

JOURNAL
PROJECT

E-Co-Housing - Co-creating a Regenerative Housing Project Together with the Community
📍 Budapest, Hungary

TOPIC
Housing

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Final journal of the UIA project “E-Co-Housing”

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The project E-Co-Housing “*Co-creating a Regenerative Housing Project Together with the Community*” from Budapest’s district Zugló is about providing quality and environmental-friendly social housing and supporting its inhabitants in their way of living and living conditions at the same time. Thus, within the project, Budapest’s district Zugló refurbished with co-design elements a social housing in need of renovation, which was no longer inhabited in part, into a modern, energy efficient building with 14 flats for social housing. At the same time, they provided a group mentoring programme for the future inhabitants to create a house community, which will support each other in their daily life and their economic independence (for further information about the mentoring programme read: [Improving social housing in Zugló: Not just the hardware, also the software! \(uia-initiative.eu\)](https://uia-initiative.eu)).

The final journal highlights what has happened since the official end of the UIA project in October 2022, the perspectives of the ‘E-Co-Housing’ approach and what can be learned from Zugló’s case.

Project update

What has happened since the end date of the project

Since the official end of the E-Co-Housing project in October 2022, three main activities took place:

1. Finalising the rehabilitation of the building

Due to various problems, there were major delays in the renovation of the building, which postponed its completion by more than a year. The building was finally handed over to the municipality of Zugló and its residents on 24 October 2023. There are still some minor construction deficiencies, which are gradually being addressed.

2. Staying in touch and group meetings with the future tenants

As the delays in construction had also postponed the residents' move-in by more than a year than originally planned, the municipality of Zugló organised group meetings every two months after the end of the mentoring programme (October 2022). The aim of these meetings was, on the one hand, to maintain the contacts that had just been established between the future residents and the sense of community and, on the other hand, to receive and answer questions and complaints from them.

3. Move in of the tenants

On 25 October 2023, the time had come: the first residents moved in and the actual co-housing project could now begin. The tenants have started to meet in the arcade or courtyard, take time for conversation, have shared dinner and ask each other for help and receive help.

What is the plan for the long-term sustainability of the project

Project-related

The residents have just moved in and now need to start building a functioning house community in line with the E-Co-Housing approach. During interviews with the residents, it became clear that they do not see themselves in a position to do this without further support from the municipality. This is mainly due to the fact that the mentoring programme, which was intended for this purpose, ultimately only lasted one month in October 2022. This was nowhere near enough to independently build a well-functioning house community able to deal with internal conflicts, communicate nonviolently and can support each other in everyday life.

The municipality of Zugló has recognised this and will appoint a professional to support the house community in its further development and act as a point of contact alongside the contacts in the city administration.

Approach-related

The aim of E-Co-Housing was to develop a new approach in the field of social housing provision: Provision of quality and environmental-friendly social housing and at the same time supporting the tenants in the formation of house communities that support each other in their way of living and living conditions.

This approach is still considered useful by the district administration, but it is very cost-intensive. Costs that cannot be borne by the municipality alone; and insufficient financial resources are provided from the national level. In addition, the subject of the provision of quality and environmentally-friendly social housing is currently no longer a political priority. This means that the expansion of the E-Co-Housing approach in Zugló is not foreseeable as long as more financial resources are not made available for social housing.

To make matters worse, the municipality's social housing is often located in buildings that also contain privately owned flats (due to the privatisation of state-owned flats in the 1990s). The consent of all private owners would also have to be obtained for an energy-efficient refurbishment of these buildings.

Generated Knowledge: lessons learned and recommendations

Innovative elements

The innovative part of E-Co-Housing is using the renovation of social housing to

- § introduce co-housing into social housing supported by a community mentoring programme for its inhabitants,
- § to support the inhabitants in their sustainable way of living and living conditions,
- § ensure a better social mixture in social housing and
- § improve the energy efficiency in the social housing stock.

Introducing co-housing into social housing supported by a mentoring programme

The 'social capital' in social housing is often underdeveloped. The co-housing approach attempts to raise and revitalise this social capital: to spark a community which supports each other in their daily life, is capable to deal

and solve internal conflicts and lives more sustainably.

Co-housing, living together, dealing with conflicts, helping each other, living more sustainably must be learned. To this end, a community mentoring programme was developed for the residents to strengthen them in these elements. Only in connection with the mentoring programme is it possible to introduce co-housing approaches in social housing.

Mentoring programme to support (sustainable) way of living and living conditions

To improve the life prospects of poorer and less educated people, it is not only affordable and decent housing that is needed. They also need support in their way of life. That is where the mentoring programme in social housing comes in. Guiding its residents in

- § Household economy: improving their economic life prospects and independence, savings and credit mapping, debt management, household cash flow, knowledge of financial products, etc.
- § Community development: living together in a house community and supporting each other, agreement on decision-making, organisational and house rules, dealing with conflicts, barter activities, etc.
- § Green lifestyle in the household: conscious consumption and food, dealing with energy crisis and climate change, energy saving and less chemicals in the household, greening the garden, etc.

Better social mixture in social housing

Social housing often concentrates people with social and economic problems, leading to negative interactions with existing income and wealth inequalities and excessive segregation of the population, reducing the educational and employment opportunities of residents.

With the introduction of a new criteria points system for the occupancy of the social housing units, a better social mix of tenants with different levels of education, income, age and household size can be ensured and thus a concentration of poor and educationally deprived persons in a confined space with its negative effects on the development opportunities of these persons can be reduced.

Improving the energy efficiency in the social housing stock

Social housing stock (in Zugló/Hungary) has a negative image (which can also affect the residents) due to the poor structural condition of the buildings, the building equipment and the high energy costs caused by the low energy efficiency of the buildings. With the energy saving modernisation of the buildings, better qualities and living conditions can be realised, which can counteract the named deficiencies.

Process innovation

Focus group

In order to gain a better understanding of the life routine and ideas of social housing tenants for a better programming of the mentoring programme, they installed a focus group of social housing tenants. This focus group shared their daily routines, their interests in a house community and in which ways they could imagine a community living and supporting each other. These views and ideas were incorporated into the mentoring programme.

Community mentoring

Mentoring programmes are often geared towards individuals. In this case, the mentoring programme was geared towards the group in order to create the opportunity for the future residents to get to know each other, to "learn" together, to develop a group feeling and to make first joint decisions, building up a community and get organised. With the mentors, there are also experienced people at the beginning who, for example, can support the group in dealing with conflicts and thus, the group can learn "accompanied" in a practical way.

Community building before tenants move together

Co-housing is also something very personal, which is not suitable for everyone. That is why it was important that people did volunteer for co-housing and that the mentoring programme allowed to define together house rules, in which areas they wanted to "co-house" and support each other.

Partnership with externals

Holistic approaches can seldom be implemented by one organisation alone, as versatile know-how is needed to be able to implement them successfully. Therefore, it was important to work together with partners from different fields and with different know-how in order to design and implement the project. In this way, the different expertise and skills could be used adequately and in a coordinated way for the project, e.g. in the development and implementation of the mentoring programme.

Challenges, lessons learned and recommendations

E-Co-Housing' has demonstrated that a social housing building in very poor structural conditions can be rehabilitated into quality and environmentally-friendly social housing and thus make a significant contribution to better and fairer housing provision for lower income households.

At the same time, E-Co-Housing had to face major challenges during its implementation with strong financial impact: among them change in the political leadership and commitment of the municipality, central governmental budget cuts on Hungarian municipalities due to the Covid 19 pandemic, serious changes in the local regulatory building framework, high increase of construction costs due to the global construction market. This meant that the project could not be realised as planned. One major change was that instead of a new building with an additional 25-30 social housing units, it was "only" possible to renovate an existing building with 14 social housing units and that the mentoring programme, an essential component of the project approach, had to be carried out within a month instead of six months before and after the residents moved in due to the delays in the project.

Despite these challenges and the necessary adjustments, helpful lessons can be drawn from the project.

Co-housing

It turned out that a high number of the social housing tenants had low interest in the co-housing approach. In addition, for most of them it was unclear what co-housing meant and why it should be relevant to them. For some people, the topic of "community" and "co-housing" also aroused fears, as it reminded them of communist times, when everything had to be done "together and in or for the group". As a result, the perception of the topic was not entirely positive.

The reason for participating in the project was therefore not because of the co-housing approach, but despite the co-housing approach. The desire and need for decent and affordable housing was much greater and more urgent and was the driving motivation to apply for the project. Co-housing therefore does not appear to be a particular motivator for social housing tenants, although there were of course tenants who were interested in the co-housing approach from the beginning.

As the project progressed, it became clear that due to the social, cultural and educational diversity of the tenants, there were also very different interests as to how much or how little co-housing should be undertaken. Not every person was suitable for co-housing, which makes it challenging to form a co-housing community. At the same time, the residents must first learn to deal with the diversity they encounter in the framework of co-housing and find a common language and behaviour. They are not all prepared for that and how to handle it.

Recommendations

The importance and opportunities of co-housing, particularly with regard to practical help in everyday life, must be communicated to the participants at an early stage; at the same time, the co-housing approach must be aligned with the needs and interests of the residents (which was pursued to some extent with the focus group). It is necessary to find out together what kind of co-housing is "desired" and should be "tried out". Only then, and if it is voluntary, can a functioning co-housing community be established.

Therefore, when selecting people entitled to social housing for co-housing projects, in addition to the criteria points system to ensure a social mix, consideration should also be given to enquiring about their interest in co-housing - in writing or via interviews. Interviews would be more suitable, but also more time-consuming. An interest or open mind should emerge in order to better build a cohesive and supportive house community.

As the social housing tenants may have to develop the skills to deal with the social, cultural and educational diversity in the day-to-day co-housing, to organise themselves independently as a group, to deal with conflicts, etc., the group needs professional mentoring and guidance from the beginning, as the e-co-housing project originally envisaged, which should extend beyond the move-in date. In general, a professional contact person is needed who can support the group at certain points, e.g. in conflict situations.

Mentoring program

Originally 6-12 months were planned for the mentoring activities. But due to the overall delay and changes of the project, which led to the late selection of tenants, the mentoring programme had to be implemented in just one month as the UIA project had to be completed. There was too little time to raise interest in all the topics of the mentoring program and to deepen and practice what was taught during the mentoring sessions or even prepare concrete co-housing elements. This resulted in shortening the mentoring programme and its topics could rather be touched upon, but not deepened and practised that much. To help the participants to remember the content of the programme, the learning materials were provided to all tenants in a ring binder to be able to look it up in future occasions.

With regards to the content of the mentoring programme the interests of the tenants were very diverse. This was due to the diversity of the tenants, which reflected the different interests and life situations of them. In principle, the interest in the practical sessions were of greater interest, for example how to build up a house community or how to have a more sustainable lifestyle in the household and how to support each other through barter activities. They showed less interest in topics which did not correspond so much to their current life goals and expectations as for example becoming an entrepreneur.

One tenant also mentioned that the intellectual level of the mentoring program was partly too high for the participants which less educational background. This overstretched some people.

Recommendations

When you develop a mentoring programme for a group of people with different cultural, social and educational background, you need to be aware of it and the training program has to reflect it. The programme must respond and align to the life situations and challenges of the participants and offer ideas and support. Nevertheless, there will always be parts of the programme that will appeal people's interest more respectively less. It is therefore important to find out the needs and interests of the tenants as early as possible, e.g. during the selection process, and to incorporate them into the mentoring programme, e.g. demonstrating possibilities how co-housing can support their needs and interests.

A key point of the mentoring programme should be that the participants get to know and bond with each other. This is a very important basis for a co-housing community.

Also, sufficient time needs to be ensured to “transmit, digest and practice” the topics of the mentoring program. It should start couple of months before tenants move in and last couple of months after they have moved in to be able to practice accompanied. This might allow as well to raise interest in topics they might not have been of interest before.

Another key is that the training programme and the support of the group is provided by professional players, as was predominantly the case in the project. Municipal employees are usually not sufficiently trained or experienced for this and can only provide limited guidance and support.

Co-design

Some residents noted that they were allowed to have a say in the decor of the flat or the design of the garden, but that this was not always implemented, which led to dissatisfaction. Other people would have liked to have had more co-design opportunities, e.g. in the design of the flat floor plans.

Recommendations

At the beginning of a project, co-design possibilities should be outlined and how the tenants can become involved. At the same time, however, any restrictions on co-design possibilities must also be communicated (e.g. due to legal or financial constraints). The possibilities should be aligned with the interests of the tenants in co-designing. Also, it is important to seriously consider the tenants' input when co-designing and, if it cannot be carried out, to communicate this to the tenants in a well-founded manner.

If decisions have to be made at a time when the tenants have not yet been selected, working with focus groups is an alternative, as it was the case in E-CO-Housing.

When selecting project partners, e.g. the architect, it is important that they identify with the approach of the project and are open or even experienced with co-designing.

Conclusion

Achievements

- § **Modern social housing:** With the renovation of a social housing in very bad conditions to a quality and environmental-friendly social housing, modern, energy efficient and affordable housing for 14 households with lower income could be made available, improving their quality of life.
- § **Renovated building:** It could be demonstrated that social housing can also be modern, affordable and energy efficient.
- § **Better social mix in social housing:** With the new selection criteria (point and quota-system) for social housing tenants they could enable a better mix of tenants with different levels of education, income, age and household size.
- § **Co-creation in social housing:** With the co-creation elements in E-Co-Housing it could be demonstrated that co-design in social housing is possible.
- § **Combination of hard and soft measures to improve the living situation of social housing households** The provision of modern social housing combined with the mentoring programme, to get a better control of one's own living situation, can (probably) achieve a greater impact on the living situation of the social housing households.
- § **Community and shared spaces to support the development of house communities** Social housing has in general no community spaces for its residents. With the large courtyard and its community house with a kitchen and space to socialise, spaces are provided easing the development of a house community.
- § **Better understanding of co-housing and its opportunities** Through the mentoring programme the tenants gained skills and a better understanding of what co-housing can be about, how it can help to improve their quality of life by helping each other and how living together in a house can work better.

§ **Getting to know each other before moving in** The group mentoring programme enabled residents to get to know each other and their interests and similarities before moving in. This strengthened the feeling of a house community from the very beginning.

Scalability

Despite what has been stated in chapter 1.2, the E-Co-Housing project as outlined in chapter 2.1 can be scaled up when there are sufficient personal and financial resources for the renovation of social housing AND the mentoring programme (combination of hard and soft measures). But this depends strongly on the political will, which perhaps needs to be fed with proactive communication and advocacy by the project partners regarding the benefits and long-term positive impacts of the E-Co-Housing approach. Financial resources are particularly needed for the professional support as certain skills and knowledge are not within the city council.

Another possibility would be to introduce the mentoring programme in social housing, regardless of the refurbishment of buildings, as it is about to strengthen the self and mutual-help of the residents, how to deal with conflict situation with other neighbours and live a more sustainable life style. It could also be organised community-building activities and events to foster connections among social housing residents and community living. This could include social gatherings, workshops, or collaborative projects that encourage interaction and a sense of belonging. Or an online tenant engagement platform could be created where tenants can share information, resources, etc. This virtual space could promote a sense of community and allow for the exchange of ideas and support among residents.

Also, regulations may have to be adapted so that the tenant selection according to the new criteria is possible to improve the social mixture in social housing; or that co-design elements can be easier implemented in social housing renovation projects.

Further projects should focus on social housing units that have a particularly poor image or building condition and can be upgraded with this approach, both internally and externally. This will improve the image of social housing and improve the quality of life of its residents. The co-housing element should remain voluntary and be aligned with the interests of the respective tenants.

The city council should provide a professional contact person to intermediate in conflict situations in co-housing projects which the housing community cannot solve on their own or organise a training in methods how to deal and solve conflicts in a community.

Transferability

The approach of E-Co-Housing is highly transferable. The main components of the project as outlined in chapter 2.1 are not dependent on national or local regulations (apart from the selection of tenants) or special (building) techniques. This means that the approach can in principle be pursued anywhere in Europe.

However, the implementation depends on the corresponding provision of the necessary resources for the (energetic) modernisation of the social housing stock and the accompanying mentoring programme, and thus on the support of politics.

There is also a need for experienced institutions in the involvement of tenants in the planning of building modernisation and co-housing, as well as the development and implementation of the mentoring programme. Appropriate partnerships need to be developed and financed.

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