

Cohousing's relevance to degrowth theories

Matthieu Lietaert

European University Institute, 50014 Florence, Italy

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ABSTRACT

In a context of ever faster globalisation, citizens and their environment are clearly put under pressure. This article introduces the cohousing movement as a model to make life more social and greener in an urban context. Cohousing communities are neighbourhood developments that creatively mix private and common dwellings to recreate a sense of community, while preserving a high degree of individual privacy. In that respect, cohousing fits perfectly well with degrowth economic theories. Yet, cohousing goes beyond theory as this phenomenon that started in Scandinavia 30 years ago is now spreading in the Anglo-Saxon world since the 1990s, and more recently in the rest of Europe and in Japan.

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1. Introduction¹

At the dawn of the 21st century, urban citizens have to face a list of problems that does not seem to stop growing: an increasingly flexible labour market, changes in family structure, the hyper-isolation of individuals, mobility problems, the ongoing rise of stress levels, and an ageing population to name only a few. On top of that, urban western residents' consuming habits are not only unsustainable in the long run, but in many ways are connected to the problems listed above. One answer to some of the problems citizens face is cohousing. Cohousing communities are neighbourhood developments that creatively mix private and common dwellings to recreate a sense of community, while preserving a high degree of individual privacy. This movement clearly shows how human beings can, to huge advantage, work among themselves by developing non-market relationship when possible and practical. The strength of cohousing is that it is based on a trial and error method. Its success is mainly due to its high degree of flexible bottom-up approach, making it possible to adapt each cohousing community to its particular cultural context.

I argue in this article that cohousing is strongly related to the degrowth movement, especially at the micro level of urban neighbourhoods. In fact, degrowth economists and activists criticise the unsustainable and contradiction-based overproduction of the current economic system. Professor Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen was among the first to explain in *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (1971) that economic theories do not take into account the problem related to the dispersion and loss of energy in the system. He argued that understanding economics is much broader than mere market exchanges and prices and that the sustainability of a (sub)system is assessed on the sustainability of the entire system containing it. For this he talked about bioeconomics. Contemporary economists, like Serge Latouche and others [2], elaborate therefore ways to put into practice a gradual decrease in economic output, and manage a true globally sustainable society. Above all, degrowth makes it possible to think beyond the orthodoxy of the growth economic theories. This is key at a time when society as a whole, from school children to CEOs, are assessed in terms of their daily production, while paying little attention to the consequences of it. The cohousing model, as a bottom-up movement and living organism, offers an existing practice to reflect on. As the French newspaper *La Décroissance: le journal de la joie de vivre* tells, degrowth is about reaching a greater quality of life. In many ways, this is what cohousing is all about too.

The article is structured as follows. First it analyses how community is disappearing in urban contexts. Second, it tells what cohousing is and where it comes from. Finally, it gives some concrete examples of how cohousing changes the life of people and fosters

¹ E-mail address: matthieu.lietaert@eui.eu

¹ This article is based on a research which is also available as award winner video reportage (<http://stores.lulu.com/mlietaert>). The author would like to thank the reviewers for their comments on earlier draft as well as Maria Brenton for her help with the editing.

degrowth by increasing the quality of social relations; the efficiency of daily time management; and group consumption patterns.

2. Setting the context

To start with it is essential to stress that the cohousing model did not arise by magic. Instead it can be described as a grassroots and innovative answer to very specific problems that many citizens are increasingly facing, mainly in northern western society. Cohousing has helped people to recreate village-like communities in impersonal urban contexts.

3. Neo-liberal globalisation

There is no doubt that the rise of capitalist society, followed later by the first and the second industrial modes of production, deeply influenced the relationship between human beings and their environment. In the mid 1970s, economic historians noted a paradigm shift from the Keynesian economic model, based on state intervention to regulate the market economy for social purposes, to a neo-liberal or monetarist economic model, based on a progressive – and sometimes radical-withdrawal of the state to let the free market economy operate by itself [1].

For the last three decades the so-called freedom of the market economy has become a religious faith for politicians whose obsession is more to increase the GDP, the competitiveness of economic actors, the flexibility of the job markets, than to focus on better living standards for the majority, and to protect the environment. The main fallacy of the market theory is to believe that the market is self-regulated and that there is no reason to worry about social and environmental problems... However, one can easily see the fundamental contradiction between an economic model fostering unlimited growth rates, and environmental and human resources which are by definition limited.

On the basis of governmental statistics from the EU and the US, a school of economists [3] corroborated the clear link between higher economic growth and lower individual happiness by including non-economic elements in their analysis. The Easterlin Paradox is a relevant piece of research showing that, in international comparisons, the average reported level of happiness does not vary much with national income per person. In other words GDP per capita has little to do with greater happiness. The collapse of individual happiness is in fact a deep structural change of our time which testifies to a sharp increase in consumption of tranquilisers and narcoleptics to face stress related diseases, something the World Health Organisation highlights as the most widely spread disease in the 21st century.² Governments all over the EU are already concerned about the fact that workers increasingly take days off due to psychological illness.³ At a time when competitiveness and growth are the two buzz words of the political elite [4] it is then useful to recall what Keynes once said about the trickle down effect: “In the long run we are all dead” [5].

4. Changing cities and crisis of the community

As noted above, cohousing is a deliberate urban or semi-urban housing model and a few words must be written on the city here. Cities have always been considered as one of the main achievements of western civilization and many great thinkers have dedicated part of their life to analysing cities as places of vibrant and rich interpersonal relationships and where people felt protected [6].

What should we think about the city today? Just like firms, states and any institutions from the school to the church, cities are put under pressure by powerful global dynamics [7]. This in turn influences the life of citizens on a daily basis. The city has hence become like a centaur: on the one hand, it fascinates mostly by its “allure”, available work, cultural and social activities; on the other hand, cities are dangerous places to live as they simply swallow people’s time and energy, forcing them to rush all the time to make ends meet. And the rate at which people living inside cities are left outside of the market system is growing faster every day [8]. Working distance, flexible working conditions and above all rising individualism are factors that have made it hard for communities to survive in an urban context since the 1980s. Even the family, which one could define as the closest community to an individual, was far from protected and it is not a coincidence that the number of single parent families and single householders is in sharp increase in urban contexts [9]. As cohesion inside communities was slowly but surely decreasing, the community buffer soon appeared unable to defend individuals from external threats as much as before. The city had shifted from being a place for protection, social life and happiness to a place for production, competition, stress and tele-rather than face-to-face communication. One of today’s main consequences of this is that loneliness is a main characteristic of urban life [10].

Cohousing communities are neighbourhood developments where private and common facilities are combined in response to the social and the practical needs of contemporary urban citizens. Cohousing makes life more fun and easier while preserving the privacy of each individual adult and child. The magic is that nothing is rigid in such a place: it all depends on what the community can afford and wants to create. What is fundamental is that cohousers themselves are the driving force behind the process. Cohousing communities gather together on average between 15 and 35 families, that is 50–100 people, in order to work optimally. Smaller or bigger ones tend to create problems [11].

5. Cohousing, a part of the solution

5.1. What is cohousing?

A characteristic of these particular housing models is that they are often set in an urban or semi-urban context. In that sense, they are not like ecovillages that tend to be more rural. It is however difficult to draw a strict line between these two types of communities and similar benefits can be noticed. By being largely an urban phenomenon, cohousing communities have shown a constructive alternative to the growing atomisation and loneliness of individuals in large cities.

There are six fundamental characteristics of Cohousing. The first one is the participatory process. Cohousers manage the whole process from scratch. They can be helped by experts (lawyers, architects, facilitators, etc.) but they are in the driver’s seat. This requires a great deal of time and tough weekly meetings for years and years. Second is intentional neighbourhood design. In fact, the design of the cohousing site is fundamental as paths, green zone, houses, benches and parking have a major influence on the quality of the community glue. The third characteristic is the extensive common facilities, which are seen by many as the heart of the cohousing community. Common facilities and activities must be given vital attention. Experienced cohousers even say that it is much more important than the private dwelling where cohousers spend statistically less time than they originally thought. Fourth, a cohousing community must have complete resident management. It is fundamental that cohousers meet on a regular basis to take decisions. Decisions can be taken either by consensus, by

² http://www.who.int/occupational_health/publications/en/oehtstress.pdf.

³ http://www.euro.who.int/occhealth/stress/20050405_1.

voting or by hybrid approach. Each cohouser should get a voice, for fairness and to avoid time-bombs [12]. The use of small working groups for the daily management of the community is required. The fifth characteristic is the absence of hierarchy. The existence of rankings and leaders is acknowledged by cohousers as human processes that naturally occur in communities. However, clear mechanisms are created to ensure that everyone gets a fair opportunity to express their ideas during meetings. Finally, incomes are separated. A cohousing community is not a commune and in that sense every cohouser has to find a way to earn his or her own money. In some cases, community rooms can be hired as offices or some cohousers can be paid for occasional work.

6. Origin in liberal societies

Cohousing started 30 years ago in Denmark, and similar housing models are now booming all over the globe, mainly in the USA and in the EU [13]. The first cohousing community for 27 families was built in 1972, close to Copenhagen, by a Danish architect and a psychologist. The trigger was an article by Bodil Graae where she argued that children should have one hundred parents [14].

The result in the form of (semi-)urban communities was not a new concept. In fact, life had been organised in small communities in the pre-industrialised societies. What was new, however, was to implement this old idea in a new context and in a new way: in post-industrial societies, people rarely work where they live and the cohousing community enables them not only to recreate social links between neighbours, but also to ease the burden of daily life.

The concept spread rapidly and reached the Netherlands, where the first cohousing community was completed in 1977. Sweden, which already had a strong community history since the 1930s, followed too and the cohousing model became institutionalised and recognised by public authorities in 1980. In the last 15 years, cohousing conquered the USA, the UK, Australia, New-Zealand, Canada, and Japan. It is paradoxical to note that these models were above all set up in liberal societies, and most of the time without the help of the state (except in Sweden and the Netherlands). Yet, it shows the success of households in meeting their needs. Today one can estimate that there are over 1000 cohousing communities in operation and around the same number in the process of being finished. As Fig. 1 shows below, in the USA, the number of cohousing projects has increased decade by decade since the first book was published in 1989. An interesting indicator of the boom in the USA is the phenomenon of yahoo groups.⁴ The Internet is in fact a crucial source of information that North American cohousers have skilfully used to spread awareness and to share experiences.⁵ Recently, the idea of the cohousing model also reached new European countries [15] where some projects started in Italy, France, Belgium and Spain.

7. Recreating villages in the city

Instead of accepting passively the problems related to contemporary urban life, the cohousing movement stresses that it is possible to develop new institutions that help citizens to enjoy their daily life. Of course it would be pretentious to claim that cohousing is the only answer available or that it is the answer to every problem. Nonetheless, we argue it should be seen as an important element that can put neighbourhood on the track towards degrowth.

Values of cohousers are in fact far from the ones which the market society tends to spread. As Birgit puts it: “the important thing and the idea with this building was to create a village-like

community where you know your neighbours, where you have the security of having relations, some social capital if you wish” [16]. And this was confirmed by Randi when she explains why her family decided to move into a cohousing community: “when we married, we thought it was very nice to move from our village to Copenhagen. It was like starting a new life. But then after a while, and when we started to get children, we started missing the good things about the smaller communities. We missed the social network where it was easy to talk with other people when you came home from work, and where it was easy for the children to run around and play with other children.” [17].

In that sense cohousing is chosen by many because it provides an answer to the rise of hyper-individualism and the breakdown of community which we mentioned above. The meaning of the original Danish name for cohousing, called *bofaelleskaber*, means literally “living community” and it was designed for two main purposes: to increase the quality of cohousers’ social life and to lessen the burden of every day life, while increasing free-time at home.

8. Practical examples: cohousing goes beyond the market

In this final subsection, we want to place stress on some practical ways in which Cohousers have managed to increase their standard of living by reducing the “market solution” through developing neighbourhood relationships. The first point is related to the habit of sharing with others, the second is the optimisation of the cooking system; and finally the education of the children.

9. The habit of sharing goods and services

The first point we would like to stress is related to the way cohousing can influence daily consumption habits, mainly shifting this behaviour from an individual to more collective action. This is important because it not only enables people to save money and increase contacts with neighbours, but it also reduces the environmental footprint. A recent publication by the European Environmental Agency urges more sustainable household consumption patterns [18]. A 2008 research study by Dr. Jo Williams argued that cohousing tends to cut CO₂ emissions by 50% [19].

By the same token, Dr. Graham Meltzer argues that even if most cohousers have already tended to respect “green” values before joining a cohousing community, they often manage to behave in an even greener way thanks to the stimulus and coordination inside the community. Cohousers above all create sharing systems (and therefore reduce their consumption) of small items such as tools for gardening, maintenance, cleaning tools, cooking, small furniture, camping, etc. They also often share clothes for babies and children. And they are pretty well organised for sharing medium sized devices such as freezers, washing machines, lawn mowers, etc. The daily use of cars is also diminished for example, as use of bicycles and car-sharing grows. When the car-sharing system is well organised, then one can see a drop in the possession of car. As Jytte says: “I think we have 6 or 8 cars, and if we hadn’t these cars that families can share, then we calculated that we should have 40 cars more!” [20].

The sharing of goods and services requires an efficient organisation of the common spaces too. As Helen explains, a cohousing community is structured in a way that makes this sharing habit easier: “Downstairs there is a place with the washing machines. I have my own machine but if you do not have one you can use this one. There is also a room for kids full of cushions so that they can play what they like. On the other side, there is a bar and an empty room with a floor so you can dance, or meditate or doing yoga. This room can also be rented by people from outside. Upstairs there is also a hobby room where there are all sort of tools and wood and

⁴ <http://groups.yahoo.com/search?query=cohousing>.

⁵ <http://lists.cohousing.org/mailman/listinfo/cohousing-l>.

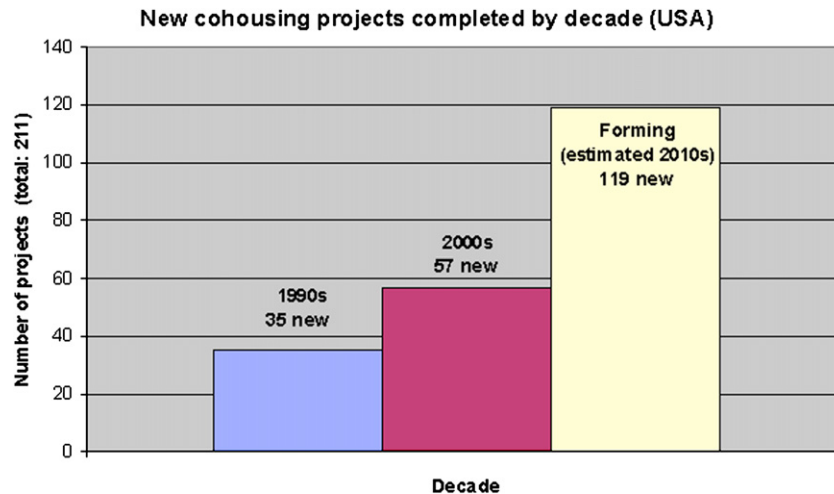


Fig. 1. Calculated on the basis of the data available on www.cohousing.org.

everybody can make use of that" [21]. In some spaces such as Munksogard or Lebensgarten, cohousers also organize a small organic food shop for the community. This enables them not only to create direct contact with local farmers and with neighbours from outside, but it also makes it possible to have quality products much cheaper and in a much greener way than one can find in supermarkets.

10. "My cooking turn is in three weeks. Today I can relax..."

If cooking is a great activity that many love, it should be recognised that it can rapidly deteriorate to a "horror movie" when it is put in the context of a rushed life: shopping for food, taking care of the kids after school, cooking, and laying the table and cleaning the dishes become complicated to do after a tiring day at work. Moreover, strong gender inequality tends to increase the sense of frustration linked to cooking. Whether we love it or hate it, assuming that the daily time that one needs for cooking activity is 90 min on average, 45 h monthly are needed. This is nothing less than one week of full time work...

All this changes in a cohousing community. On average in a community of 25–30 households it is common to cook not more than once or twice monthly. As Uffe from Trudeslund puts it: "you have to cook once every 5 weeks. And you are put together with someone new each time. There is a rotation. You can see here who is going to cook for the following month. And if you have been put on and you see you cannot make it, you are responsible yourself to find another one to take your shift" [22]. And as Caecilia explains: "And for me, as I have a full time job, it saves me cooking sometimes. So sometimes I have to cook for the whole group but the other days I can just relax and sit down when it's done" [23]. Hanne also adds: "you can have "quality time" with your children from 4 to 6 pm instead of cooking and horrors hours, when the adults are stressed and the children are stressed. You can do whatever you like and just go and eat at 6 o'clock". Moreover, as privacy is an important side of cohousing, organisation of the cooking activity does not mean that a cohouser is forced to eat with the rest of the community. In fact, anyone can take their dish and eat it in their own dwelling if they wish so.

11. Children education: easier for parents; more fun for the kids

One of the main demographic changes in our western society is the radical collapse of the birth rate since the 1960s [24]. From our

interviews, it appears clear that life in cohousing helps parents a lot with dealing with a new born baby. As Jonas explains: "there were a lot of single mothers who moved here. For a reason I suppose. The kids knew each other and they were perfectly safe or comfortable with other grown-ups as a natural thing. It was a bit like a liberation movement. You were not stuck in your own little compartment in a double meaning. It was very much "give and take" with other people" [25]. Henning also stresses that "it was a great help to have other families around us. We always had people to look after the children if we had to go to a meeting or to pick them up in the kindergarten when we came late from work" [26].

If isolation is already an important problem for many, children are also seen as another factor of greater isolation, at least in the first 30 months of the baby's life. This tends to create some difficulty in having the same social life as before. Cohousing is useful too as Ingrid says: "if you live together with other families which have children you can look after their children and expect them to look after yours if you need it. And just for the company because when you have children you can't go out in town as much as you did before. You have to have the social life at home because the children go to sleep at night" [27].

If cohousing is of great help for the parents, kids like it too. Instead of their being locked up alone inside four walls after school, the cohousing environment offers them large spaces in the common areas as well as a big community of children and teenagers to play with. Maja, a teenager from Trudeslund puts it clearly that "there are always people around you. You have a lot of neighbours. You can't go to school without seeing 1, 2 or 3 persons you know. That's the best thing. And you know everybody here. We know each others" [28]. By the same token, Bjorn explains that "a whole bunch of adults, that had grown up their childhood at this place, had a speech where they told what was the best part of growing up here. Many of them talked about the corridors and how they just grab their mattress at home and went over to which ever friend they wanted to sleep over with" [29].

12. Some limits of the cohousing movement

It would not be objective to depict the cohousing movement without including any critiques, challenges and contradictions. The first limitation is related to the ecological behaviour of cohousers. It needs to be noted that living in a cohousing community does not automatically reduce one's environmental footprint. Looking back at our field work in several cohousing communities, we can highlight that it really depends on priorities

and varies from one group to another. Cohousers are not all vegetarians, they do not all eat organically, they have not all banned the car, nor do they all create energy with windmills or solar panels on their roof. Yet a trend which is clearly visible is that the new generation of cohousing communities, built around 2000, compared to those in the 1970s, are on average much more oriented towards green building and lifestyles. I realized also that the common activities should not be idealized too much either. Again it varies from one group to another. The common evening meals for example occur 5 times a week in some places, and only once or twice in others. This is a visible example of the degree of community activities shared in cohousing. Not all cohousing communities reach the highest possible level of community sharing outside the private dwelling. Some limit themselves to a weekly meal, the laundry and a few common rooms; others decide to get involved in a much broader community sharing in terms of time, rooms and activities. From a certain analytical viewpoint, a rather reformist attitude can be detected among cohousers. In fact, most of them (not all) come from the middle class or upper middle class, are relatively well off and work in the service sectors of the economy. The speculative bubble of the real estate sectors that burst recently in the USA and to some a lesser extent in the EU, has made it extremely difficult for some sectors of society to even dream of buying a house, let alone think of a cohousing community... If the cohousing movement is to become a widespread way of life it will need a much more significant involvement and support from public authorities to help low income families and individuals. This was the case in the Netherlands and in Sweden back in the 1980s. Private actors should however also be considered as they can not only bring investment, knowledge and expertise but can also enter into efficient partnerships with local authorities. This is the case today in some US towns where public and private actors work hand in hand. The idea is that 20% of households in the cohousing community are built for people at the margins of society, such as long-term unemployed people or elderly people who cannot take care of themselves on their own anymore. In any case it is relevant to think in terms of broader partnerships across sectors, or there is the risk that the cohousing movement will remain to a great extent an elite phenomenon and will not develop its full potential for society at large.

13. Conclusion: fostering degrowth at neighbourhood level

At the dawn of the 21st century, when half of the world's population lives in cities, it is paradoxical to note that an increasing number of human beings are locked up in lifestyles that are often exhausting, asocial and environmentally damaging in many ways. Unfortunately, prospects in the near future are not bright at all. In fact, there is no evidence that long-term public policies are being implemented to reduce the existing high level of stress, competition and housing prices or to favour a better quality of interpersonal relations. To the contrary, hyper-individualism keeps growing at a fast pace and it is even reaching non-western societies known hitherto to have had strong community cohesion.

Assuming that degrowth is a crucial step towards sustainability, I would like to finish off the article by stressing two more points. One of my assumptions in this article was that the dominant ideology of unlimited growth is directly linked to media advertisements and myth about hyper-individual freedom. The market society has developed all strategies possible since WW2 to ensure that each individual could access all goods and services available on the market. To give an example, we are urged daily by the media to buy

a new model of car, laptop, washing machine, to change furniture every five years, to travel by plane every summer, and so on and so forth. While this way of living requires ever more growth and energy consumption, I argue that cohousing communities, in comparison, enable the spread of "efficient sharing" habits. Car-sharing becomes feasible at home; washing machine and tools are shared; toys and clothes for children are reused several times; services are offered between the members of the cohousing community and its neighbours, and so on. In other words, cohousing is a constructive step towards degrowth at the family and neighbourhood level.

Another conclusion behind this article is that the lack of public spaces in cities requires an unlimited growth. In fact, the main place where urban citizens nowadays "meet" is ironically the supermarket and other consumption places. The lack of spaces where people can interact and build alternatives leads to a system where individuals are atomized and don't think to create sustainability with their neighbours to meet their needs. Consumption increases growth, but it is a massive waste at different levels. In a cohousing community, the several common spaces available offer a great potential to go beyond the market economy and recreate social and practical links among people.

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