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### **The effects of cohousing on the social housing system: the case of the Threshold Centre**

This work aims to assess if cohousing communities might generate positive effects in terms of social housing. Cohousing projects are "supportive" communities where many types of informal support networks arise, referring to the concept of sharing spaces, facilities, but also properties, the decision-making process and experiences. The costs of the sites and construction are often higher than a "normal condominium" (especially if they are resident-led communities) and sometimes they might be responsible for the failure of the groups: inhabitants of those communities born spontaneously, without any kind of public aid, are mainly from a medium-high economic-social status. However, in the UK, where cohousing follows mainly a grass-roots model, some communities are able to keep the costs down, in particular by the creation of mixed tenure systems, collaboration with Housing Associations and self-building processes. The Threshold Centre in England allocates 50% of the residential units for social housing. The collaboration with a Housing Association produced a "good housing" model, which allowed both a reduction in construction time, and a guarantee of the creation of a heterogeneous group (but with a compact identity), as well as the inclusion of socio-economically vulnerable people.

Cohousing, Community life, Housing Association, Social Housing, Sustainable Development, Threshold Centre.

### **Introduction**

A number of studies have been produced on the cohousing phenomenon. They mainly concern architectural features, physical layout, common facilities, legal structures, decision-making processes (Fromm, 1991; McCamant and Durrett, 1998; 2011; Bamford, 2001; Field, 2004; Scotthanson C. and Scotthanson K., 2005; Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2005; Lietaert, 2007; Sargisson,

2010), and internal social dynamics (Blank, 2001; Field, 2004; Bouma and Voorbij, 2009; Williams, 2005, 2008; Sargisson, 2010; Jarvis, 2011; Chatterton, 2013). Moreover, a part of the literature focuses on relations between cohousing and the environment (Bamford, 2001; Brown, 2004; Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2008; Sargisson, 2010; Chatterton, 2013). Cohousing communities consist of private homes around a common network of facilities (shared kitchen, dining rooms, child care facilities, libraries, laundries, gymnasiums, cafeterias, offices, gardens, guest rooms etc.). They combine rented and privately owned homes and, in some cases, they are "all-rented" communities. Usually, an ownership (or rental) contract specifies an amount of work expected from each adult member per month (babysitting, gardening, maintenance work, etc.) (Sargisson, 2010). Moreover, car and bike-sharing systems can be made available. Usually residents of cohousing communities share weekly meals in a common house. The number and ways in which they are prepared are different in each community (see Blank, 2001). The size of the sites varies depending on the number of inhabitants, facilities, economic resources and whether communities are built on existing or new sites.

The first cohousing community arose in the 1970s in Denmark, and then the phenomenon spread in Northern Europe (Sweden, Holland, Denmark), North America, and to a lesser extent, in Great Britain, Germany, Norway, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. In Northern Europe cohousing is often state-financed due to a solid social policies system which defends the universal right to have a house. In Great Britain about 15 established communities and about 40 developing projects exist, but they are mainly resident-financed. Recently, groups have been trying to create partnerships with Housing Associations (e.g., the Threshold Centre, Dorset; the Cohousing Woodside, North London, and the Baltic Wharf Cohousing Group, Devon). A second wave of cohousing communities could be identified in North America (see Williams, 2008; Sargisson, 2010), which was introduced in 1988 by two architects (Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett). Different from the European model, in North America cohousing is mainly resident-financed without any kind of public financial support (see Fromm, 1991; 2000; Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2008; Sargisson, 2010; Durrett and McCamant, 2011). Finally, a third wave has been identified in relation to a few cohousing projects in Australia, New Zealand and Japan (see Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2005).

The historical roots of the cohousing "philosophy" may be represented by hippie communities of the 1960s: as Lietaert (2011) points out many of the initiators of cohousing come from student movements or have previous experiences in community life. On the one hand, the connection between cohousing and communes can be identified in the same willingness to address the "daily life problems" in a collective way (Francescato, 2010); on the other, cohousing differs from hippie experiences in relation to a very clear boundary between private and public dimensions, because

they do not aim to reach a "totalizing communitarianism". According to Field (2004), utopian principles and the Garden Cities Movement, inspired by Howard (1974), are reflected in the co-operatives, communes and squatters, developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of these echoes are also present in cohousing communities: they achieve a compromise between "totalizing" forms of shared living and the "extreme" individualism. Furthermore, some similarities may be found between cohousing architecture and the Modern Movement in Architecture, in particular referring to shared spaces provided by Le Corbusier's *unité d'habitation*. Finally, cohousing might be assimilated to those projects that Harvey (1999) defines as "practices of searching for a space 'outside' of hegemonic social relations and valuations". In fact, cohousing projects might be seen as "communities" in which people choose to live in an "unconventional" way in order to struggle against the social order imposed from outside.

This paper is structured in six paragraphs: the first one identifies some constitutive principles of the phenomenon; the second one describes the methodology applied in investigating the phenomenon; the third refers to the Threshold Centre in relation to its "social" character; the fourth concerns the structure, organization and community daily life of cohousing communities, also referring to the existing literature produced on the phenomenon by sociologists, geographers, and architects; the fifth considers the cohousing phenomenon as a potential social housing scheme; finally, some conclusions will be drawn.

### **Cohousing Developments**

According to Field (2004), basic conditions for the development of cohousing projects are identified in intentionality, design for facilitating processes of socialization, presence of private and common facilities, group size to support community dynamics and control and self-management.

Usually, a cohousing community needs a long time to become fully developed, because it requires the provision of a cohesive group, common goals and a physical site. Each group defines both the physical structure and internal rules. Usually, the forming group process takes a long time because cohousers need to create a strong group that may come over problems that arise during all phases of the development process. According to Tuckman (1965), the development process might be summarized in four steps: *forming* (people start to know each other), *storming* (conflicts arise within the group), *norming* (rules are adopted by the group in order to become more cohesive), *performing* (rules become more flexible due to the increasing trust among neighbours).

A cohousing system can be considered in a "naive way" because it aims to achieve the "correct functioning" of the community through a "self-reliance system" (Tarozzi, 1992), which aims to satisfy the material and immaterial needs of its inhabitants. In cohousing communities, people

would develop a strong sense of belonging in relation to many factors, but in particular thanks to a very active participation in decision-making and design processes (Dioguardi, 2001). Groups take part in each aspect of the community's development process: they participate in designing the physical layout of communities, collectively manage the site, share common facilities and spaces, but they have private homes and do not share finances (usually they manage a common fund only in relation to common possessions). As Biraghi (2011) points out, communities also tend to create a strong sense of safety because people directly manage and control their spaces. In this vein, Brenton (2008) underlines that the participative process becomes the cornerstone on which cohousers get to know each other, develop a sense of ownership and establish group cohesion (Brenton, 2008). Different from a top-down approach (i.e., through partnerships between external investors), which often brings together people who are strangers to each other (Brenton, 2008), this "collaborative and participatory system" allows people to know each other. Some scholars point out the participation in the decision-making process as a key element in social interaction (Fromm, 1991; McCamant and Durrett, 1994; Brenton, 1998), but, at the same time, it might contribute to creating conflicts (Williams, 2005; Sargisson, 2010). Almost all scholars (Fromm, 2000; Field, 2004; Renz, 2006a; 2006b; Scotthanson C. and Scotthanson K., 2005; Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2005; Lietaert, 2007; Sargisson, 2010), highlight the difficulty in managing decision-making processes in a collective way (see Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). In fact, "consensus", which requires unanimity, is the cornerstone of the cohousing governance system, even though it requires time, patience, and a strong willingness to solve potential internal conflicts (Sargisson, 2010). Findings obtained by Kirby (2003) in Ithaca (EVI) show that the "consensus system" is considered by residents as "a beautiful process in theory", "ponderous" and "the tyranny of the minority". The "consensus" is considered the most democratic system in decision-making, but it is supposed to be a long process that may become problematic. Furthermore, it could be argued that even though the minority could ask to restart the decision making again and again, finally someone will be asked to stop raising complaints due to the need to conclude the process.

Finally, cohousing cannot be simply defined as a "big condominium" where people do not know each other and they only try to find ways to get along. Cohousing groups are "intentional communities": as Fromm (1991), Bamford (2001), Kirby (2003), Sargisson (2010) Jarvis (2011) point out, "intentionality" is the pillar of the mutual support and cohousing governance. Bamford (2001) identifies the "intentional designed neighbourhood" (Bamford, 2001) as one of the main characteristics of cohousing projects. According to Meijering et al. (2007), intentional communities represent an attempt to create "a common, alternative way of life outside mainstream society". In cohousing communities, common aims may be firstly identified in the intention to create a "friendly

neighbourhood" in order to restore and redefine relationships among neighbourhood units (in terms of "neighbourliness"), and escape from the "alienated, isolated and disconnected social life in the city" (Sargisson, 2010); secondly in the creation of a community life, while preserving the private dimension. At the same time, there is a need to consider the "dark side" of the social capital (see Bourdieu, 1980; 1986; Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1993; 2000) contained within communitarian forms: this "dark side" may lead groups to become closed and hostile against the institutions and "outsiders" (Castells, 1997; Karn, 2004). This is the reason why the reciprocity and trust in people (considered key elements in the creation of social capital by Putnam, 2000; Paldam and Svendsen, 2000) are not sufficient in providing successful neighbourhood relationships. By contrast, against the closure of cohousing communities Poley's (2007) research on 56 cohousing projects in North America highlights that cohousers improve their relationships not only inside the community, but also in the wider neighbourhood.

## **Methodology**

The Threshold Centre (Gillingham, Dorset) was chosen due to its "semi-social" character. The community was analysed in terms of its history, internal structure, physical layout and social dynamics, decision-making process and governance, social interaction within the group, environmental sustainability, relations with the outside and effects produced in the wider context from which it arose.

Two techniques of analysis connected to the "qualitative" (semi-structured interviews and cognitive maps) were referred to. The units of analysis were: the individual, the group, the community, the internal organization and the relations with the wider context from which the community arose. The internal composition was investigated with reference to the social, cultural, and economic capitals of the residents, tasks required for each member, residents' personal experiences, group cohesion, common interests and goals, sense of belonging and development of a group "identity", internal organization and decision-making process. Semi-structured interviews referred to a list of topics and questions were added according to the themes and ideas recalled each time by respondents. The topics were:

- Cohousing in the UK;
- Personal motivations;
- The composition of the first group;
- Legal structure;
- Relations with the institutions (and other kinds of support);
- Obstacles;

- Meaning of "selection system";
- Rental system;
- Internal organization;
- "Turnover";
- Decision-making process;
- Physical layout and social life
- Social dynamics and privacy (public and private spaces);
- Activities and shared facilities;
- Shared values and "ideologies";
- Relations with the outside;
- Safety.

Following Lynch's method, cohousers were asked to draw two cognitive maps in order to record their image of the internal and external community spaces. The first map referred to the internal community spaces, the second to the surroundings. The first one aimed to investigate how residents perceive those spaces designed by themselves; the second, how they perceive the spaces outside the community. Paths (along which each cohouser moves daily), edges (points of breaks in continuity), districts ("medium-to-large sections" of the community and the surroundings), nodes (strategic parts inside and outside the community), and landmarks (parts that they felt as significant point-reference) were identified in both inside and outside the community. Cognitive maps were useful to understand where social interaction is concentrated, which areas represent opportunities for socializing within the community, residents' "habits", spaces and their use.

Finally, they were asked to use coloured pencils to identify different elements (car free areas, public and private spaces) and indicate the intensity of use of those spaces they had already indicated.

### **The Threshold Centre, Cole Street Farm**

The Threshold Centre is a small community of 14 dwellings, born of an idea of Alan Heeks in a rural area of Gillingham (Dorset) in 2002, Heeks aimed to create an affordable cohousing community thanks to a partnership with a Housing Association. The Threshold Centre consists of 18 adults (six men and twelve women): six members of the original group still own their houses even though two members have rented theirs out. Residents are mainly singles (there are only two couples) over 40 years old (the age range is between 45 and 70 years).

In 2005 a group of six individuals created a non-profit company and bought an existing site, the Cole Street Farm: the original planning application provided for "social houses", but it was rejected by the Local Planning Committee. This is the reason why the group tried to collaborate with the

East Dorset Housing Association (Synergy Housing Group): in 2007 the final project provided 14 dwellings and 50% of the community was established a social housing scheme. The project was completed in 2008: the partnership with a Housing Association significantly reduced the approval time, even though it required the negotiation and sacrifice of some cohousers' goals.

Residents can be owners (shareholders), renters and co-owners (they own a part of their house and pay an affordable rent to Synergy Housing for the remaining portion). The costs of properties (until 2009) have varied from £68,000 (one bedroom) to £115,000 (three bedrooms) and from £160,000 to £180,000 for the largest types. The highest price registered was £230,000<sup>1</sup>. The rent is lower than that provided by the free market: the weekly rent is about £88 (one bedroom), which is higher than public housing rent in the South West (around £67 per week in 2011), than "social rent" provided by other private actors, such as a Housing Association (around £76), and more than the English average (respectively £72 for public housing rent and £78 for social housing rent) (Randall, 2012). However, this is lower (more than 50%) than the free market prices in the South West (£197) (Communities and Local Government, 2010-2011).

The Threshold Centre renovated an existing site: it consists of 14 semi-detached houses located around a lawn. About one acre of land is separated from the community and it is located on the other side of a public road. The parking area is located at the entrance of the community. The common house (Farm House) consists of three floors, and common services are placed on the ground floor; a common laundry is placed nearby the Farm House (cohousers have decided not to buy washing machines individually). The common houses and the central lawn are the most important socialization points within the community (even in relation to the small size of the site): cohousers indicated a daily frequency of both.

In relation to the presence of two investors (the group and the Housing Association) new potential residents are selected by both, the group and the Housing Association: Housing Association refers to its waiting list (mainly based on economic criteria), whilst potential residents are asked to spend an amount of time within the community. They are also "selected" by the group in relation to their sex (due to a prevalence of women in the group) in order to balance the internal composition (at least one third of members has to be represented by men). Residents share a common way of life: they share several spiritual and meditation practices. The strong sharing of values might also depend on the small size of the group and site (they are 18 members who live in 14 houses concentrated in a site of around 1.5 acres in size).

The Threshold Centre adopted the consensus decision-making system, hence all residents (including renters and co-owners) should agree with the decisions taken. In fact, Synergy Housing allows

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<sup>1</sup> In Dorset (2010) housing prices are higher (£263.916) than South West (£228.940) and England (£240.033) (Office for National Statistics, 2012).

tenants to vote on decisions that do not regard economic issues. A voting system is provided in case members are not able to reach an agreement (but they have rarely used this system).

There are also many activities which involve members (and, sometimes, people from outside): cohousers share dinner twice a week (Thursday and Saturday), cook common dinners together, organize work days and work weekends. The Threshold Centre is also an "environmental education centre" and it organizes several courses about environmental sustainability.

### **Threshold Centre community daily life**

In the Threshold Centre, a structured social life promotes common activities and pushes cohousers to meet up in order to develop stronger relationships. This could also be explained in relation to the small size of the project that allows people to create stronger and more intimate relationships due to the physical proximity. In the Threshold Centre the physical layout was adapted to a pre-existing site, keeping the original layout of buildings. However, residents participated in physically designing the community (e.g., deciding the location of common spaces). The participation in designing the community in physical terms may explain the cohousers' perception of internal spaces, as shown by their cognitive maps. In fact, comparing their maps it is possible to identify some common points which contribute to creating a "collective perception" of the community. At least four architectural/physical levels can be identified, which match with different cohousers' perceptions of the community life.

A first level is represented by private houses, the common house and the central lawn. Almost all cohousers drew their maps starting from one of these elements and they stated that these are the cornerstones on which the community life is based. Both the common house and the central lawn are considered as landmarks by cohousers for satisfying their needs of socialization. They also indicated a higher frequency of "collective use" of these spaces (especially, the common house and the lawn). They indicated their paths to reach different nodes (as for example the laundry and the common house) through a steady crossing (or moving around) of the central lawn.

A second level may be identified in other cohousers' houses and the laundry facilities. In the first case, cohousers distinguished their neighbours' houses in relation to reciprocal more or less intimate relationships; in the second, cohousers not only indicated the laundry as a common facility, but they recognized its role in promoting casual meetings. In fact, the absence of washing machines in private houses allows people to meet each other there.

A third level is represented by the vegetable garden, which is outside the community and located on the other side of a public road. The majority of inhabitants forgot to draw this and, only under a specific request, they became aware of this deficiency. Some cohousers, who are particularly



involved in gardening activities, draw their maps starting from this point; some others found the cause of their space's misperception in the spatial distance from the concentration of houses. Finally, one-half of cohousers forgot to draw the parking area that is located at the entrance of the community. Even though cars can reach the common house entrance, and this generally happens when people get shopping from their cars, cohousers feel that the community is entirely a car-free area. Moreover, they drew the community following a circle shape with all houses facing the central lawn. By contrast, two flats are separated from the concentration of houses and one of them faces the car parking area. Although the community is represented according to this circle shape, which may indicate a closed community from the outside, none of the respondents indicated boundaries or edges, as points of break between the inside and the outside. Even in the context of a real absence of gates in the community, cohousers feel safe and leave their front doors open. They explain their high sense of safety in relation to both the physical layout of the community, which allows a wide visioning of the space, and the constant presence of people on the site.

While the community is described in detail, when cohousers were asked to draw a second map about the surroundings, they indicated very long paths and nodes, which are far from the community, in relation to the scarcity of services in the area (they live in a rural context).

In addition to the participation in physically designing the community, the self-management of common spaces contributes to defining the community life and the "collective perception" of this. In fact, this regards many aspects of the Threshold Centre daily life, including informal mutual help among cohousers. In the Threshold Centre the "informal mutual-help" (Hoch and Hemmens, 1967) may depend on the degree of heterogeneity, the residential stability, the age of the community and personal factors (Williams, 2005). When cohousers buy a house they also sign a "contract", which includes a wide range of collective activities and work (for example: gardening, cooking, maintenance work, cleaning). These represent the "infrastructure of daily life" (Jarvis, 2010) which involves all aspects of the cohousers' "public life". These sets of rules and agreements affect members' behaviours because they are responsible for the community life. The participation in all steps of the development process, in addition to the self-management and formal and informal care systems, might be seen as key elements in producing a sense of belonging and social capital. In fact, everyone is supposed to feel part of the community and operate in order to satisfy personal and collective needs. In the Threshold Centre, cohousers are supposed to be able to discuss all issues together concerning the common spaces and activities, in relation to their common vision and goals. In fact, cohousers interviewed share the same intention to create the "village atmosphere" in which the neighbourhood is able to create formal and informal mutual-support networks. This need might be explained in relation to the impossibility to find the same relationships within a "normal"

neighbourhood. Cohousers identify only one difference between the cohousing and village lifestyle: this is the intention of relating more to each other.

In addition, the Threshold Centre might be defined as a "spiritual and green community" where spiritual practices are deeply rooted, as is environmental care. Cohousers have to share common values about lifestyles (even in relation to the consensus system that otherwise would become very complex), even though they do not share any political ideology and religious faith. In relation to the residents' selection system cohousing might be read as a form of "self-segregation". At the same time, it can be argued that the selection is more an abstract principle than a real recruitment system because people tend to self-select themselves. However, this means that cohousers have to share lifestyles and values to some degree. Literature describes cohousing communities as characterized by ideological heterogeneity (from the political ideas to religious faith), although the intention to create a "community life" often involves, at least, a minimal adhesion to a common "ideological base" (see Horelli and Vespa, 1994; Sargisson and Sargent, 2004; Chiodi, 2012), such as the environmental care and spirituality in the Threshold Centre. In the Threshold Centre, rules might be read as a key to "recruiting" members and verifying their "compatibility". This means that the cohousing lifestyle is not suitable for everybody, because people should share values. In fact, the community does not recruit any new members, but potential inhabitants select themselves if they feel suitable for the community lifestyle. At the same time, cohousers stated that they adopt this general principle to protect themselves and their sense of community. Referring to Meijering et al. (2007), the Threshold Centre might be described as a hybrid form between a "communal and practical community": in the first case people share an ideology, mainly based on the strong relationships between members in order to get over the typical individualism of contemporary society (they are located mainly in rural contexts); in the second, communities arise in relation to practical needs (they are located in urban and suburban contexts).

With regards to the internal organization, it can be argued that the Threshold Centre has been able to balance the private and public dimensions. Results from cognitive maps, highlighted that the perception of private and public spaces is very different in relation to the individual and collective use of these. However, cohousers agree in identifying (even at different degrees) the common house, the lawn, the laundry and the vegetable garden as public spaces, while in general they define their houses as private spaces. Even in the common house the ground and the second floor are recognized as being public, but the first floor is defined as private by some cohousers. In fact, two cohousers live in the common house, and they have a room on the first floor. In general, residents "defend" their private spaces (home), whilst internal common spaces (which are public for cohousers) may be defined as "semi-public" for the outsiders (cohousers prefer to plan external

visits). The community provides activities, meetings and facilities that are "public" and potentially accessible to people who do not belong to the group. The "semi-public" or "semi-private" spaces are functional to reaching these goals, but people from outside know that they are not exactly public spaces, so they have to respect them much more. In short, people from outside feel like the guests they are.

Furthermore, the other relevant feature of the Threshold Centre concerns the relationship between buildings and the environment, the cohousing lifestyle and the residents' well-being. For many scholars, cohousing is a low-impact lifestyle that adopts natural materials in the building process, uses renewable resources, contributes to reducing car use, energy consumption and carbon emission rates, promotes food production, and affects individual behaviour in terms of using bicycles, recycling, gardening and sharing resources (see Brown, 2004; Meltzer, 2005; Lietaert, 2007; Chatterton, 2013). At the same time, some contradictions can be highlighted with respect to the relationship between cohousing communities and the environment: living in a cohousing community does not necessarily mean reducing one's "carbon footprint" because each group or single person is more or less environmentally-oriented (Lietaert, 2010). Evaluating the impact of cohousing communities on the environment, it is also important to consider the sites where communities are located (urban, suburban or rural), and if they are new constructions or renovations of existing buildings. The Threshold Centre is located in a rural context (around two miles from Gillingham - 25 miles West of Salisbury - 100 miles from London); this is the reason why very often people from Gillingham do not participate in the common activities, even in relation to the distances between the village and the cohousing. However, often cohousers invite people from Gillingham to participate in events, activities, parties, courses and afternoon tea, because they are truly convinced that it is very important to create good relations with the wider neighbourhood.

The Threshold Centre is also an "environmental education centre" and it organizes several courses about environmental sustainability. Furthermore, cohousers apply permaculture principles in gardening, make the compost, collect rainwater and produce clean water through a biodigester, share the laundry, do the recycling, share cars and bikes, produce energy through photovoltaic panels and use a central biomass heating system. Although the community is environmentally-oriented, not everyone has chosen to live in the community for environmental reasons: the environment is important for residents, but it does not represent the main reason for becoming a cohouser.

### **Between cohousing and social housing**

A review of the literature shows that all cohousing communities have to deal with almost the same problems (at least in the early stages) regarding: the group-forming process, long timescales, approval of projects by institutions, finding money and a construction company, and rejection by local communities. Usually, the "forming-group" is one of the longest phases: the Threshold Centre was able to reduce the timescale in relation to a partnership with a Housing Association. This solution may be assimilated to the "Community Housing Partnership Enablers" (COHOPE) formula suggested by Field (2004): cohousers recruit an external facilitator who helps them during the forming and development phases. Moreover, enablers could help groups in finding local partners (Housing Association, Development Trust, Ecodeveloper, etc.) and grants, by negotiating with local authorities in order to get the necessary approvals. At the same time, the inclusion of an external partner should respect the cohousing scheme, which is based on the inhabitants' intentionality to become part of a community. In fact, external bodies, such as for example a Housing Association, have to evaluate both willingness and capabilities of potential members to both live in a "community", and take part in common activities and work. However, the Threshold Centre has been able to create a scheme in which "social housing residents" participate in all aspects of the cohousing life. This outcome depends on the participation of the whole group in managing activities, the decision-making process and the internal organization of the community. Even though new members (in particular social housing residents) did not take part in the *forming phase* they have been "selected" after a steady participation in community life, taking part in common dinners, work days and work weekends. For cohousers these represented significant moments for both understanding if the community lifestyle fitted with their needs, and developing their sense of belonging to the group. Moreover, referring to resident-led communities, the selection system might be connected to economic forces that can exclude some people who cannot afford to buy a house there. As Williams (2008) and Bouma and Voorbij (2009) point out, resident-led communities are very homogeneous from the social and economic point of view. High costs are also related to the lack of external public or private (Housing Associations) funds. For this reason, partnerships with external bodies might reduce the costs: in the Threshold Centre the social-economic heterogeneity is more evident in relation to its partnership with a Housing Association that helps to keep the costs down.

There are many variables that can affect the absence of heterogeneity (in economic, cultural and social terms) within resident-led communities. This can be explained in relation to the principle of "self-selection", which might become a "self-exclusion". In fact, although the selection system represents only an abstract concept (not applied in the majority of cases), it theoretically aims to identify the most suitable members for the cohousing lifestyle (for this reason, they can be defined

as an elite) and emphasize the need to select active members. At the same time, construction costs of a cohousing community are often higher than a "normal condominium", especially if private groups manage the entire project. In resident-led communities, residents are responsible for all costs and risks of the projects, they have to choose a legal form, establish a budget and how to proceed, and select professionals who have to be involved. At the same time, it is suggested that members of cohousing for rent and partnerships might not have the same "freedom of choice", because an external investor can decide instead of them, and it may result in less involvement among inhabitants. In fact, partnerships (as well as speculative models) may follow a top-down logic: on the one hand, cohousers can be free from any financial responsibilities, limiting their commitment and reducing the risks of the resident-led model; on the other, it can affect the internal cohesion of the group (see also Williams, 2008). The Threshold Centre allocates 50% of the residential units for social housing: this might be considered as a "successful" model because it efficiently combines the "social" with the "private" level, allowing cohousers to have higher degrees of freedom. In fact, the Housing Association allows tenants to take part in the decision-making process. It is responsible only for financial investments. Furthermore, the collaboration with a Housing Association has produced the reduction of the time scales in getting approvals by institutions and building the community.

As regards the sharing of common values, it is a key element in particular in the early stages of the process, and then, in managing the site, activities and community social life. The forming group phase is very important because cohousers have to get to know each other in order to verify the possibility of their cohabitation. Moreover, it is necessary to establish priorities and find solutions for potential problems that arise during the development process. In this sense, the group might be defined as an elitist group, because members are characterized by common values. In fact, the Threshold Centre has specific guidelines and goals related to spirituality and environment. This is also characterized by the prevalence of middle-aged single women.

Among the motivations that led members to become cohousers there is a common need to trust people. In fact, cohousers believe that in big cities (from where they come) it is very difficult to create friendly relationships among neighbours. Through the "infrastructure of cohousing daily life" the group is able to create its own identity, and residents are more likely to take a part in common activities. This means that cohousers are supposed to be characterized by a strong "intentionality" to take part in community life. The Threshold Centre develops a strong sense of belonging that has to be read also in relation to the small number of residents. The sharing of values is also connected to the trust-development among the residents and with their capacity to organize and manage the community without compromising the relationships within the group. The Threshold Centre adopts

the consensus decision-making system because they consider this as the most democratic system (in the second instance, they can actually use majority vote). It could be suggested that this scheme is more difficult to apply to those bigger communities that follow a top-down logic (in relation to the presence of an external investor who administers the community). The decision-making process can become very long and, however, it can lead to taking decisions that are not accepted by all members (unanimity is not always easy to be reached).

It can be argued that besides the advantages already counted, partnerships with external bodies might produce two other positive effects: the first one regards the possibility that cohousing groups are "forced" to make available in the wider context and directly manage those facilities that would normally be government responsibilities (McKenzie, 2005; McKenzie, 2006); the second one concerns the environmental sustainability as a constitutive principle of cohousing communities (as happens in the Threshold Centre). In fact, self-sufficient and self-organized communities reduce the need to use cars, to go out in relation to the presence of cultural and entertainment activities and, in some cases, even to work, given the presence of offices aimed at this purpose. Communities can also renovate existing sites (as the Threshold Centre) and they can arise in urban or rural areas. Cohousing communities, which arise in an urban context, are supposed to be more likely to participate in the wider community life in relation to the physical proximity to the town, and reduce the use of private transport mainly referring to the public one. The eco-friendly orientation is also connected to economic resources of groups: this orientation can be read, as Meltzer (2005), Williams (2008) and Lietaert (2010) argue, in relation to those social practices oriented to the sharing that can reduce the "environmental impact" in a spontaneous way despite the lack of an "environmental ideology". Social networks and sharing practices can help to reduce consumption and waste production, thanks to the recycling and activation of transport-sharing systems (Williams, 2008).

Finally, the possibility that partnerships with Housing Association may fail is mainly connected to a potential top-down logic that might limit residents' freedom, avoid people taking part in all phases of the development process and managing the community life. If people do not independently choose to live in a cohousing community and they start to live together without knowing each other, the possibility that they will develop a sense of community might be negatively affected. This means that social housing (in the cohousing form) might promote participative practices and directly ask people what they need. In this vein, the Threshold Centre represents a "good housing" model because it follows a bottom-up logic: people apply in order to live in the cohousing community, then, if they are eligible for social housing they can become members thanks to the Housing Association.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, if one is willing to extend the results of the partnership between the Threshold Centre and the Synergy Housing Group, then it is possible to identify the following advantages stemming from the cooperation between Housing Associations and cohousing communities: higher heterogeneity (in economic, cultural and social backgrounds of cohousers); reduced approval and construction timescales; reduced costs; possibility for social housing inhabitants to take part in the decision-making process (and managing the community life). Furthermore, in general, partnerships might "force" cohousers to make their facilities available in the wider context and build environmentally-oriented communities (thanks to public or private financial supports).

Usually the high costs of the sites and construction contribute to making homogeneous groups (in economic, but also social and cultural terms). For this reason, inhabitants of communities born spontaneously, without any kind of public aid, are mainly of medium-high economic-social status because they bear all the financial costs (Williams, 2008). Vulnerable people are often excluded from cohousing communities because of the absence of external financial support (private or public). The Threshold Centre allocates 50% of the residential units for social housing (thanks to a Housing Association). The engagement of an external developer does not affect the sense of community and "intentionality" because cohousers and external providers efficiently combine the "social" with the "private" level, allowing cohousers to have higher degrees of freedom. Through the "infrastructure of cohousing daily life" the group is able to create its own identity, and residents are more likely to take part in common activities. Cohousers are characterized by a strong "intentionality" to take part in community life and they have developed a strong sense of belonging, thanks to a bottom-up logic. Members firstly decided to become part of the community (after participating in common activities and works) and having then applied for social housing.

Furthermore, the Threshold Centre is able to produce several positive effects in the wider context, despite its rural location, in relation to the organization of different kinds of activities open towards the outside and making its facilities and spaces available for people from outside the community. The community is also strongly environmentally-oriented despite the lack of an environmental ideology: it renovated an existing site, cohousers apply permaculture principles in gardening, make compost, collect rainwater and produce clean water through a biodigester, share the laundry facilities, recycle, share cars and bikes, produce energy through photovoltaic panels and use a central biomass heating system.

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