforce the perception of others' presence but also enable informal surveillance of space, thereby contributing to the safety and sustainability of communal life.

2.2 Hierarchy and flexible use of common spaces

One of the key characteristics of cohousing communities is the developed hierarchy of common spaces, encompassing various levels—from smaller areas intended for everyday encounters, through inner courtyards and gardens, to larger halls or common houses used for planned activities. This multilayered structure enables social engagement to occur in different forms and intensities, in accordance with the needs and preferences of residents. Research shows that such a structure contributes to the long-term sustainability and stability of the community, as it simultaneously offers the possibility of retreat into privacy and active participation in collective life (Bouma et al., 2015; Williams, 2005).

In addition to hierarchical organization, the aspect of flexible space use is equally significant. Franck and Stevens (2013) introduce the concept of *loose space*, denoting spaces that remain open to spontaneous and creative appropriation. Such spaces can be adapted to diverse situations: movable tables and chairs, children drawing with chalk on the pavement, improvised games, gatherings, or even temporary installations. This fluidity of use allows common spaces to function as platforms for everyday interactions that are not strictly programmed but evolve organically in response to the community's needs.

In this way, hierarchy and flexibility together enable common spaces to operate as a dynamic framework of life within a cohousing community, ensuring the long-term appeal of this housing model.

2.3 Visual legibility and the human scale

The visual legibility of space is of central importance for orientation and the quality of social interactions. Lynch (1960) identifies elements such as paths, nodes, and landmarks as the basis for the formation of mental maps, which facilitate navigation and contribute to a sense of belonging. Landmarks—whether individual objects, distinctive buildings, or recognizable features within the community—function as visual reference points, creating both safety and identity. They not only enable spatial orientation but also foster social recognition, as emphasized spaces become natural meeting points and gathering places.

Connectivity and spatial visibility likewise encourage lingering and spontaneous interaction (Whyte, 1980), while Gehl (2010) stresses that visual accessibility directly affects everyday social dynamics. Nevertheless, excessive exposure can generate discomfort, making it crucial to strike a balance between openness and the sense of control over space.

The human scale and spatial dimension directly shape the intensity of encounters. Gehl (2010) demonstrates that distances of up to seven meters allow for visual recognition and eye contact, facilitating spontaneous communication. By contrast, greater distances produce anonymity and reduce everyday contact. Similarly, building height influences participation in communal life: while low- and mid-rise housing supports visual oversight and quick access to common facilities, taller buildings weaken connectivity and diminish the likelihood of spontaneous encounters.

Community size and density represent another critical factor. Smaller communities (6–15 households) facilitate trust-building and a sense of control (McCamant and Durrett, 1988; Williams, 2005), whereas larger ones may lead to reduced social cohesion and increased anonymity (Holtzman, 2014; Whyte, 1980). Optimal density entails a balance between closeness and privacy, enabling interaction without feelings of overcrowding. Gehl (2010) also underscores the significance of group size: smaller spaces are conducive to informal gatherings of up to ten people, while larger groups necessitate more formal organization.

3 Results: example of spatial organization and social activities in the Marmalade Lane Community (UK)

Marmalade Lane serves as an illustrative example of how architectural structure and spatial organization can actively foster social cohesion and everyday interactions. The community consists of 42 housing units arranged around shared courtyards and pedestrian pathways, which enable visual connectivity and spontaneous encounters among residents ("Insights from Marmalade Lane," 2024).

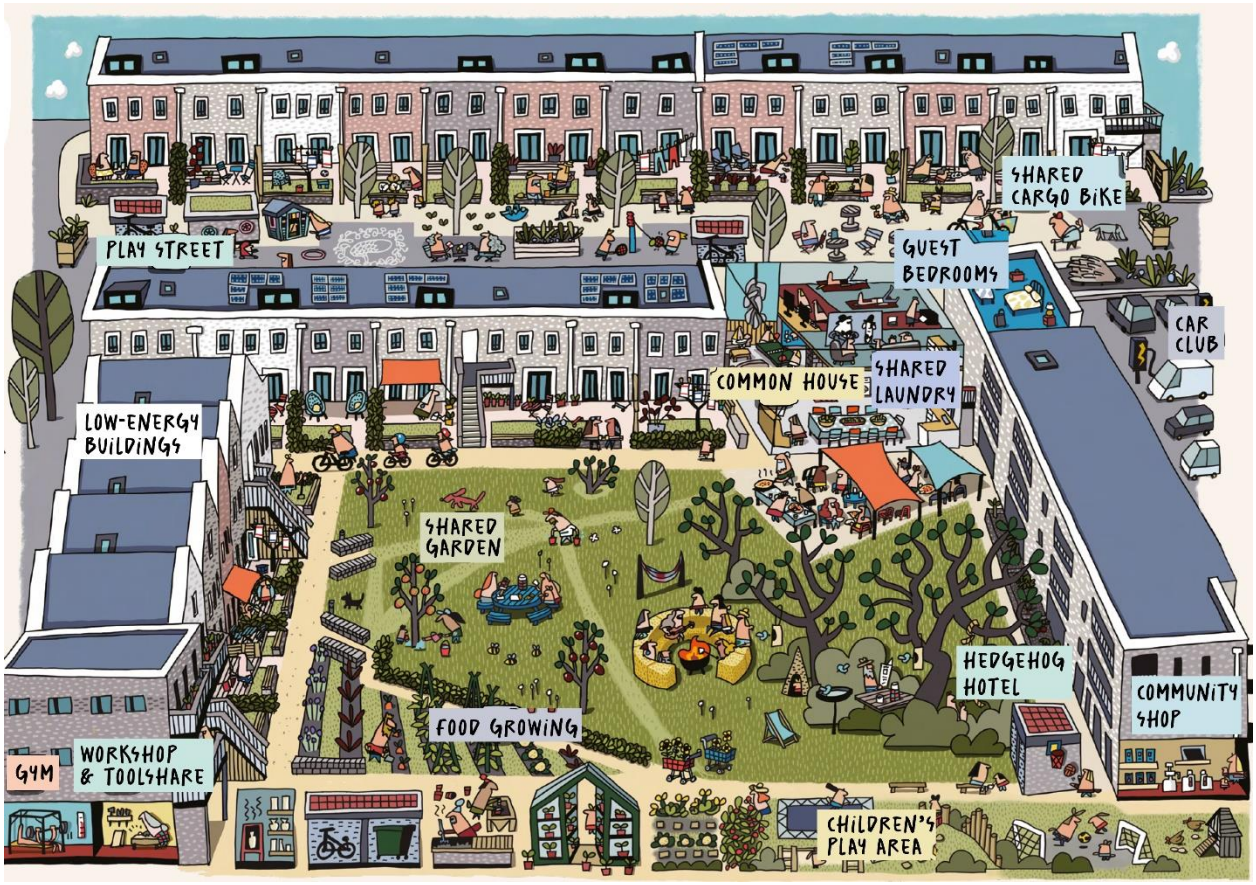

Figure 1 Organizational scheme of activities, Marmalade Lane (UK). Source: https://www.wearetown.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Insights-from-Marmalade-Lane_Report_Digital_Final-compressed.pdf

3.1 Marmalade Lane (UK) – transitional zones and patterns of encounter

Residents frequently use transitional zones—entrances, verandas, and pathways between houses—as spaces for brief, informal meetings. These function as "soft boundaries" between the private and the communal, enabling gradual acquaintance and spontaneous communication. In the Marmalade Lane community, the ground-level zones of shared courtyards and direct entrances from the street serve precisely as such thresholds, creating meeting points with immediate neighbors while also providing sufficient distance to avoid excessive social exposure. In this way, a balance is achieved between privacy and communal life.

Figure 2 Left – direct entrance from the street. Right – entrance through the courtyard via the shared pedestrian street. Source: https://lucileabertolaso.com/marmalade-lane-dissertation

3.2 Marmalade Lane (UK) – hierarchy and flexible use of common spaces

The shared spaces of Marmalade Lane include courtyards, a multifunctional common house, gardens, and small play areas for children. This hierarchy of spaces enables different levels of social engagement—from intensive gatherings in the common house, through informal encounters in courtyards, to spontaneous play in smaller inner or semi-private areas. The flexibility of these spaces allows residents to adapt them to their needs, encompassing socializing, collective workshops, or recreational activities.

Figure 3 Left- common house. Source: https://www.marmaladelane.co.uk/index.html#gallery. Right- garden and open field. Source: https://www.thedeveloper.live/places/places/the-miracle-of-marmalade-lane-

3.3 Marmalade Lane (UK)- visual legibility and human scale

The spaces are clearly defined and easily legible: pathways lead to key communal areas, while visual landmarks such as central courtyards or shared kitchens facilitate spatial orientation and enable spontaneous visual contact among residents. In the Marmalade Lane community, the two-story buildings are consistent with the human scale, contributing to a transparent and socially active environment. Pedestrian streets further support visual contact and brief interactions among neighbors.

The analysis of Marmalade Lane demonstrates that the combination of carefully designed transitional zones, a hierarchy of shared spaces, and visually legible landmarks enables a rich social life and fosters a strong sense of belonging. These findings provide concrete guidelines that may be transferred to conventional housing blocks, through the adaptation of existing spaces and the introduction of semi-private zones and multifunctional areas.

Figure 4 Left – Visually accentuated common house with a large glass surface along the main pedestrian path. Source: https://www.archdaily.com/918201/marmalade-lane-cohousing-development-mole-architects. Right – Movement schemes, position of the common house and entrances to the neighborhood. Source: https://www.google.com/maps and author's adaptation.

4 Discussion: transferring cohousing principles to conventional housing typologies

In conventional housing blocks, communal life is most often reduced to circulation areas—corridors, staircases, or entrances—which are treated solely as transit zones, without the capacity to become places of encounter and interaction. By contrast, research on collective housing highlights the significance of transitional zones, such as semi-open porches or shared courtyards, which can function as active social interfaces (Alexander et al., 1977; Gehl, 2010). Rethinking entrances and lobbies in housing blocks in this regard opens the possibility of strengthening social dynamics. Even simple spatial elements—seating niches, notice boards, or shared mail areas—have the potential to stimulate spontaneous contact (Whyte, 1980; Williams, 2005).

Field observations in conventional housing blocks or apartment buildings often reveal that patterns of communality develop spontaneously even in the absence of formal design intent. Semi-private spaces in front of entrances, when safe and clearly defined, are transformed into small courtyard "pockets" where children share toys and parents establish social ties. Interestingly, spontaneous resource-sharing emerges in these contexts (e.g., toys left behind and used collectively by several children). This can be seen as a genuine "cohousing effect" on a micro-scale. Such spaces are significant because they combine a sense of safety and appropriation with opportunities for everyday interaction. Similarly, spacious ground-floor corridors or rooms originally intended for building caretakers are often spontaneously repurposed as gathering places for residents. Even when not intensively used, they function as symbolic signs of communality and contribute to the formation of the identity of an entrance or block (Bouma et al., 2015).

Key factors in fostering communal life in these spaces are physical boundaries and degrees of privacy. Fences and gates that clearly demarcate semi-private spaces from the outside encourage residents to relax and use them actively, while visual accessibility and proximity to others enable everyday encounters without compromising privacy (Gehl, 2010). In this way, even in standard blocks or apartment buildings, micro-versions of the "cohousing effect" are generated, where community emerges retrospectively—once the buildings are already constructed and residents discover new possibilities of space use.

Developers have recognized that real estate increases in value when shared spaces and additional amenities are provided. However, in contemporary residential complexes, exclusive facilities such as saunas or small swimming pools are often included; experience shows that these "marketing tricks" rarely become part of residents' everyday life, while the costs of their maintenance remain high (Lietaert, 2010). By contrast, multifunctional spaces equipped with basic infrastructure—such as a water tap, an electrical outlet, or a small counter—enable flexible use: from spontaneous coffee preparation, they can evolve into a "kitchen corner" for social gatherings. Such spaces have greater social potential as they correspond to the everyday needs of the community. This perspective aligns with the approach of *everyday urbanism*, which emphasizes the value of small, daily interventions in shaping community life (Bhargava and Sharma, 2014; Chase et al., 1999).

Another important aspect lies in recognizing existing but underutilized resources within housing blocks. For instance, small service rooms with sinks or utility sinks, originally designed for building maintenance, can be adapted into communal toilets, while dark ground-floor atriums, often left neglected, hold potential for transformation into covered meeting and gathering spaces. Such repurposing demonstrates that the creation of shared facilities does not necessarily rely on added square footage or costly interventions, but rather on the recognition and reinterpretation of what already exists (McCollum, 2018). These interventions exemplify the *adaptive reuse* approach, whereby existing spaces and infrastructures are reinterpreted and placed in the service of new social needs (Bullen and Love, 2011).

Table 1 Transfer of cohousing spatial principles into conventional housing typologies. Author

Cohousing principle	**Spatial manifestation in Marmalade Lane**	**Possible adaptation in conventional housing typologies**
Transitional zones	Semi-open porches, courtyard passages, entrances to private units	Enclosed entrances and small “pockets” in front of gates, benches, and play areas
Shared spaces	Common house, communal courtyard, multifunctional halls for workshops and gatherings	Conversion of dark atriums into covered communal areas, multifunctional ground-floor rooms for sitting, socializing, or small activities
Flexibility	Courtyards used for both gardening and play, spaces for temporary activities	Corridors with niches and improvised seating corners
Visual legibility and human scale	Clear landmarks and human-scale spaces	Clearly defined entrances and micro-spaces for small groups, visibility of shared terraces from apartments, spaces designed for 4–10 people to encourage spontaneous encounters
Resource sharing	Tools, toys, food, appliances	Shared toys in the communal courtyard, shared utensils, sockets, water taps
Transitional events and activities	Organized meetings, workshops, meals in the common kitchen, festive events	Small-scale resident initiatives: gatherings in front of entrances, seasonal decorations, spontaneous conversations and exchanges, joint maintenance or space reconfiguration

Cohousing experiences can serve as inspiration for developing new models of communal living in conventional housing blocks, but the path toward this goal does not necessarily require radical spatial transformations. The key lies in simple, accessible, and flexible solutions that reflect the real needs of residents. In this way, the community is shaped naturally—from the bottom up, through everyday practices and the spontaneous use of space—rather than from the top down, through the imposition of luxurious but impractical amenities.

5 Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the design principles of cohousing communities do not need to strictly follow the form and organization of cohousing itself in order to foster a sense of belonging and everyday interaction among residents—the same principles can also be applied to conventional housing blocks. Unlike cohousing, where a group of people predefines shared values and designs the space with the explicit aim of creating a community, housing blocks assume that residents move into an already completed environment, without an initial collective agreement. Nevertheless, architecture and spatial organization can later act as mediators in community formation.

The analysis of practical examples shows that even in already constructed buildings, transitional zones, enclosed semi-private spaces in front of entrances, corridors, or small atriums can encourage spontaneous resource sharing, informal encounters, and the development of a sense of safety and belonging. The flexible and hierarchical use of shared spaces—from improvised seating areas and children’s play zones to caretaker rooms that transform into “club tables”—enables different levels of social engagement adapted to residents’ needs.

Visual legibility and human scale further contribute to the recognizability and identity of entrances or buildings, thereby stimulating everyday interaction and the spontaneous gathering of small groups.

Marmalade Lane serves as an illustrative example of how spatial organization can shape social relations and foster community, while local cases of conventional housing blocks demonstrate that similar principles can be applied in other contexts. The key lies in accessible, safe, and flexible spaces that encourage spontaneous interaction—luxurious or costly facilities are not required. In this way, architecture becomes a catalyst for togetherness even where it was not originally envisioned, enabling the creation of socially sustainable housing blocks with stronger feelings of belonging and opportunities for everyday encounters.

This paper provides a framework for further research and practical interventions, emphasizing that spatial organization in housing blocks can significantly contribute to reducing social fragmentation and enriching everyday life in urban environments.

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