Cooperatives and Co-housing of older people. German Case Studies in Rhineland-Palatinate

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Abstract

Interest in the neighbourhood has increased considerably by housing companies and social policy-makers in recent years. The withdrawal from social services and neglect of the needs of seniors in many European countries led to growing importance of communities. Nowadays, grassroots organizations and self-help approaches especially of senior citizens emerge. Co-housing projects aim at a new form of neighbourhood and community, in which adults come and live together by purpose and voluntarily without family bonds (Choi, 2004; Bamford, 2005). Construction projects aim at barrier-free units, high ecological standards and eco-friendly environments. As such, these projects are expected to enhance the quality of life of senior citizens as well as allowing them to age in place. In this contribution we are describing organizational patterns, visions of conviviality, push-factors and barriers of co-housing projects. Results show a broad variety of projects and different levels of their acceptance by local authorities.

1. Introduction

Co-housing projects try to establish communities to make neighbourhoods safe and comfortable places to grow old, not to be forced to leave one’s home by dependence on others (?). The concept of co-housing means: affordable housing (not always), member-led governance, green spaces and community interaction, participation and support for older people (Fedrowitz, 2011; Pendras, 2002). Last but not least, facing rapidly rising prices on the housing market and international hedge funds buying whole communal housing companies, cooperatives¹ and co-housing seem to be an alternative to anonymous investors and neighbourhoods to guarantee affordable and adequate housing. In more romantic visions community projects inspire political consciousness and new democratic structures, in which local actors work together on a balanced power basis (Defilippis, Fisher, and Shragge, 2006). In Germany, the number and legal status of co-housing projects rise significantly in the last years (cf. figure 1).

Nevertheless, it takes years to plan and realize such projects. Many initiatives only make it to the first steps and fail to establish a formal organization. In the end, an enterprise for constructing or remodelling a building with significant financial commitment has to be established. Social, organizational, legal, and financial obstacles have to be negotiated. Until now, it’s quite unclear, which reasons are decisive for breaking off the planning process. In research normally good practices are investigated and described, but success factors are under-researched. In this contribution we aim at describing organizational patterns of co-housing projects in a German state and visions of convivi-

¹Whereas in rural Rhineland-Palatinate only three projects organized themselves as cooperative, in Hamburg 27 cooperatives were established alone within the years 2000-01 (BBSR, 2012). About 2.000 housing cooperatives exist in Germany with 2.1 Mio flats in total, representing 10 % of the housing stock (BMVBW, 2004). Members of cooperatives are tenants as well as owners, following the idea of support, self-management and participation (one member one vote).
ality. Hereby we analyse, whether these projects are embedded in local structures and as how far they are accepted. In Rhineland-Palatinate, a quite rural state in Germany, 25 co-housing projects were realized, four projects are in the phase of institutionalization and 40 more initiatives are planning to create a co-housing project or a cooperative. Their names reflect the broad variety of initiatives: “Generation Yard” (Landau), Women’s specific Living (Mainz), “Technology and Ecological Factory Old-Paper-Mill” (Ebertsheim) or “Rural Ecological Multi-Generation Living” (Imstweiler). Compared to big cities, the number of projects in Rhineland-Palatinate is quite small (cf. figure 2).

Figure 1: Age and legal status of co-housing projects in Germany 2010. Source: Fedrowitz 2010

2. Theoretical background: Neighbourhood, community and social inclusion

“Neighbourhood” has a twofold meaning: it is both a socio-spatial unit and a social relationship. Definitions vary according to the focus of research. Schwirian (1983, p. 84) pronounces social networks and symbolic distinctions: “a population residing in an identifiable section of a city whose members are organized into a general interaction network of formal and informal ties and express their common identification with the area in public symbols.” Healey (1998, p. 69) describes an environment which is characterized by certain resources and opportunities for identification: “key living space through which people get access to material and social resources, across which they pass to reach other opportunities and which symbolises aspects of the identity of those living there, to themselves and to outsiders”. This concept is taken as a theoretical framework, as it combines aspects of a spatially contoured living space with symbolic effects, enabling different social contacts and courses of action around one’s place of residence.

In modern, western societies, the “normal level” of neighbourhood relationships consists of passive greetings and the possibility of being able to make use of sporadic assistance such as lending cooking ingredients. The rule of thumb for neighbourliness, even for older people, is a friendly distance, and the assurance of privacy (Argyle and Henderson, 1990; Häußermann and Siebel, 2004; Seibt, 2009). Nevertheless, in viable communities and co-ops trivial day-to-day interactions, mutual support as well as more formal organizations can be found, like community groups, managing local facilities or participation processes (Williams, 2006; Richardson, 2008, 2012). Generally, relation-
ships based on empathy and common interests, are gaining greater significance, accordingly, a voluntary as opposed to an assigned association of neighbourhood is becoming more significant. But, in unorganized, normal neighbourhoods relationships are only in certain cases expressed as “in-groups” with specific identities and emotional ties, e.g. peer groups of teenagers (Blokland, 2003). Social relations are not shaped equally, as children and older people show closer contacts, spending more time per day in the immediate surroundings than persons in other phases of their lifecycle. Social distances decide in how far neighbourly relationships are superficial, conflicting or friendly (Hamm 2000). Hamm further describes four functions which are expected of neighbours: being a helper in need (cf. Weber 1964 p. 280), socialization, communication, and social control.

An essential factor for the desire for co-housing projects is the neighbourhood which is to be peaceful, secure, social homogeneous and community oriented. Care for one another and for one’s surroundings means focusing on a high place identity, something which is considered to be missing in inner cities and in large cities generally (Tönnies, 1963; Ryan, 2002). As such communities might be quite exclusive.

Combined with the growing importance of communities and neighbourhoods to guarantee social support, the concept of social capital became prominent. In his oeuvre “Distinction” Bourdieu (1984) argued that social capital is linked to one’s amount and proportion of economic and cultural capital. Social capital consists of strong and weak social ties (Granovetter, 1973) that can be activated to get along and strive forward – or on the contrary – networks are missing to overcome deficits and needs. Social capital is focused on especially in state regimes that follow neoliberal ideas, meaning that non-profit organisations or private associations should provide social services. It is questioned as in how far coops and initiatives represent a reliable backbone for service provision and in how far these groups are able to challenge local politics and influence local governance (Shragge, 2003; Richards, 2008). As Jupp (2012) ascertained, bottom-up processes in neighbourhoods do not necessarily correspond to administrative and political actions and procedures. If co-housing projects are regarded as demanding and/or proclaiming alternative lifestyles, e.g. trying to introduce sharing economies, ecological food production, becoming energetically self-sustaining and changing local power structures, they might not be appreciated in local contexts and not supported in the planning and realization process on one hand. On the other hand, co-housing projects and cooperatives may gain importance for social change not only on the project or local level, but also, for the societal level, if they are able to reach out and promote social innovations (Szypulski, 2008). This contribution is aiming at determining factors that decide over success or failure of co-housing projects. Furthermore we analyse bridging and linking ties of initiatives into local political processes.

3. Project and Methods: Co-housing in Rhineland-Palatinate

During the last years, 25 co-housing projects were realized in the quite rural state Rhineland-Palatinate (Germany) and 40 more initiatives can be identified as being in a course of formation. Many of these initiatives do not make it into real life, facing a long and complicated group process, having to become an entrepreneur and construct buildings. The goal of an ongoing research project (6/2013 – 5/2015) is to contribute to answering the question as to success factors and barriers of co-housing initiatives with older people. Under which social, financial and organisational circumstances do initiatives succeed and when do they fail? Do all cities and villages promote housing projects?
25 interviews shall be conducted, mainly with emerging initiatives (10 interviews). Results are contrasted with three groups: failed initiatives (five interviews), existing projects (five interviews), and “normal” environments (five persons). Additionally semi-structured interviews are conducted with political actors in villages and cities respectively by students of urban planning at the University of Kaiserslautern. Members of initiatives are questioned about their visions, their social relationships, their attitudes towards communities, organizational procedures, as well as their needs and understandings of neighbourhood. In the first year of the research project we focused on emerging and failed initiatives. This fragile phase is neglected in present research, but seems to be decisive, as requirements and rules of living together are negotiated in this period of emerging. The following intermediate results are bases on 13 interviews, 10 with representatives of founding initiatives and three with persons, who tried to create a project, but had to stop the process. In the second year of the research project we should concentrate on existing projects and unspectacular neighbourhoods.

Based on these interviews, in this contribution we are focussing on the following questions: Which ideas exist on future neighbourhoods and communities? Which conflicts occur? Why was planning stopped? How do villages and cities react, do they support initiatives for co-ops and co-housing?
Do political actors feel disturbed by active groups of elderly people within their cities? Do they regard them as an incubator for community life?

A qualitative research strategy seems to be appropriate because of the heterogeneity of projects. Some are privately organized and others are directed by housing companies, some focus on seniors whereas some focus on multi-generational inhabitants, some include services, others do not. We find a variety of sizes and memberships. Interviews took part in private settings of the representatives of projects and lasted two hours in average. Narratives started with an introductory question: Please tell me, how you got in contact with the members of the initiative. To give some examples of further questions: How do you experience your relationships to the other members of your project? How do you imagine, the future living will look like? Do you expect difficulties or conflicts and how do you deal with it? Do you get professional advice? What is your time frame? Do you have predetermined breaking points to fix what has to be accomplished by those deadlines? Initiatives that had to dismantle the project were asked about crucial reasons, which difficulties of members existed, and how planning was done up to the interruption. How do they judge the level of professionalization? Was there a lack of mediation or advice? How would you have wanted the support?

4. Results of semi-structured interviews

Six out of ten emerging initiatives were privately organized, two were initialized by housing companies (a traditional housing cooperation, a communal company) and two were based on NGO activities (volunteering exchange and advisory service for owner oriented construction groups). All failed groups (n=5) were privately attempted and located more often in rural villages or small towns. Remarkably, these failed initiatives tried to remodel existing structures (abandoned school, monastery or farm), which implies even more unforeseeable obstacles than a new structure. Four out of five failed groups had hired an architect, in the beginning of the realization phase. But, they did not include consultation regarding mediation, legal questions, preservation order or project management.

4.1 Motives of projects

The analysed initiatives and projects plan to realize communities within a building or small estate, not one of them aimed at a flat-sharing community with a common kitchen or laundry. All of them focus on high quality of life, mutual support, neighbourly help as well as gaining an effect on the wider social environment: “We have to become old full of pleasure.” (Mainz. L. 712-716) The person thinks about monetary costs, but individual and societal benefits of co-housing. The representatives of initiatives in Speyer and Rheinzabern mention ageing in place, too: “... well, I think societally speaking it would be an advantage for all.” (Speyer. L. 411-412) “.... There is a village or city that says, we would like to offer an alternative to a nursing home. As it is now, that can't be. We like all generations. We don’t want to deport our elderlies somewhere and so on. From time to time, such motives force local authorities to push such a co-housing project. But there is not such an idea of a homogenous housing project with a conspiring community, following only their own ideas.” (Rheinzabern. L. 157-165) In contradiction to this attitude in a rural environment, another interviewee proclaims the vision of an alternative life style: “We want a new form of living, we are not in need.” (Neuwied. L. 1335) In Trier the project got access to a piece of land in a problematic neighbourhood. “We are building in an inner urban area with a bad image. We are trying to get people here, who are interested to live together, but who show some kind of solidarity, as they have to cope with the surroundings.” (Trier. L. 124-128).
4.2 Living together in the future

Asked about future common activities, a huge spectrum came to the core: dancing, Yoga, playing cards, getting together, cooking and eating, car sharing, newspaper sharing, shopping services, collective garden, barbecue, reading for children, having coffee, etc. “You party together, you are sitting around cosily, you help each other, activities, children are in the focus, such an idea, you read to them … it has to be lived, after all.” (Nieder-Olm. L. 892-895) An interviewee hopes to join an egalitarian group with no hierarchies and „bosses“. A common room is a prerequisite for co-housing. “The common room should be used for meetings on a regular basis; maybe interested inhabitants of the area are joining us; that could become an impulse for the area.” (Rheinzabern. L. 188-190). Similar in Mainz: “We want to affect the town centre, inviting people there, say, come along, create a meeting point, at least that’s our idea and provoke this by buildings and structures, that we meet each other, by chance, by purpose accidentally, but coming across welcoming to the outside, talking about topics.” (Mainz. L. 65-69). Different to these expectations, in Trier and Bad Dürkheim no exact ideas exist, how the members will live together. Conflicts are expected that have to be mediated (Neuwied). „You have to argue, too, that’s the case in families and in the working place, everywhere, there are conflicts. And why shouldn’t there be any conflicts within a community. But there are people who can’t cope with it. Or rather, they can’t solve problems without being offended or without arguing in a way that they don’t want to join anything anymore.” (Speyer L. 302-306). “People who gather there, they all come with their personalities, and I also think that specific people come together, such pioneers, who have power and are creative and have ideas as well, and that are quite good energies. And sometimes conflicts happen, because everybody wants to be listened to, and that’s not possible, of course.” (Ingelheim. L. 556-562)

4.3 Conducive conditions

Highly motivated actors and willingness to spend a lot of time is a crucial condition for an emerging project. Being linked to political, administrative and institutional stakeholders and networks decides about failure or success as well. Support of people in power and/or people with knowledge about structures and competences should not be neglected as a relevant factor. Some initiatives are trying year after year to become accepted by local authorities, but in several cases they can’t convince the relevant persons in charge.

Establishing an enterprise for constructing a new multi-family unit and create a community in the same time is a very long and demanding process that needs lawyers, architects, planners, mediators and bankers. Having access to advice and consultation during the planning procedures means to reduce mistakes, misperceptions and dead-ends. Cooperation with investors, project developers or housing companies can be fruitful, if the initiatives are regarded as partners and are included in decision processes. Experiences are named positive, even setbacks in the past are seen as valuable, as they imply learning effects.

A piece of land that fits the needs is a very pragmatic precondition, which in the same time is a great challenge in dense housing markets. Properties often are highly contested and initiatives normally are not able to compete with private investors or bigger housing companies. It depends on cities, if they hand out land below market prices. In Wittlich an initiative fought successfully in the city council for the building lease of a parcel of land, but the developing company, with whom they cooperated, bought it for a high price. “I have learned how people think and how they act, if they really strive for profit maximising. And that’s why they exploit others for their interests. That is a bitter experience I made.” (Wittlich. L. 776-779)

4.3 Difficulties in the realization process

Firstly, high insecurity is the most important factor. Nobody knows whether and when the planning efforts will become reality. In most cases the planning process takes more than five years, including backlashes from time to time. To handle the time frame is very difficult, especially for seniors
who need a clear perspective due to health and mobility reasons. „We already lost three members, because it’s not fast enough.” (Mainz. L. 215-216) Long duration is difficult not only for the single group members, but also for investors, banks and local staff. “It’s a risk, if it takes too long, if energy is lost somehow and finally for the last precise steps it’s really important that power is still left.” (Ingelheim. L. 212-215)

Secondly, missing support is a weakening aspect. Local conditions, especially lack of interest and willingness to cooperate by local authorities can prevent a project from becoming successful. “And then we generated our concept and wanted to present it to the mayor, but immediately he said, he didn’t want to know, well, he’s not up for it.” (Bad Dürkheim. L. 39-41) And further: „We tried again to talk to the mayor, … he rejected it again. … max half a year and we could start. Well, that’s all about good will. We really have a hard battle.” (L. 84-95) Initiatives have to convince local stakeholders of their idea. One project changed locality and moved to a different village, because in the first one, barriers were too strong to overcome. “To convince government, they really have to do something for the project, and they can do something, really, they got the power, or they have the background, they decide about building lease. …Now they reserve a piece of land for half a year”. (Nieder-Olm. L.247-249, 226) The mayor shows a positive, but awaiting attitude towards the project, meaning only minor support in the end. Positively, a room for meetings is made available by the local community.

Thirdly, unfavourable financial conditions are problematic. Normally, co-housing projects and especially co-operations and private construction groups need a sound financial basis. The realization of projects on a rental basis is even harder, because an investor is needed. But, for most people involved it is very important that all population groups get access to co-housing projects, including those with small pensions and minor incomes. “Well, that’s it, that’s only for the well-off. Others are not there, that’s a coop. … Because of costs, very simple, you have to pay a fee, and, additionally, rental prices are extremely high (Speyer. L. 198-208)

Fourthly, internal difficulties may result from divergent ideas and objectives and next steps to go. Energy, time and competences differ between members, resulting in bad moods and conflicts.

Fifthly: Even if projects focus on seniors, some of them are planning for multi-generations. But, time constraints prevent families to take part in group processes that take years before a precise structure emerges. Accordingly, families are seldom found in these initiatives. Only some are really enthusiastic, many are lost on the way.

The last factor is related to the structure itself. Members doubt that their ideas are realized, e.g. barrier free apartments or common space. In many cases financial restrictions have to be taken into account, contrary to the ideal of a structure that enables and strengthens community life.

5. Discussion of findings

Interest in the neighbourhood has increased considerably by housing companies and social policymakers in recent years. Nowadays, grassroots organizations and self-help approaches especially of senior citizens emerge. Co-housing projects aim at a new form of neighbourhood and community, in which adults live together by purpose and voluntarily. Construction projects aim at barrier-free units, high ecological standards and eco-friendly environments. As such, these projects are expected to enhance the quality of life of senior citizens as well as allowing them to age in these places. In this contribution we are describing organizational patterns, visions of conviviality, push-factors and barriers of co-housing projects in Rhineland-Palatinate, a quite rural state in Germany.

Members of housing communities face a lot of difficulties and need energy for a long period of time to realize ideas. As many initiatives fail in the long run, they mention that right from the beginning financial support for advice and advertisements could reduce mistakes and false hopes. A great barrier is related to missing local support. The availability of a room for meetings and access to parcels of land are crucial factors for the group process and the realization of a building. Promotional attitudes of
mayors and stakeholders enable projects to become visible and find new members easier than if they were operating in non-supportive environments. As states have great influence on regulations in Germany, initiatives suggest establishing legal and financial advice for housing projects on state level. Information campaigns could inform population as well as local stakeholders, as many of them do not even know what housing project means and which variations exist.

Existing projects did realize ideas that are mentioned in this contribution: high standard of buildings, common spaces and rooms, access to the Internet, barrier-free apartments, common garden and neighbourly support. Good practices of housing projects are important as they serve as role models. In many cases they are developing activities for the whole local community and can be regarded as incubators for new forms of social life. Doing so, they interrupt local routines and challenge local authorities. The social innovativeness may be one reason for reluctance of local authorities to embrace housing communities on their territory – at least in quite rural environments. Ecological aspects are relevant as well, as in many communities a sustainable lifestyle is a main target of the project.

As Putnam (1999) argued in his book “Bowling alone”, social problems may be solved, if people act and work together as friends, neighbours or in networks. Loosening social bonds may increase the risk of economic stagnation and political weakness. Networking individuals are able to change societies positively in the long run. Access to resources and networks, as social capital, enable groups to provide support for people in need. Translating Putnams ideas into the future, those regions and cities with strong and weak social ties (Granovetter 1973) will show a better development than those with missing social capital. Co-housing initiatives and co-operations imply high social capital as they form an alternative to family and support structures and get involved in civic engagement. Single parents, families with little children, older people and people with an alternative lifestyle benefit most from housing projects (Fedrowitz, Gailing 2003). Co-housing initiatives are becoming more important on the housing market and for the social strategies of cities. Biedenkopf, Bertram and Niejahr (2009) proclaim that these “small living circles” are able to reduce stress of caretakers, enable women to work and provide social support in an adequate way in urban surroundings. Nevertheless, urban oriented people may miss social diversity and mix of social classes in the nearby environment. Exclusiveness and middle class orientation are named as negative outcomes of housing projects. In Rhineland-Palatinate the focus is orientated to mixed communities and housing for older people. As more rural living conditions predominate, lifestyle aspects are less relevant than in big cities where more pioneers and experimental lifestyles play a major role. In cities and in villages the criticism of a homogenous social environment with high social control can not be negated. Foreigners are clearly underrepresented, for example.

In many cases, local engagement and activities try to enhance quality of life in communities as a whole and can be regarded as social city development. On the one hand, ecological, economic and social aspects of sustainability are more focused on in housing projects than in “normal” neighbourhoods. On the other hand, local projects are clearly limited and not able to overcome state responsibility for social support, organizational backbones and reduction of social problems, linked to inequality and lack of opportunities for participation.

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References