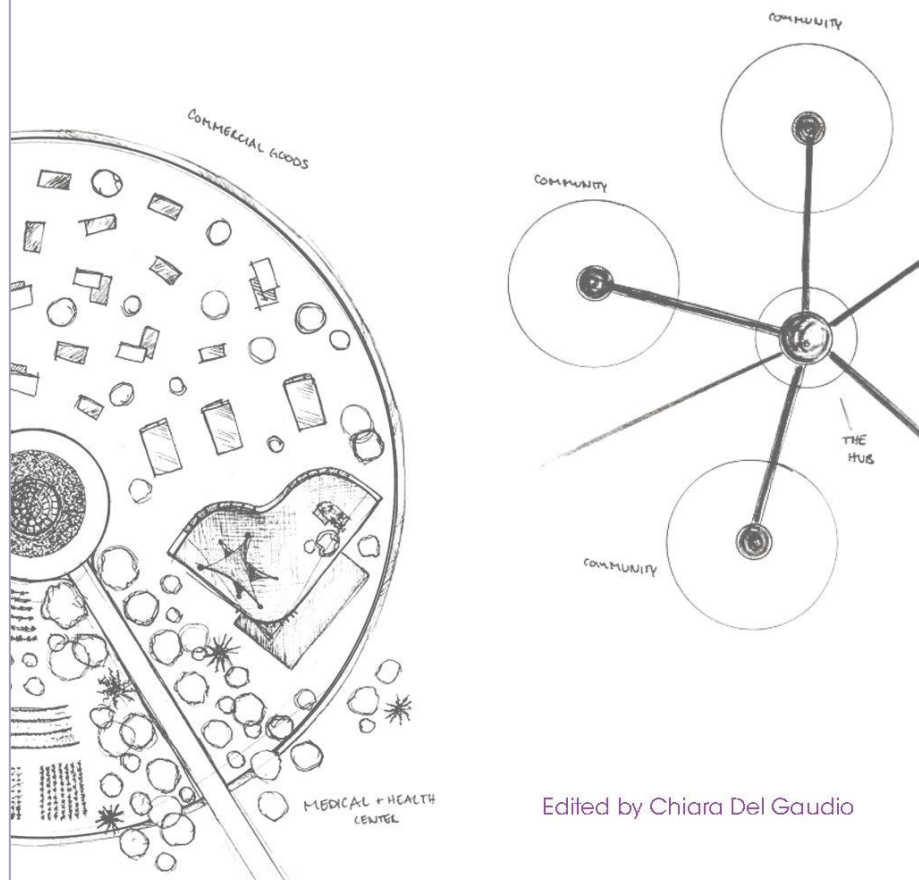


Section excerpted from:

INSIGHTS

4th-Year Students' Reflections on
Design for Social Innovation



Edited by Chiara Del Gaudio

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Innovation Through Collaboration: Redefining Community

CO-HOUSING COMMUNITY - SUSTAINABLE - COLLABORATION - INNOVATION

This paper addresses design for social innovation with regards to designing for a more sustainable life. There are many ways in which people are making more conscious lifestyle decisions within the current systems, yet a greater impact would be seen if they committed to using design as a tool to change the existing systems. One avenue along which design is being implemented is within housing systems; considering the units we live in, who we live with, where we live, what we have in our homes and who has access to them. An example of an alternative housing model that is emerging is co-housing, which is a community-based housing model that allows for people to live alongside each other and to share resources, while still maintaining their privacy within the confines of their own home (Hurst, 2018). Due to this sharing model, people living in co-housing communities have a reduced ecological footprint compared to those living in mainstream housing models. Research shows that these communities use less energy, own fewer cars, and consume less material goods as a result of their sharing principles (Stratmann et al., 2013). A unique quality of co-housing is that its “residents participate in the planning, design, ongoing management and maintenance of their community” (Canadian Cohousing Network, 2019, para.3). These collaborative and participatory characteristics raise the question of whether co-housing allows for community members and designers to cultivate a relationship that helps them move towards the overarching goal of a sustainable lifestyle.

Design for Social Innovation as Seen in Co-housing

Social innovation has been defined in many ways. For the sake of this paper, we will move forward with the understanding that social innovation consists of

new solutions that simultaneously meet a social need and lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and better use of assets and resources. In other words, social innovations are both good for society and enhance society’s capacity to act (The Young Foundation, 2012, p. 18).

Innovation differs from mere improvement: where improvement implies incremental change, innovation involves a radical shift in people’s values (Mulgan et al., 2007). The co-housing model evokes these shifts by challenging mainstream values of what a home offers its dwellers, and by redefining what community means.

To set the scene, a typical co-housing community involves residents owning their own homes or housing units which surround the *common house*, which is arguably the defining feature of these communities (Boyer, 2014). This space is a resource of shared amenities which includes a kitchen and dining room along with a variety of other facilities such as guest rooms, home office, workshops, laundry machines, children’s playroom, and so on (Boyer, 2014). Beyond access to these shared, tangible resources, co-housing provides many social benefits. The co-housing model rejects the notion that community is simply a group of people who live in close proximity with one another (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary). It allows for its residents to reframe the concept of community as an environment that evokes trust and reliance (Stratmann et al., 2013). Its members tend to have more “developed social sensitivities in terms of understanding and acceptance towards others” (Stratmann et al., 2013, p. 37). According to Stratmann et al. (2013), this level of empathy is an “underrated value in our society but highly important for human interaction” (p. 37). Through the review of a case study, examples of innovation and design

opportunities within the co-housing model are presented.

The case of *De Kersentuin – Sustainable Housing and Living*

A case study titled *De Kersentuin – Sustainable Housing and Living* was undertaken by researchers affiliated with Eindhoven University of Technology in 2007 (Ouwenland et al., 2007). This referenced paper serves as the main source of information for the case used in this section. The study focuses on a specific co-housing community, known as De Kersentuin, and how community can provide the necessary conditions to foster environmentally conscious lifestyles. De Kersentuin is located in the Netherlands and has been described as environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. The emergence of this community was a result of a group of people who took it upon themselves to create environmentally friendly living spaces, which they felt would never be provided by the state. After overcoming various challenges, their vision was realized in 2004, and is now an active neighbourhood consisting of 94 buildings and is considered to be in a stage of maturity within the development process.

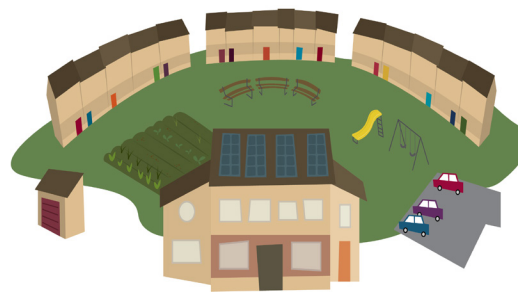
Reflecting on this study, the researchers identified sustainable benefits offered by this housing model, which they categorized in three broad groups: society, environment, and economy. It was found that within the social realm, De Kersentuin was home to a diverse population, and hosted many activities that brought and kept people together, contributing to their feeling of safety. The level of collaboration resulted in the output of many innovative initiatives and had the residents feeling as if they were part of a greater whole. Furthermore, the environmental benefits of this community included the efficient use of resources, which were shared and consistently utilized. Moreover, the inhabitants relied on a car-sharing project and used eco-friendly laundry machines, solar energy, rainwater for domestic applications, as well as growing some of their own food in community gardens. Finally, the community had many economic implications, the major benefit being the amount of money saved from sharing amenities (Ouwenland et al., 2007).

Discussion

Across many examples and cases of co-housing communities, residents, and researchers alike express that the desired environment of trust and mutual support does not automatically manifest itself upon moving to a co-housing community. It is one that must be developed

through intentional efforts from all of its members starting with the early planning stages, recognizing that being a community member is not a passive role; rather one of action. Meroni (2007) reaffirms the value of active community members when she speaks of creative communities and their ability to “introduce new solutions that bring individual interests into line with social and environmental interests, which means that they have a high chance of becoming authentically sustainable solutions” (p. 14).

Since the co-housing process is collaborative by nature, there is an opportunity for designers to use their unique skill set in order to harness the creativity emanating from community members and to help foster a collaborative environment that allows for these ideas to evolve into realities. Meroni (2007) sees designers’ role in this context as using their expertise and professional network to create effective communication systems that “recognize, reinforce and transmit, in an adequate manner, the ideas and solutions generated at a social level” (p. 14). Their contribution would increase the potential of large-scale dissemination and implementation of these grassroots initiatives. Furthermore, designers’ ability of visualization would aid effective communication amongst collaborative members. In addition, design professionals would be able to encourage collaborators to consider both physical and psychological human factors that may influence the experience of a living space and the likelihood of people adopting the co-housing model. In conclusion, there are benefits for co-housing communities to invite designers into their creative process. Meroni (2007) suggests that this functional relationship will only be successful when professional designers see themselves as “social actors” (p. 14) or “solution providers” (p. 15) and are able to recognize that they do not hold a monopoly on the practice of design. While in the process of answering one question, another question has emerged: How can designers gracefully remove themselves from a given community, after working so closely with its residents during the development phase, without disrupting the social fabric that everyone involved has worked so hard to cultivate?



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Innovation Through Collaboration

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