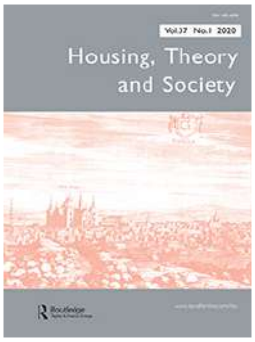

Housing, Theory and Society

ISSN: 1403-6096 (Print) 1651-2278 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/shou20

Collaborative Housing in Europe: Conceptualizing the Field

Darinka Czischke, Claire Carriou & Richard Lang

To cite this article: Darinka Czischke, Claire Carriou & Richard Lang (2020) Collaborative Housing in Europe: Conceptualizing the Field, Housing, Theory and Society, 37:1, 1-9, DOI: 10.1080/14036096.2020.1703611

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2020.1703611

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 24 Jan 2020.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 4048

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 13 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=shou20

HOUSING, THEORY AND SOCIETY
2020, VOL. 37, NO. 1, 1–9
https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2020.1703611

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

INTRODUCTION

OPEN ACCESS
Check for updates

Collaborative Housing in Europe: Conceptualizing the Field

Darinka Czischke[a], Claire Carriou[b] and Richard Lang[c]

[a]Department of Management in the Built Environment (MBE), Delft University of Technology, Delft, Netherlands; [b]Laboratory Mosaïques – UMR LAVUE 7218, Maître de Conferences at Paris Nanterre University, France; [c]Institute of Innovation Management, Johannes Kepler University Linz, Linz, Austria

Introduction

Since the 2000s many European countries have seen the re-emergence of a range of collective self-organized and participatory forms of housing provision. These include resident-led cooperatives, cohousing, Community Land Trusts (CLTs), and different types of community self-help and self-build housing initiatives. While the idea of collective self-organization in housing has a long tradition, this recent wave of housing initiatives features new aspects, and aims to address pressing issues in today's society. The latter include, amongst others, concerns for wider social inclusion and cohesion as well as affordability and higher environmental sustainability standards. In this Special Issue (SI), we refer to these types of housing practices in terms of "collaborative housing".

Collaborative housing (CH) has been adopted by many researchers and practitioners over the last decades as an umbrella term to encompass the wide variety that these forms of housing can take. The term suggests that collaboration among residents as well as between a community of residents and external stakeholders in housing provision represents one core aspect of all different models (Vestbro 2010; Fromm 2012). Although this SI deliberately focuses on European debates, CH is a global phenomenon. Over the last decade, grassroots activity and international exchange in this field have increased, and the number and breadth of research and publications is rapidly growing. Nevertheless, European research – and also knowledge transfer between Europe and other parts of the world – on these housing models are still weakly connected despite a few notable efforts. The latter include the first International Conference on Collaborative Housing, which took place in Stockholm in 2010; three SIs in academic journals (Built Environment 38/3, 2012; and 45/3, 2019; Urban Research & Practice 8/1, 2015; and the International Journal of Housing Policy, 18/1, 2018) and the formation of a working group on collaborative housing within the European Network for Housing Research (ENHR) in 2016. While recent publications have mostly featured case studies, there is a recurrent question underpinning practice and research discussions: are we talking about the same categories?

Practitioners in this field often ask the question whether strict definitions or labels are really necessary to advance the field. From a scientific perspective, we believe a discussion about definitions and conceptualizations is important for a number of reasons. Clearer definitions of CH practices would help us identify the potential and limits of these housing

CONTACT Darinka Czischke d.k.czischke@tudelft.nl Department of Management in the Built Environment (MBE), Delft University of Technology, Delft, Netherlands

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

types to address a variety of (new) housing needs, notably vis-a-vis other types of housing provision. It would help us look into convergences between the different forms and the conditions for these to happen. It would also help to identify the (operational) conditions for each CH type to achieve its goals, including tensions and balancing acts between professionals and non-professionals. Furthermore, the contextual nature of CH models and labels needs to be taken into consideration. Therefore, definitional and conceptual clarifications can facilitate the dialogue between practitioners and researchers across disciplines and countries. Ultimately, a better definition and theoretical conceptualization of what CH means would help this emerging sector to position itself within wider debates about current shortcomings of institutional housing actors to address a variety of housing needs.

At the same time, we are also aware of the potential limitations of an overly strict definition of CH, which would close the field to the emergence of new versions. This approach is in line with Dorit Fromm's (1991) initial conceptualization efforts, which sought to keep the field as inclusive as possible given the many international variations of models. We also need to keep in mind that housing models change over time. Cooperative housing is a good example of such instititutional change. In some countries, housing cooperatives moved away from the community sector and increasingly incorporated elements of public or market-based provision (see for instance Sørvoll & Bengtsson in this SI).

In an effort to pin down the elusive nature of the emerging CH research field, in 2016, we invited contributions from different disciplinary backgrounds and welcomed papers applying various theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches to contribute to a SI. We were also keen to receive papers on forms of CH which could have been traditionally studied in separate research fields (cooperative housing, for example). In particular, we aimed to publish papers that challenge readers' existing knowledge about forms of CH and contribute to a better and more comprehensive conceptual understanding of this phenomenon. Therefore, we asked for papers that shed light on key aspects of these debates, such as: What are the particularities of this type of housing? What do CH projects have in common, and how do they differ? Are there any fundamental common values and principles running across their wide organizational, legal and geographical differences? What are the main differences between them? Where are the boundaries with other "established" types of housing provision? What kind of actors on different levels and scales are involved in CH initiatives and how do they interact?

The resulting SI comprises six papers featuring empirical data from Denmark (Sorvoll & Bengtsson; Falkenstjerne Beck), Finland (Laine, Helamaa, Kuoppa & Alatalo), England (Thompson), and France (Bresson & Labit). One paper (Lang, Carriou & Czischke) brings together empirical evidence from across Europe through a literature review.

Concepts and Definitions

Taken all together, the six papers in this SI encompass a wide range of "models" or "labels" often associated with what we define as CH in this SI, most notably: cooperatives (Thompson; Sorvoll & Bengtsson), cohousing (Falkenstjerne Beck), Community Land Trusts (Thompson), and "habitat participatif" (Bresson & Labit).

In their contribution, Lang, Carriou & Czischke add greater conceptual clarity to the umbrella term "collaborative housing". Taking Fromm's (1991) definition as a starting point, the authors carry out a systematic literature review resulting in 195 relevant peer-reviewed journal articles in English, German and French. Applying an inductive approach to synthesis and categorization, results show that the concept of CH is more multi-faceted than it was presented in previous deductive reviews based on specific models. The conceptualization comes down to a range of key themes that are discussed across a variety of CH models and respective literature streams. These themes are grouped into five main thematic areas which can be seen as cornerstones of the CH research domain: socio-demographic, collaboration, motivations, effects and context. The authors further highlight that boundaries of the CH field to adjacent fields are fuzzy and change over time. Thus it can be difficult to draw a clear line between the phenomenon of CH and, for example, assisted living for elderly; or between CH and social housing, as is the case in some country contexts. The paper by Bresson & Labit in this SI shows, for instance, how the social housing sector in France has recently begun to support CH initiatives as a way to improve solidarity at neighbourhood level, and to experiment with new forms of housing management based on tenants' self-organization.

The papers in this SI also provide insights into specific housing models that are comprised under the umbrella concept of CH. Authors note the specific definitions that are tied to these concepts in their local contexts. A case in point is "cohousing", which despite being often used by some as an umbrella term for a wide range of collectively self-organized housing forms, is defined by Falkenstjerne Beck as a specific model, impliying "stronger links between people" (Falkenstjerne Beck, p.4). This concept is in line with McCamant & Durrent's interpretation of the original Danish Bofaelleskab concept, which puts emphasis on "sharing common areas, making decisions in non-hierarchical processes, living and interacting socially, and doing things together" (Falkenstjerne Beck, p.4). Cohousing initiatives vary from one context to another, in terms of their tenure or their legal form. However, according to the author, they share some fundamental common principles, in the sense that each type of cohousing presents a variation of four principles: a dimension of visions and values (sharing common ideas on how to live), an organizational dimension, a relational dimension (importance given to the social relations considered as a social architecture) and a spatial dimension (the physical layout of the building is designed for social interaction). Therefore, according to Falkenstjerne Beck, cohousing is different from other "established" types of housing provision because it is considered by the author, citing Jarvis (2015, 102), as "a living arrangement", which "represents more than simply an alternative system of housing: the social dimensions reveal a setting and system that cultivates an intentional negotiated ethos of sharing".

Another example of a specific model that might fall within the wider umbrella of CH is the case of "housing cooperatives", which presents different characteristics depending on the local context. As seen both in the literature review by Lang et al., and in the articles by Sorvoll & Bengtsson and Thompson, housing cooperatives come in many shapes. While in Denmark housing cooperatives (*andelstanken*) are associations of cooperative homeowners, in England they display a stronger social movement character. English housing cooperatives have also traditionally been part of the social housing system with a focus on providing affordable homes to lower income groups and to people in urgent housing need. Thus, at times, it was even proposed as an alternative to the public housing model but eventually failed to get the necessary government support (see also Lang, Chatterton, and Mullins 2019). Despite differences in legal status and tenure forms between countries, what tends to characterize cooperative housing is their rather *inward-looking nature*, as Thompson puts it, or their *inside solidarity*, as phrased by Sorvoll & Bengtsson. Thus housing cooperatives always stress (and mostly practice) the importance of democratic, member-based governance. In this sense, the difference between the types of cooperative housing discussed in the SI and the broader domain of CH resides in what Thompson describes as follows,

> "[The concept of] collaborative housing (. . .) has a number of benefits over its cousins: it helps conceptualise these models as distinctively *collaborative* not just inwardly, among direct beneficiaries themselves – as community-led or co-housing suggest – but also outwardly, with external stakeholders." (Thompson, p.2).

This resonates with Bresson & Labit's conceptualization of CH in terms of "habitat participatif" in the French context, a movement that includes collective self-organized housing projects not only in a bottom-up fashion, but also increasingly initiated in a top-down manner by social housing providers. Social housing organizations in France are showing a growing interest in "the identification of practices, relationships and new forms of management" that could be developed more widely in the framework of social housing in order to encourage social cohesion and cooperation among and with inhabitants (Bresson & Labit, last page). Here, again it is the collaborative dimension that stands at the centre, both in terms of residents working with each other, and with external stakeholders (see also Czischke 2018).

Another housing model where collaboration clearly extends beyond the group of residents are Community Land Trusts (CLTs). Thompson, in his contribution to this SI, highlights that CLTs are established and governed voluntarily by a wider community of place or interest to develop and manage homes. This contrasts with, but also extends the cooperative model, which according to Thompson is more resident- than community-focused. The main aim of CLTs is to keep the homes affordable in the long run through local collective ownership of land and assets. This can lead to a pronounced display of what Sorvoll & Bengtsson describe as *external solidarity* when local community members actively support the provision of affordable homes for their (future) neighbours. Is is worth keeping in mind, however, that CLTs are not a pure housing model, as the provision of homes is sometimes only part of broader community governance of local infrastructure.

All in all, the empirical evidence presented in the different contributions to this SI supports Fromm's (1991) assumption that CH cannot be reduced to one specific type of tenure, house type or target group. This reinforces the conceptualization by Lang et al. in this SI, which posits that CH represents an integrative research domain.

Historical Dimension

Some of the contributions in this SI engage in an in-depth historical analysis to uncover the roots and evolution of CH types. Thompson, for instance, documents several generations of CH models in Liverpool since the 1970s and their interplay with external stakeholders, especially government actors, tracking the competing influence of bottom-up and top-down forces. His analysis brings to the fore the crucial potential of CH movements to show flexibility and be able to adapt to changing institutional settings. At the same time, this case study suggests the key role of the state as enabling CH development, preventing it from being just some kind of "private" experimentation. Nevertheless, the CLT experience with government actors in Liverpool appears conflict-laden. There seems to be the danger that CH forms can also be used by government actors to "outsource" part of their service in order "to cut costs and produce efficiencies" (p.13) rather then empower communities and their goals. Furthermore, Thompson states,

> "there are no examples of successful projects to date, in Liverpool at least, driven from above by professional consultants or policymakers; only those campaigns with deep grassroots support and energy from the outset have so far succeeded" (Thompson, p.14).

Sorvoll & Bengtsson also include a historical perspective in their article. Their analysis is rooted in the development of the cooperative housing sector in Denmark since the 1970s, uncovering tensions between market owner-occupied housing and the more broadly accessible cooperative tenure. They draw on a comprehensive collection of printed sources, including parliamentary acts and debates on cooperative housing between 1980–2017. Their longitudinal perspective sheds light on the changing (political) discourse and how it shapes (and is shaped by) socio-cultural perspectives of different tenure forms with regards to housing needs and personal and societal aspirations.

From these contributions we can conclude that past collective self-organized housing practices (even if not successful) still have an influence on contemporary CH. This SI thus shows the usefulness of historical analysis in CH research as a means to uncover its actual meaning.

Tensions within the Field

Papers in this SI reveal structural tensions characterizing the large field of CH. The article by Laine, Helamaa, Kuoppa & Alatalo, for example, looks at resident-driven owner-occupied housing projects in Finland, which the authors consider a form of CH based on the collectively self-organized nature of these housing projects. They characterize these initiatives as alternative forms of housing provision in the face of mainstream housing production dominated by large construction companies. Their conceptualization of CH as the domain of "bricoleurs" or "makers" emphasies the agency of residents who collectively display creativity and resourcefulness to customize their own homes and "obtain housing that is not easily available in the standard housing production" (p.7). In this sense, their conceptualization of CH can be linked to Lang et al.'s domain ontologies "motivations" (alternative lifestyles) and "effects" (architectural design innovations). Furthermore, Laine et al. assign great value to the resources and capabilities of the residents who are, in relative terms, more resourceful than less privileged groups. These residents, by their own admission, are "wealthy, upper-middle class residents" hence they possess high degrees of social, cultural and economic capital. The question arises on whether less fortunate groups in society would be able to become bricoleures in the same way of these groups? Is CH in Finland reserved only to those who already posses these resources?

Bresson & Labit give another insight on this issue. Based on surveys of socially mixed initiatives in France, they highlight a tension between the intention to build social cohesion within groups of residents in CH and the intention to foster social diversity:

> "Being part of projects such as these thus entails socio-cultural proximity, which promotes group solidarity and cohesion, but excludes people who are not involved in the activist networks where this type of experience develops." (Bresson & Labit, p. X)

Therefore, including the most disadvantaged members of the population in CH is anything but obvious. However, it may be possible to bring together a group of people from different backgrounds if certain conditions are met, such as including professional advice (Bresson & Labit, last page).

In addition to the above, the articles in this SI unravel other types of tensions, such as, for example, those resulting from different types of solidarity that Sorvoll & Bengtsson's observe in the case of Danish housing cooperatives. Related to this is the challenge of finding a balance between the promotion of (internal) interests of members and residents on the one hand, and the wider community, including different external stakeholders, on the other hand (see also Thompson's paper on cooperatives and CLTs in England). Another source of tensions in CH is the type of tenure and legal form that CH may take. In their historical analysis, Sorvoll and Bengtsson underline the problematic relationship between CH focused on market owner-occupied housing and a more broadly accessible cooperative form of tenure. The choice for one or the other has long-term effects beyond the first generation of residents, as home-owners' private economic interest becomes more institutionalized than external solidarity, which builds on altruistic values. Relatedly, in his case study of CH forms in Liverpool, Thompson points to the competing influence of top-down and bottom-up forces in CH.

Against this background, the cases analysed in this SI remind us that CH models are rather flexible organizational forms – which has advantages when coping with (external) institutional constraints. They can, for instance, adopt different types of tenure and legal forms (self-help versus external help). This determines their position in terms of the key characteristics of CH as defined by Lang et al. in this SI, such as the *socio-demographic* target group, the *collaboration* aspect (continuum between individual and collective action), as well as the (long-term) socio-economic *effects*. Therefore CH can be defined as a broad and integrative research field, which consequently leads to tensions between different models and approaches (see also Carriou 2019). In this sense, it is worth considering that initators of CH often have a limited choice to adopt certain organizational forms as these are context-specific.

Conclusion

This SI shows that under the overarching concept of CH, we find a wide spectrum of conceptualizations of housing, which makes reference to specific territorial, institutional and temporal settings. This materializes in projects with different tenures, socio-econonomic target groups and motivations, and with diverse socio-economic effects.

Taking the above into account, we posit that "collaborative housing" can be understood as an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of housing forms with different degrees of collective self-organization. Central to this type of housing is the presence of a significant level of collaboration amongst (future) residents, and between them and external actors and/or stakeholders, with a view to realizing the housing project. In this sense, the term collaboration stands for coordinated action towards a common purpose.

This collaboration can take place at different stages of the project – sometimes from the conception, design and development – and may extend to the daily maintenance and management of the housing. Collaborative housing forms can vary in terms of tenure, legal and organizational characteristics. Common attributes include a high degree of social contact between the residents and the presence, to different extents, of shared goals and motives in relation to the housing project, such as ecological sustainability and social inclusion. In many cases, these values also extend to the project's external environment.

Common to many of these examples is the residents' aim to regard themselves, and be regarded, as active agents of their own housing situation, and as part of a group sharing this common aim. Therefore, "agency" in CH assumes a double character: on the one hand, in terms of individual autonomy (to choose the own lifestyle and type of home that one wants to inhabit) and in terms of collective autonomy (the capacity to do this as a group, with others who share a common vision of the housing project). However, it is worth noting that the recent appearance of "top-down" initiated CH forms, as documented by Bresson & Labit, for example, introduce some nuance to the degree of agency in these projects, as well as the risk of cooptation (see Thompson's analysis). Therefore, it would be interesting to conduct further research into these new forms of CH in terms of the possibilities they afford to tenants to become, and more importantly, to perceive themselves, as agents of their own housing situation.

In terms of terminology, we would like to emphasize the need for greater rigour with regards to the use of different labels within the broad family of CH models. A case in point is the term "cohousing", often used interchangeably with its homophone, "co-housing". Following the extensive literature review by Lang et al., as well as the articles in this volume by Laine et al. and Falkenstjerne Beck, in our conception of CH we use "cohousing" to refer to the U.S. interpretation of the Danish Bofaelleskab model, where, as explained by Fromm,

> "(…) the design encourages social contact, residents have a strong participation role in the development process, complete management of their community, and typically share dining on a weekly basis, among other defining criteria (McCamant and Durrett 1988; Fromm 1991)." (Fromm 2012, 368).

In line with the above, we view cohousing as one model amongst many others, which can be classified under the umbrella term "collaborative housing".

A central finding that comes out of different contributions in this SI is the importance of mobility of ideas, practices and policies which appears fundamental to the ongoing development of CH models in Europe and beyond. Authors show how experiments and the reassembling of past ideas from other places have influenced contemporary CH practice. However, their implementation needs to account for the place-based historical institutions in order to be successful. This is most clearly articulated by Thompson's contribution in this SI who builds on "policy mobilities" and "mobile urbanism" literatures as well as on the critical genealogical method. Another methodology to trace the development of models is presented by Lang et al. and their systematic literature review approach.

A broader aspect raised in this SI, even though indirectly, are the links between the growing interest in studying CH forms, and the evolution of the European social model.

One of the questions to be explored in the future would be to understand to what extent these CH initiatives compensate the retreat of the institutions that have traditionally provided social protection and inclusion in different parts of Europe – the welfare state, family or communities. This issue is interesting in terms of conceptualization, because it could be assumed that the boundaries of CH develop in parallel to changes in welfare models. To what extent does CH development follow and/or accompany the reconfiguration of the role of public authorities? As the papers in this SI show, the expanding variety of recent CH projects, and their interactions with public authorities, call for research on their effects in line with welfare transformations. In this regard, Aernouts and Ryckewaert (2015) use the notion of "publicness" to qualify initiatives that are not provided anymore by the state but take place in the "public sphere" and carry out "public" tasks – for example some housing cooperatives where households are actively involved in the organization of their living environment. Another example is the work by Semprebon and Vicari (2016), which evokes the possible emergence of an "active welfare" when analysing self-build experiments in Italy, while Droste (2015) shed lights on new "intelligent collaboration between self-organisation and local welfare policies" in Berlin, calling for a "more community organised welfare" (Droste 2015, 90).

Last but not least, as this SI has focused on Europe – and to some extent the U.S. influences – future work should also pay attention to current self-help and cooperative housing movements in the global south, and stimulate exchanges with CH practice in Europe and North America. In fact, prominent CH architects and planners imported and built on ideas from the global south already in the 1970s, such as John F.C. Turner in England ("autoconstrucción" in South America) (see Thompson in this SI) or Fritz Matzinger in Austria ("Les Palétuviers" from Africa and Asia) (see Millonig et al. 2010). In this respect, academics can also play an important role in international knowledge transfer about CH ideas and practices. In doing so, researchers in this field should explicitely and critically address their own role in structuring the practice field of CH. This requires special attention in view of the substantial number of authors who are also activists and/or residents of CH projects, which might sometimes lead to a certain bias in covering the experiences and effects of these housing forms.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Darinka Czischke http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4734-0654

References

Aernouts, N., and M. Ryckewaert. 2015. "Reconceptualizing the "Publicness" of Public Housing: The Case of Brussels." *Social Inclusion* 3 (2): 17. doi:10.17645/si.v3i2.63.

Carriou, C. 2019. "Communs Et Habitat." In *L'Alternative Du Commun*, edited by C. Laval, P. Sauvêtre, and F. Taylan, 201–209. Paris: Hermann.

Czischke, D. 2018. “Collaborative Housing and Housing Providers: Towards an Analytical Framework of Multi-stakeholder Collaboration in Housing Co-production.” *International Journal of Housing Policy* 18 (1): 55–81. doi:10.1080/19491247.2017.1331593.

Droste, C. 2015. “German Co-Housing: An Opportunity for Municipalities to Foster Socially Inclusive Urban Development?” *Urban Research & Practice* 8 (1): 79–92. doi:10.1080/17535069.2015.1011428.

Fromm, D. 1991. *Collaborative Communities: Cohousing, Central Living, and Other New Forms of Housing with Shared Facilities*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Fromm, D. 2012. “Seeding Community: Collaborative Housing as a Strategy for Social and Neighbourhood Repair.” *Built Environment* 38 (3): 364–394. doi:10.2148/benv.38.3.364.

Jarvis, H. 2015. “Towards a Deeper Understanding of the Social Architecture of Co-housing: Evidence from the UK, USA and Australia.” *Urban Research & Practice* 8 (1): 93–105. doi: 10.1080/17535069.2015.1011429.

Lang, R., P. Chatterton, and D. Mullins. 2019. “Grassroots Innovations in Community-led Housing in England: The Role and Evolution of Intermediaries.” *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development* 1–21. doi:10.1080/19463138.2019.1663525.

McCamant, K., and C. Durrett. 1988. *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*. Berkley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

Millonig, E., H. Deubner, E. Brugger, I. Kreyer, and T. Matosic. 2010. *Evaluierung Der Wohnform “Co-housing” Am Beispiel Von Bestehenden Projekten in Niederösterreich F- 2150 [Evaluation of the Housing Type “Co-housing” with Particular Reference to Existing Projects in Lower Austria F-2150]*. Vienna: ARGE Brugger/Matosic GesbR. Retrieved from http://www.yumpu.com/de/document/view/5602880/evaluierung-der-wohnform-co-housing-am-beispiel-von-.

Semprebon, M., and S. Vicari. 2016. “Innovative Housing Practices Involving Immigrants: The Case of Self-Building in Italy.” *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 31 (3): 439–455. doi:10.1007/s10901-015-9464-3.

Vestbro, D. U., ed. 2010. Living Together – Cohousing Ideas and Realities Around the World. Proceedings from the international collaborative housing conference in Stockholm 5-9 May 2010. Stockholm: Royal Institute of Technology and Kollektivhus NU.