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Title: Participatory processes in designing cohousing communities: the case of the Community Project

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Abstract

In cohousing communities participatory processes take place from the preliminary phases of the development process when the group is expected to collaborate and negotiate its private stakes with those of the whole community. Even after the establishment of the community, every choice regarding the common spaces has to be discussed and approved by the whole group. Results obtained from a qualitative research on cohousing in England show how the internal dynamics of the Community Project are highly different from an "ordinary" condominium, mainly because it is an "intentional community". At the same time, the case study shows that when some constitutive features of the participatory process are not respected, this negatively influences the community dynamics. Theoretically, the cohousing formula produces a cooperative and communitarian organisation rationally constituted in order to ensure not only livelihood, but also a higher quality of life and higher degree of socialisation inside and outside. Practically, it requires a great effort to inhabitants in terms of intentionality, time, financial resources and willingness to collaborate and negotiate private stakes. The Community Project represents an evidence of the difficulty in reaching an equilibrium between creating an "open" community and preserving the privacy typical of a condominium.

Introduction

This paper aims to investigate the "community capacity" of cohousing groups to independently provide safe and self-managed communities thanks to both a system of mutual support and an active participation of inhabitants within and outside their community (Bamford, 2001; Karn, 2004). It investigates the participation within cohousing communities as key-factor for distinguishing this kind of housing from "ordinary" condominiums. In doing this, it explores on the one hand the capability of cohousing experiments to develop cohesive communities; on the other hand, the risk that cohousing communities can become similar to "ordinary" condominiums if some basic principles are not respected during the process of development.

So far housing-related issues emerge in the international political debate as a "social concern", in particular in relation to the complexity of contexts (economic, social, cultural, working, emergency) that shape the various frameworks in which new family structures and relationships take form (Author, 2013). The increasing interest in those housing initiatives based on concepts such as "participation", "community", "mutual support", "solidarity", "sharing", "intentionality", is mainly connected to the reasons why people try to "artificially" create new "social environments" (see also Tummers, 2015). Barrucci *et al.* (2013) define cohousing as a way of living together aimed at creating favourable conditions to satisfy material needs while creating a sense of belonging to the territory. In fact, the cohousing formula testifies inhabitants' willingness to create "niches" in which they can satisfy both their daily practical needs and their needs for socialisation, by adopting participatory mechanisms as key-concept for guiding the process of development of their communities. In short, the cohousing formula promotes a governance system and a culture of exchange in order to overcome potential difficulties resulting from a society that tends to enhance both privacy and individualism (Jarvis, 2011). In this direction, the cohousing scheme combines both private and shared spaces. The firsts consist of private homes built around shared spaces and facilities (such as living rooms, children play-rooms, libraries, laundries, guest rooms etc.) designed

both to maximise the opportunities of meetings among inhabitants and to generate more intimate relationships.

The literature on cohousing highlights that the process of participation starts from the involvement of cohousers in designing the architectural layout of their community (Torres-Antonini, 2001; McCamant and Durret, 1998, 2011; Field, 2004; Scotthanson C. and Scotthanson K., 2005; Williams, 2005; Lietaert, 2007, 2010, 2011; Bunker *et al.*, 2011). This involvement might be explained by referring to a number of reasons such as: i) opportunity to create and reinforce the group thanks to preliminary negotiation and agreements on the physical layout; ii) opportunity to collectively design the most appropriate physical layout for facilitating internal social dynamics; iii) collective choice of the type and the number of facilities to be provided also in relation to the internal financial resources. The involvement of cohousers, firstly in designing the community and then in managing the common spaces, is highlighted by a number of scholars as one of the constitutive features of the cohousing experience (McCamant and Durret, 1998; Fenster, 1999; Vestbro, 2000). The participation in designing the community might be interpreted as a way to develop a sense of responsibility and belonging to the community. Therefore, the intentionality is recognised to play a key-role in implementing the cohousing idea. As a result, those who successfully implement their project, are supposed to develop a strong sense of belonging to it (Sargisson, 2001).

The need for both intentionality and involvement is particularly evident during the preliminary phases of the process of development, which sometimes requires long time due to the necessity to create a cohesive "team" able to face potential difficulties that could arise during the further phases of development. The process of development of a cohousing community can be described by adopting the four-phases scheme proposed by Tuckman (1965) for describing the evolution of whatever community. During the "forming phase" a group of people starts to identify common interests and motivations for being involved in such experience; during the "storming phase" conflicts may arise within the group due to a number of factors related to the process of

development; during the "norming phase" the group learns how to face difficulties and becomes more cohesive by defining internal normative and rules; during the "performing phase" the group starts to work as a whole and the internal rules become more flexible because the established relationships among cohousers push them to deeply trust each other.

Since the involvement of cohousers starts from the preliminary phases of the development process (when they have to choose the site and the architectural layout), they are supposed to act as a cohesive group in order to identify solutions for the benefit of the overall community. However, even after the community is already established, the choices of each member or family regarding the common spaces (e.g. making changes to their front yard) have to be discussed by the whole community. Moreover, each individual choice, which might produce effects on the collective life, is supposed to be shared and negotiated by the whole group. For example, if a family decides to park their car in the driveway, theoretically they have the right to do that as owners of the property. At the same time, this choice might reduce the opportunities of casual meetings with other members. In the long run, this might produce negative effects on the internal social dynamics. Therefore, cohousers are aware that the process of development (and evolution) of the community depends on the negotiation between individual and collective benefits. This means that cohousers need to develop a strong sense of belonging to feel themselves as part of the community. As a consequence, cohousing are self-managed communities that are characterised by a high specialised structure in which responsibilities are clearly assigned to each member. Cohousers' rights and duties are usually included in a specific document which also regulates the decision-making and the internal management along the process of development (from the forming to the performing phase). Cohousing communities tend to be "horizontal" social organisations in which any hierarchy does not exist and the weight of each member on decisions is the same (Jarvis, 2014). This is a significant difference in comparison with an "ordinary condominium", in which generally decisions are not based on the principle "one head one vote", but instead on the basis of the quote of the property owned by each member. The decision-making varies among communities, but mainly two

methods are most frequently adopted: majority vote and "consensus". The latter is applied in the majority of the cases, whilst the majority vote becomes a secondary decision-making system only used in the context of conflicts otherwise irreconcilable. Obviously, unanimity requires a great effort to cohousers, because they are expected to set aside their personal preferences in favour of collective choices. Hence, the consensus requires long time in relation to the need to find an agreement on whatever issues. From this, extensive discussions arise within communities in order to find solutions that can be approved collectively. As Sargisson (2010) and Williams (2005) argue, the potential limit of this decision system might be represented by the difficulty in reaching an effective agreement at the end of the process: the decision-making process might produce conflicts among inhabitants, which in turn might compromise the internal social relationships. In this direction, as highlighted by the members of the Ithaca eco-village (EVI, USA) interviewed by Kirby (2003), the consensus is described on the one hand as "a beautiful process in theory", on the other hand as "ponderous" and as "the tyranny of the minority". In fact, in order to reach an agreement someone might be required to stop complaining both for guaranteeing the "common good" and for reducing the decision-making length. In case of frequent disagreements, this might also cause a self-exclusion of those inhabitants who do not agree with the rest of the group.

The literature on cohousing suggests that the involvement of residents in decision-making (in addition to designing the physical layout) fosters social relationships and social capital (Williams, 2005). In addition to the decision-making sessions, other kinds of collective meetings are provided such as shared dinners and collective working days. The number and the frequency of these vary in relation to each community. Moreover, the main group (community) is usually split into subgroups with specific tasks (maintenance, organisation of recreational activities, cooking, management of car/bike sharing services, gardening, management of financial resources, etc.). In relation to these tasks, each sub-group suggests some potential changes to be collectively discussed at the decision-making meetings (usually one per month).

The present paper consists of four paragraphs: the first refers to the methodology applied in studying the Community Project (East Sussex, England); the second describes the Community Project; the third refers to the delicate balance of cohousing experiments between communities and ordinary condominiums. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn by highlighting potential risks for cohousing communities if participatory processes are not adopted.

Methodology

The Community Project (East Sussex) has been chosen as one of the first cohousing communities established in England: the group renovated a disused hospital in 1998. Two techniques of analysis belonging to the qualitative methodology were adopted such as semi-structured interviews and cognitive-maps. Starting from the scheme proposed by Ledwith (2011) the following units of analysis were considered: individuals, group, community, structure and the context where the community arose. The following macro-areas were explored: internal composition by referring to members' social, cultural and economic capitals; role played by each member within the cohousing; personal past experiences; relationships among inhabitants; interests and goals of the community in relation to the resources available (material and immaterial); history of the group; sense of belonging and potential development of a group identity; internal organisation and decision making; role played by the community in the wider context. During the interviews, additional issues were raised by respondents each time.

The use of cognitive-maps derives from the awareness that everyone builds their own "cognitive maps" in order to make the external environment a recognisable and familiar space (Ramadier, 2003). Moreover, the maps were useful to identify spaces of interaction within the community. Cohousers were asked to draw two maps related to both internal and external spaces. Following the Lynch's scheme (1960) paths, edges, districts, nodes, landmarks, and the value attributed to these elements were identified. Finally, the frequency of use of the identified spaces was recorded. The map tool was also useful to record the perception of cohousers about the role played by the

community in the wider context. They were asked to describe: i) the wider neighbourhood; ii) borders (material and immaterial) between the community and the outside; iii) what spaces they perceive as private and public (inside and outside the community); iv) potential connections between the physical layout and social dynamics (internal and external).

The Community Project was visited twice: in December 2011 and May 2012. Twenty three interviews were recorded (9 men and 10 women, and 4 children). During the second visit, three members already interviewed were interviewed again, in order to investigate if something was changed in the meanwhile. Moreover, a number of informal chats provided additional information during common dinners and collective activities.

The Community Project

The Community Project arose in Laughton (East Sussex) in 1997/1998. Laughton is a parish of around 500 people, and it is around 6 miles-far from Lewes, and 13 from Brighton. The community Project represents one of the first cohousing communities built in England. The group renovated a disused hospital owned by the National Health Service. The group consists of 74 people (35 adults e 39 children): families come in large part from urban contexts, with a medium-high income and educational level. It is a "limited by guarantee company": each member buys a 999-year lease. Inhabitants are at the same time members of the company, which manages the entire property, and owners of their houses. The process of development, from the "forming" to the "performing" phase lasted 7 years due to a number of difficulties and constraints related to: recruiting people interested in the project, finding an available site, obtaining approvals from local institutions, obtaining a mortgage, finding a company interested in building such a community, being accepted by the wider community. Even after they started to build the community ("storming phase"), a number of difficulties arose related to the length of the process, the need for increasing reciprocal trust among cohousers, the disapproval by the wider community of Laughton. The Community Project is a large community in comparison with other cohousing communities in England and it does not have a

rigid internal structure. Since the Community Project was one of the first cohousing project in England, and cohousers did not have any experience in such communitarian experiments, the group chose not to provide a large number of common activities and meetings. Hence, the big size of the project, in addition to a limited number of collective meetings and the lack of an internal rigid normative (beyond an internal document that includes the general rules for managing the "company"), sometimes causes "discontent" among inhabitants. As stated by cohousers, this happens because some members of the community do not steadily take part in common activities and sometime they do not fulfil their duties, producing additional work for the others. In fact, the legal document of the company includes the general framework of the company's management, but it does not include rigid normative for managing the collective life of the community.

All these factors are responsible of some imbalances within the community. The lack of participation of some cohousers represents the most significant threat to transform the community in an "ordinary" neighbourhood in which inhabitants live without knowing each other. This hypothesis is reinforced by the fact that some cohousers stated that they do not known all members intimately because some residents do not take part in the community life. The lack of normative also threats the system of selection of new members because there is not any rigid scheme for selecting cohousers. In fact, as reported in the legal document, cohousers are expected to select new members by three months after someone leaves the community. However, they have never been able to exercise this right due to both the limited time available, and the lack of coordination among inhabitants. As a consequence, the members who leave the community autonomously select new cohousers without certainties of their active participation in the community life.

Moreover, a subsequent intervention on the physical layout of the site after that the community was already established, which in turn caused the addition of new houses, contributed towards splitting the community into two groups. In fact, as emerged by the cognitive maps the Community Project is also physically separated into two "communities": they are located in two different sides of the site and are characterised by different architectural layouts. A first group consists of blockhouses,

and a second one consists of detached houses. Even though a succesful architectural "model" for cohousing communities can hardly be generalised (Tummers, 2015), in the case of the Community Project the physical design appears to influence the community life: cohousers believe that the limited participation in the community life of those cohousers who live in the detached houses (the "new houses", as defined by the cohousers), in addition to the different architectural style (detached houses), which contributes towards making the new houses "too private", influences the community life. As the respondents stated, the willingness to create favourable conditions for increasing informal meetings and contacts has only been partially satisfied. However, beyond the physical layout, the limited communication between the two groups seems to play a key-role in influencing their relationships. The detached houses were built in particular for financial reasons only after the first group was already established. Therefore, the new residents became part of an existing cohesive group that had already established its rules. Furthermore, the limited number of meetings for sharing dinners and collective activities affected the establishment of intimate relationships with the new residents. In fact, the shared meal is organised once a week as a potluck. This means that cooking groups (widely used in cohousing communities) do not exist, and each family individually contributes to the common dinner.

As underlined by the majority of cohousers in their maps, also the location of the parking areas contributes towards affecting the internal social dynamics. Cohousers often meet up in the main parking area (located at the periphery of the site), but the lack of a rigid normative caused that the "new residents" started to park nearby their homes. This means that the new residents reduce their possibility to casually meet other cohousers due to their car use to enter and exit the community. Finally, the lack of participation of the new residents in designing the community from the "forming phase", influences the frequency of use of the common house. In fact, this is mainly used in the context of programmed activities instead of being used daily. As a consequence, for some residents Shawfield (the common house) represents the core around which the community arose (mainly for those who have an office within the building), for some others this is only a space where sometimes

they go. The presence of "private" facilities provided in the houses contributes towards affecting the frequency of use of common house as well. Cohousers are unlikely to use the common facilities if these are provided at home, such as in the case of the laundry. By contrast, they are likely to use the common kitchen thanks to its extensive equipment.

However, even though there are not strong relationships among all members, several intimate relationships among inhabitants were recorded. On the one hand, both the lack of rigid rules for regulating the social life and the physical layout influence the community dynamics (in particular, in terms of relationships between the two groups); on the other hand, this high degree of freedom allows a dynamic evolution of the group without "trapping" the community in a rigid scheme. In fact, although cohousers do not know all their neighbours intimately, they have been able to create mutual-support relationships with the majority of them. Cohousers perceive as benefits not only the availability of collective spaces and facilities, which contribute towards increasing the opportunities to meet other members, but also, and mainly, the informal exchanges resulting from the community life. In some cases, in addition to those "formal" activities aimed at specific goals (e.g. decision-making meetings, working and entertainment activities), "spontaneous" mutual support arose (in particular related to childcare). In this direction, the main reason why cohousers chose to live within the community is related to their willingness to create a "village atmosphere" in which their children could grow up and safely play outdoors. Hence, the opportunity to create a more friendly neighbourhood is connected not only to the physical layout of the community and to the organisation of common activities, but mainly to the cohousers' intentionality to relate each other. This means that the cohousing formula increased members' social capital by creating a network of social relationships, which in turn efficiently supports people in their everyday life and activities. In fact, as stated by cohousers, they support each other in relation to childcare, to personal and health problems, to work-related issues. Sometimes, the dynamicity of the community allowes cohousers to organise several activities in relation to the internal competences available, such as for example a handicraft laboratory. Moreover, the high degree of opening to the outside allowed members to

realise joint work projects with people who daily access the community because they rent an office within the common house. The inhabitants are aware that if they had provided a rigid scheme for regulating the community life, these activities would have hardly arisen spontaneously.

With regards to the degree of opening to the outside, probably also in relation to the initial disapproval by the local community, the group tends to be highly externally-oriented. In fact, at the beginning of the development process the fifty per cent of the local community (250 out of 500 people) signed a petition against the establishment of the cohousing. However, since the establishment of the group, local community's hostility has progressively decreased and many people from Laughton have started to participate in the community life. Cohousers organise several activities also targeted to external visitors. They also rent some internal spaces to external people such as for example a large room in Shawfield in which parties and meetings can be organised. This also means that sometimes people from outside might not perceive the area as private as it is supposed to be (because owned by cohousers). In fact, even though the community has a "closed configuration" because it is surrounded by hedges, people can freely access the community through a main entrance (without any gate) and a secondary gate which is always open. However, the majority of cohousers perceive the site as safe and they trust both cohousers and external visitors. This because, they feel that the internal safety is guaranteed by an informal "neighbourhood watching system". At the same time, they believe that this system works in relation to the limited number of external visitors that come into the community in particular during the collective activities (Author, 2013). This means that if the number of external people increased they might be pushed to notify the private status of the community.

Finally, even though within the Community Project residents share some values and perspectives such as solidarity and mutual support, which allow the consensus based decision-making to work, the lack of a stronger "ideology" causes some tensions within the group. For example, cohousers stated that they do not want to be classified into a specific category, because they created a community in order to generate friendly relationships among neighbours (while keeping their

independence) without knowing what exactly cohousing was (at least at the beginning of the process). At the same time, the scarce experience/knowledge of cohousers in building this type of community, seems to have partially influenced the internal social dynamics by causing a division into two groups.

The cohousing scheme: between ordinary condominiums and community dynamics

The internal dynamics of the Community Project seem to be very different from an "ordinary" condominium, firstly because it is an "intentional community", therefore cohousers spontaneously chose a "sharing way of life" in relation to a number of personal reasons.

Considering the constitutive features of cohousing communities it is possible to define this kind of experiences as "collaborative and supportive neighbourhoods", in which residents actively participate to decision-making and continuously refine the internal structure. It would be too simplistic to describe the cohousing, and specifically the Community Project, as "big condominiums" in which people live together by negotiating possible ways to "get along". While in an "ordinary condominium" residents not necessarily have to establish friendly relationships, in a cohousing community the inhabitants are expected to both socialise and know each other as a "mandatory task", because this is the constitutive mission of the cohousing. Against the hypothesis that cohousing might become an "ordinary condominium", those features listed by Mutti (1992) in defining "supportive neighbourhoods" can be applied to the Community Project. The author identifies as key variables: neighbourhood watching systems; ordinary forms of support (such as babysitting, do shopping for elderly neighbors, taking neighbours' children to school etc.); exchange of domestic equipment and food; services provided on the basis of residents' expertise (hydraulics, maintenance, etc.); collective management of communal facilities; emotional support in times of personal crisis; privacy. All these features are also constitutive of the Community Project. As already underlined by recalling Jarvis's words (2011), cohousers try to establish reciprocal connections by referring to a housing scheme based on sharing of resources, mutual-support,

responsibility of creating a sustainable community (features that are not usually constitutive of an "ordinary condominium"). In fact, as a constitutive feature, these communities aim to promote an "alternative" way of life able to enhance social relationships (Kirby, 2003).

At the same time, in the Community Project a contradiction can be identified. The addition of new houses subsequently to the establishment of the community caused the division of the community into two groups. The original aim of creating a community characterised by sharing practices seems to be only partially achieved by cohousers among each single group but not between groups. This indicates that when the above described phases of development (from the forming to the performing phase) do not involve all cohousers in a participatory way, the risk that the community becomes an "ordinary" condominium increases.

Although it is not possible to refer to an universal model of cohousing because each group shapes its structure and organisation, in general cohousing communities try to satisfy the material needs of members by both adopting internal normative and taking care of the environment. In fact, even though usually cohousers do not share political ideologies or religious beliefs, however they share an eco-friendly way of life (Meltzer, 2000, 2005; Bamford, 2001), which in some sense may be interpreted as an ideology. In fact, the "ethos of sharing" (Jarvis, 2015) also underpins the intention to limit the cohousing environmental footprint. Even though members of the Community Project voluntarily chose to adopt more or less eco-friendly way of life, there are some shared "eco-friendly" facilities and basic principles that regulate the community life such as: doing recycle, a biomass central heating system, a rainwater collection system (used to irrigate fields), bike-sharing. Moreover, the "new houses" are provided of big windows used as a passive heating system. All cohousers interviewed spontaneously marked in the cognitive maps the places where these eco-friendly facilities are located. Differently from an "ordinary" condominium, in which the management of these facilities is likely to represent "a waste of time" for inhabitants, in the Community Project this is seen as an additional opportunity to develop stronger relationships

among cohousers. In fact, the presence of facilities and eco-friendly measures pushes cohousers to meet up, to create sub-groups and collectively discuss on their management.

Digging deeper, the concept of community cannot be applied in its proper sense if members intentionally choose to be part of a group, because the need to artificially create a community is an evidence of a loss. The "cloakroom community" (Bauman, 2000), typical of the liquid modernity, would represent a symptom of the "loneliness" of individuals who try to artificially reproduce something that does not exist anymore. At the same time, a reflection on the motivations that push cohousers to intentionally recreate a sense of community is needed. In this vein, the cohousing formula might be interpreted as a need to generate a self-organised system able to face cohousers' daily-life problems. Problems that otherwise would not be solved by the "society" itself. The housing concept in relation to the cohousing scheme seems to satisfy on the one hand the need for a "family-extended home" as an expression of extended family-relationships, on the other hand the need for a "neighborhood of households" characterised by a high density of relationships aimed at meeting both basic needs and the individual aspiration to belong to a "group" (Gasparini, 2000). At the same time, the Community Project and more generally the cohousing model simultaneously satisfy the need for both privacy (inside homes) and socialisation (in the common areas). However, the borderline between public and private spaces could become very thin (Author, 2013) because related to the perception of the inhabitants, the group, and the people who access the community from outside. However, differently from a condominium, in which external people can access only if invited by residents, in the Community Project external visitors are welcome and they can go around the community site. Usually cohousing communities make their facilities available to the outside and organise many activities that involve external people in order to develop friendly relationships also with the wider neighbourhood.

Adopting Weberian categories (1978), the Community Project might be inscribed in those autonomous and autocephalous social groups characterised by a "horizontal" organisation: each member has the same influence in decision-making and there are not administrative bodies that

manage the community through top down logics. In fact, each member is at the same time administrator and beneficiary of the "company". The cohousing community is based on economic and personal relationships, rationally built in order to guarantee, not only livelihood, but also higher quality of life and higher degree of socialisation and solidarity (at least within the two groups). Solidarity is a key for interpreting actions in social relationships and this can also be applied in the analysis of cohousing communities. Following Weberian categories, action in cohousing communities appears to be at the same time "affectively-oriented" (as an emotional expression of the cohousers' sense of belonging to the community) and "rationally-oriented" (as a rational and negotiated solution to cohousers' needs). However, in order to generate both kinds of actions (affectively and rationally oriented) participatory mechanisms are supposed to support the process of development from the forming to the performing phase. The involvement of inhabitants firstly in designing and then in decision-making produces a strong engagement, which in turn allows cohousers to develop a sense of belonging to the community.

Conclusions

The proposed study shows how the cohousing model differs from an "ordinary" condominium in particular in relation to a solid mutual support system and a strong intentionality of inhabitants. At the same time, it shows that when the participatory process does not involve cohousers in all phases of development (from the forming to the performing phase), the risk of failure increases. However, the Community project is an evidence of how the equilibrium between freedom and rigidity, opening and closure, friendship and privacy is difficult to be reached in cohousing communities. First of all, differently from a condominium cohousing communities resulted from residents' intentionality to create a friendly neighbourhood in which they can satisfy their material and immaterial needs. In order to achieve this goal cohousers need to build a common mission and strategy.

Secondly, the cohousing formula is a hybrid scheme between both opening-closing, and solidarity-"utilitarianism": it produces a cooperative and communitarian organisation rationally constituted in order to ensure not only livelihood, but a higher quality of life and degree of socialisation inside and outside. These constitutive features result from the combination of a number of factors such as, participation, personal orientations, physical layout, regulatory framework, number and types of collective activities. At the same time, the sense of community might be undermined if these elements are not equally balanced. The Community Project has been chosen as an evidence that when basic cohousing principles (related to the participation of all inhabitants in the development/evolution phases) are not respected the sense of community may be undermined. However, the intentionality of inhabitants to be part of a collective system generates smaller communities within the larger one. The intentionality appears to be a constitutive feature of cohousing communities: those who choose to take part in the community have to actively contribute to the whole process of development (from the forming to the performing phase).

Thirdly, differently from an "ordinary" condominium, even when new members join an already established group, the process of integration should happen gradually by participating in collective meetings, working days, shared meals. This means that during this process the new members are supposed to understand whether the cohousing lifestyle is suitable for them, and vice versa the whole group tries to progressively involve them. Hence, the intentionality contributes towards making the process of development time-consuming because cohousers need both to know each other before starting to live together, and to share goals and strategies in order to define a system of rules. In the Community Project, the different degree of involvement of the original and new members, firstly in the development process (from the forming to the norming phase) and then in the community management (performing), caused an internal division into two groups. The addition of houses built for financial reasons, the lack of involvement of new members and the absence of a rigid internal normative contribute towards undermining social relationships among cohousers

belonging to the two groups. The original aim of creating a community characterised by sharing practices seems to be achieved by cohousers within each single group but not between groups. These considerations bring us to identify the main difference between a cohousing community and a big condominium in the participatory processes upon which the development process and the decision-making are based. The cohousing scheme might be interpreted as an expression of the reticular governance which flattens hierarchies and requires the active participation of its members in decision-making. The active participation empowers inhabitants by defining specific responsibilities and duties within the group. Members are asked to update the whole group about personal intentions to make changes to the common areas in order to enable a transparent and "democratic" decision-making. Rules in cohousing communities are progressively defined through a steady process of participation. Members of the Community Project are asked to perform their tasks, even if sometime this general principle is applied only within the boundaries of each of the two groups. The splitting into two groups might indicate a failure in achieving the goals established by the whole group. This also represents the main risk for the community to become an "ordinary" condominium in which neighbours do not necessarily know each other. However, the Community Project created the favourable conditions for the development of two groups within which mutual support practices spontaneously arose.

Therefore, both active participation and intentionality to take part in community life play a primary role in developing supportive neighbourhoods: in fact, within the Community Project, those who joined the community later feel themselves "excluded" from the community life, because the "new houses" were built for financial reasons and not to enlarge the group. However, the intentionality of members to relate each other (in particular within each single group) allowed cohousers to establish intimate relationships and mutual exchanges.

The proposed study represents a first step in analysing the effects produced by the participation of inhabitants in developing supportive housing schemes. Some limitations can be identified in the possibility to generalise results because the case study is not representative of international trends.

At the same time, it is difficult to generalise about the structure of groups, because each community establishes its own organisation in relation to its specific needs and through a process of negotiation among inhabitants. However, these limitations also represent the opportunity to develop further research in the context of other forms of intentional supportive neighbourhoods to explore limits and opportunities of participatory housing schemes.

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