

Cohousing is empowering people to fight back against a global housing crisis

[Johannes Novy](#), University of Westminster

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¹ The debate around how to fix [the global housing crisis](#) usually **hinges** on whether more market or more state is required. Some people stress the need for additional housing stock and less **regulatory red tape**, so that the market can create it. Others claim that stricter government measures – against **ruthless** developers and landlords, more rent control, and more public housing – are crucial.

² Increasingly, policymakers are paying [attention](#) to what lies between the public and private **sectors**. The United Nations' [New Urban Agenda](#) – a key international policy framework to promote sustainable urban development – highlights the benefits of “cooperative solutions, such as **cohousing**, **community land trusts** and other forms of collective **tenure**”. A slew of recent [community-led](#) housing projects [across Europe](#) and [beyond](#) show how this can work.

³ [Cohousing](#) includes all kinds of **edifices**, new and existing. It is not tied to a particular type of tenure. And the groups of people it involves can vary considerably in size. At its heart are two key principles. Residents do not only live next to each other, but with each other, in buildings that **comprise communal** spaces and facilities. And they take the lead, or at least are involved in, the design and management of their communities.

Communal life

⁴ German sociologist Anja Szypulski has lauded the “[abundant potential](#)” cohousing **proffers** for sustainable housing and neighbourhood development. The first way it does this is by promoting an **ethos** of participation and sharing.

⁵ Residents are involved throughout the building process. When, in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, a developer pulled out of a state-owned site in Cambridge, the city council **opted** for a cohousing **initiative** to build on the land instead, precisely because of the social and community benefits that would bring.

⁶ The resulting [Marmalade Lane](#) project opened in 2018 after four years, during which the cohousing members developed the architectural **brief**, sought planning permission and contracted builders.

⁷ Residents also often take part in actually building their homes too. The [Church Grove project](#) in Lewisham, south London, is a community-led housing development on an old **derelict** school and industrial site. When completed it will count 36 homes designed to be permanently affordable. To keep the costs low, future residents are involved in this construction process. They have already built a [communal hall](#) on the site.

⁸ Community also shapes daily life in a cohousing project. Marmalade Lane residents share 42 homes – houses and **flats**, both – organised around a common house with a shared kitchen, **refectory** and fireplace, a pedestrianised lane, outdoor play area and garden, a laundry, a gym and a workshop.

⁹ Similarly, [La Borda](#), in Barcelona, is a cooperative housing block comprising 28 apartments, organised around a communal, open-plan **atrium**. Residents share a kitchen-dining area, a laundry room, guest rooms and generous outdoor spaces. Their flats were deliberately designed small, with movable walls, so that a room belonging to one flat could become part of another, as the need arose.

Socially and architecturally sustainable



The facade of the La Borda cohousing development in Barcelona. [VELKEJ LED I Wikimedia, CC BY-SA](#)

¹⁰ The La Borda project contributes to the wider community, too, by organising events and sourcing goods from local **cooperatives**. It is based on a participatory planning process and costs have been kept low through the use of smart low-tech solutions and a lot of self-help during construction by its future users, who are also responsible for the maintenance and management of the project. Decisions are made collectively in a general assembly and all adults participate in various committees that deal with different issues, from financial matters to communal dinners.

¹¹ While the idea of committee meetings and doors facing each other won't appeal to everyone, the benefits of knowing you're not alone are clear. Residents at Marmalade Lane [have spoken](#) about children playing together, stay-at-home mothers not feeling isolated and retirees being engaged and occupied.

¹² The [UK Cohousing network](#) describes cohousing as a “way of resolving the isolation many people experience today, recreating the neighbourly support of the past”. And research bears this out. A [recent study](#) on the way cohousing dwellers in the UK coped with lockdown found that many residents experienced a level of **mutual** support and care that went well beyond the general good neighbourliness of the early days of the pandemic.

¹³ Cohousing projects also encourage **sustainability** by typically being built for the long term. The Marmalade Lane buildings used environmentally-friendly materials and designs that promote low-energy use for a small **carbon footprint**.

¹⁴ Critics have lauded La Borda, meanwhile, for its **bold innovation** – the passive cooling and heating system; the fact that it does not include a car park and thus has a significantly lower projected carbon footprint; the way the architect-residents continue to improve the building as needs **emerge**. The project has been awarded the **2022 Mies Van Der Rohe prize** for emerging architecture, with the jury noting its radical, “**transgressive**” approach to shared resources and capacities. It was deemed to be effecting “political and urban change from within the system.”

Institutional support

¹⁵ An EU-funded report on the right to housing highlights that cohousing has been “**coopted by the market**”. And it is true that cohousing nowadays can be less an alternative to market housing than **an upmarket niche product of it**, with prices of entry often **prohibitively** high.

¹⁶ Grassroots initiatives can find it difficult get hold of **suitable** sites and to finance their projects, especially when their budgets are limited. In many countries, housing, tax and lending policies create a huge **bias** in favour of traditional **homeownership**, while planning systems favour **large developers**.

¹⁷ For cohousing to thrive, then, institutional support is key, from facilitating access to public land to providing grants as well as planning support and technical advice. It also helps for projects and initiatives to team up and support each other, as an initiative in Germany shows.

¹⁸ Founded in Freiburg, Germany, in 1992, the **Miethäusersyndikat** or apartment-house **syndicate**, helps self-organised housing initiatives get off the ground, at scale. It is essentially a **consortium** of existing housing projects that acts as a non-profit, cooperatively run investment company, helping people to buy or build homes for cooperative use.

¹⁹ These projects are organised as limited **liability** companies, with both the syndicate and the respective residents as joint owners and the individual residents paying rent to the liability company they co-own. Residents also largely manage their properties themselves.

²⁰ While residents are free to decide on most matters, including designs, the **modalities** of living together or rent levels, they are not able to convert their houses into traditional private property or to sell them. The syndicate’s approach is, at its core, about permanently removing housing from the market.

²¹ Similarly central to it is the idea of **solidarity**. Projects with more financial resources support those with less. All residents contribute to a syndicate-wide solidarity fund, that gradually increases over time as other burdens such as loans decrease. This in turn makes it possible to support new projects, of which it currently has **at least 177** in the works, in Germany and elsewhere.

²² These 177 projects are not only enabling thousands of people to escape the vagaries of the housing market. In many cases they also demonstrate the innovative potential that comes with empowering people to take control of the creation of their homes and communities.

This article was amended on November 3 ,2022 to correct a typo.

Johannes Novy, Senior Lecturer in Urban Planning, School of Architecture and Cities, University of Westminster

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