



Lars Ågren, Kollektivhuset Stacken, Göteborg, Sweden, 1969-1980. The first small collective house of the multi-family dwelling "Swedish model". © Claes Caldenby.

## ***Kollektivbus:* the Swedish model<sup>1</sup>**

BY CLAES CALDENBY

Today there is a new wave of co-housing internationally. Co-housing is here understood as collaborative housing, based on collaboration between residents on cooking and house maintenance, a new phenomenon since the 1980s. Sweden has a tradition since early modernism of *kollektivbus*, collective houses, in multi-family dwellings with employed staff managing household work. In Sweden today there are only some 40 true *kollektivbus* or co-housing projects, while ordinary Swedish postwar multi-family dwellings have common facilities that potentially would make them co-housing. Co-housing is often seen as a sustainable house form, but a problem is that they mainly reach middle-class residents.

The first ever international conference on co-housing was held in Stockholm in 2010. This is not a coincidence. It tells at least two things: 1. That today there is a new wave of co-housing internationally, including also countries that have not had many examples built before and 2. That Sweden has a long history of collective houses, since early 1900s and especially since the breakthrough of modernism in the 1930s. The terminology is also telling: the conference was about co-housing, usually understood as collaborative housing, while the Swedish term since the 1930s and still today is “*kollektivbus*”, collective house. Collaborative and collective can be understood as two different aspects of this kind of housing, its content and form if you like, but they can also be given a political meaning.

### **Housing typology and organization of household work**

Much has been published internationally on co-housing as part of this recent wave. One Italian book, by Jacopo Gresleri (1971-), gives an overview of co-housing projects and points out two main building types, the “Swedish model” and the “Danish model”.<sup>2</sup> The “Swedish model” is a multi-family dwelling, while the “Danish model” is a group of small houses of the “dense-low” type. The “Danish model” is most common in the Anglo-Saxon world, where co-housing is a fairly new phenomenon from the late 1900s. In housing generally multi-family dwellings are dominating in the Nordic countries, in the former Eastern Bloc and in central parts of more densely populated European cities, while the rest of the world is dominated by lower one-family dwellings.

It is worth emphasizing from the beginning that the Swedish and Danish models are about housing types while the collaborative aspect is about the organization of household work (cooking and house maintenance), in collaboration between inhabitants as opposed to done by employees. Collaboration on household work is a recent phenomenon, introduced in Denmark in the 1970s (then mainly

in dense-low settlements) and in Sweden in the 1980s (in multi-family dwellings). The Swedish term for the collaborative aspect was “*bogemenskap*” [living community], still used alternating with “*kollektivbus*”. The reason for introducing this model was both to counter the “social atomization”, a perceived lack of community in modern society, and the high costs of employed household workers.

The modernist collective house, both in Sweden and Denmark, was typically based not on collaboration, but on employees doing the household work for what was mainly middle-class inhabitants. The Swedish modernist manifesto *Acceptera* from 1931 describes “family hotels” as a type of housing already being built in “capitalist America and communist Russia”. A large unbuilt project by Sven Markelius (1889-1972) from 1932 was called “*kollektivbus*”, a term claimed, with unclear support, to come from the Soviet Union. The first built modernist example, also designed by Sven Markelius, was *Kollektivhuset John Ericssonsgatan 6* in central Stockholm, from 1935, with 57 apartments, a restaurant, and a day nursery. It was followed during the next ten years by a handful of similar projects, each with between 60 and 280 mainly small apartments, half of them aimed at single women and all with a restaurant.

The large multi-family dwelling of the *unité d'habitation* type was characteristic for modernist housing architecture. This has been called “a new urban genotype”, typical for “industrial bureaucracies”, by Bill Hillier (1937-2019) and Julienne Hanson in their space syntax analysis.<sup>3</sup> They also call it “reversed buildings,” not facing the street directly but with a certain inward-oriented detachment from its context. This might be advantageous for the community but can also cause problems which will be addressed later.

### **Swedish post-war housing policy**

The ruling Social-Democratic party, already in the early 1930s, started to form a new housing policy for Sweden, which was launched immediately after the war. Collective houses were not part of that policy, they were considered to

be, and also remained, marginal cases in what was intended to be a general policy. There is however an interesting relation between the two million apartments that were built in Sweden up until the mid-1970s as part of this policy and the later co-housing projects that makes it necessary to go a bit deeper into the characteristics of the in many ways unique Swedish post-war housing policy.

The Swedish post-war welfare state model included a long and strong tradition of financial state support to housing. It was part of Keynesian politics, but it also had social ambitions. The aim was to provide “good housing for everyone,” meaning that the policy was universal, with no special “social housing” for lower income groups. It also meant an internationally very high percentage of multi-family dwellings (~50%) as well as a large percentage of rented (~40%) or cooperative tenant-owned (~20%) flats. Municipal housing companies were set up to lead the construction of affordable housing on a large scale, facilitated by the state through favorable loans.

The typical Swedish multi-family dwelling of the post-war decades would contain not only flats but also a common laundry, for free use of the inhabitants. In cooperative tenant-owned houses there often was an overnight room that inhabitants could rent for guests that they could not accommodate in their own flat, as well as a meeting room for the board of the cooperative, which also could be used for bigger parties by inhabitants. Many of the recent international co-housing projects do not have more common facilities than this, which means that even if the number of “true” collective houses in Sweden today are not more than some 40, there are tens of thousands of houses that in other countries would qualify as co-housing.

The housing policy was launched after the war in a situation of severe housing shortage. To this was added the economic boom of the first post-war decades, which caused a rapid growth of both smaller factory towns and large cities. More housing was in high demand while at the same time all the available workforce was needed in export industries. In an agreement between the government and the large builders, the builders were given economic loans for mechanization and full control over the building process, in exchange for a promise to build more without using a larger workforce. Sweden got a structure of the building trade which included large clients (municipal housing companies), large-scale builders and large-scale architects’ offices. Large-scale architects’ offices were a way of handling large-scale projects (often with over 1000 flats) but also a way of trying to counter the weakened role of the architect in the building process.

The “million program” to build one million flats between 1965 and 1974 was a final attempt to get rid of the still lingering lack of housing. It meant that the state guaranteed loans over a ten-year period to make the builders invest in prefabrication factories. There was a large production of rational housing at a highly functional standard, both in flats and in common facilities, but in external locations and often with a rather bleak architecture that made these districts vulnerable to changing economic conditions.<sup>4</sup> This is

also what happened with the crisis in the early 1970s. All of a sudden, the demand for multi-family dwellings dropped dramatically: in a process of “suburbanization” those who could afford moved to one-family houses on the outskirts of larger cities. In the beginning of the “million program” two-thirds of the built apartments were in multi-family dwellings, towards the end it was one-third in a decreasing production. Empty flats started to appear in the “million program’s” districts, which contributed to their stigmatization. But it also opened up an opportunity for the new wave of co-housing.

### Two pioneer projects

The “record years” of the 1960s and the “million program” in housing, with a belief in technology and large-scale solutions, had addressed the Swedish post-war housing shortage, but it also ended in a critique of the social consequences of the “strong society.” The general lack of community became a focus of the co-housing movement.

This was combined with a widespread interest in ecological alternatives and gender equality. There were also practical experiences of different forms of solutions to these problems. Small groups of young people, sometimes referred to as “extended families,” shared large central apartments, older villas or small former institution buildings. Estimates indicate that around 1980 there were at least 200 such small collectives with an average of six to seven members in Sweden. One of the last traditional large collective houses, Hässelby Family Hotel, opened in 1955 but closed its restaurant in 1976, allegedly for economic reasons. Inhabitants then for some time took over cooking for themselves, showing that this was possible.

These different tendencies were combined in the idea of “the small collective house” formulated by a group of ten women in Stockholm, many of them architects or journalists. Somewhat paradoxically they called themselves BIG, which stands for “live in community” [*“bo i gemenskap”*]. Four principles were fundamental to the idea of the small collective house: no more than 20–50 residents, shared work with daily activities coupled with living (such as cooking and house maintenance), freedom from economic speculation and the right to decide on common matters, and finally a varied group of residents.

The ideas outlined by BIG influenced the first Swedish co-housing project of the new generation, called *Stacken* [“the Ant-Hill”] in Gothenburg, opened in 1980. Another part of its background was that municipal housing companies were bleeding economically because of empty flats and searched for all kinds of solutions, including co-housing. An empty point block with 40 apartments from 1969 in the suburb of Bergsjön was offered to Chalmers School of Architecture, who had run seminars and student projects on co-housing of the new type. The school handled the design and the recruitment of inhabitants, while the housing company paid for the remodeling. In 1980, 55 adults moved into the building, which now had some common facilities such as a laundry, workshop and *café* on the rather closed ground floor and the main common rooms – kitchen,

- 01 Carl-Axel Acking, Håsselby Family Hotel, Stockholm, Sweden, 1953-1956. One of the last large collective houses with 340 apartments and employed staff.  
© Holger Elgaard, Wikimedia Commons CC-BY-SA-3.0.



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- 02 Palle Dyreborg & Theo Bjerg, Sættedammen co-housing, Hillerød, Denmark, 1972. The first co-housing project of the dense-low "Danish model".



- 03 hsb architects, Kollektivbuset Trädet, Göteborg, Sweden, 1956-1985. A follow-up of the same model as Stacken. © Claes Caldenby.

Essays

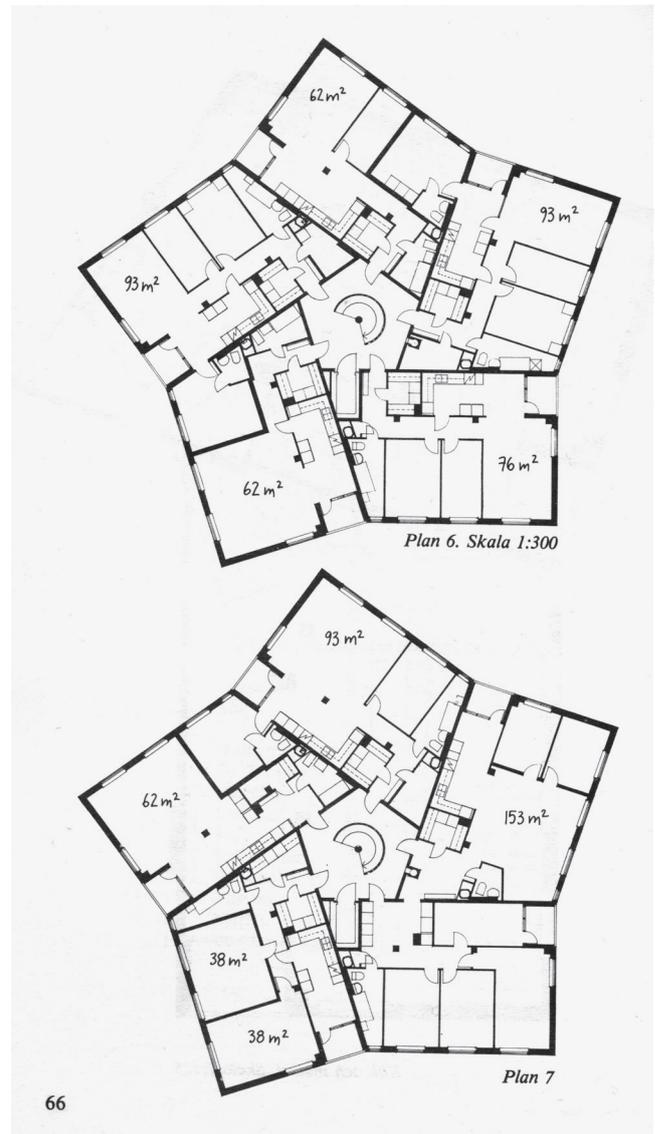
04 Lars Ågren, *Kollektivhuset Stacken*, Göteborg, Sweden, 1969-1980. The building after being remodeled into a passive house with a new facade of solar panels, 2017. © Katarina Despotovic.



dining room for daily common meals, day nursery and textile atelier – on the fifth floor. The reason for this was that the structure was so neatly tailor made that larger openings could not be cut in the load-bearing walls on the lower floors. Inhabitants were lower middle-class, many of them with jobs in the public sector as teachers, health and social care workers. The most common household type was single adults, and the second most common was the traditional family of two parents and two children. Single mothers with one or two children were also common.

The pioneering project was, in 1985, followed by a second one, called *Trädet* [“the Tree”], in another point block in a slightly older nearby suburb. *Trädet* was owned by a municipal housing company and the remodeling was again handled by Chalmers School of Architecture. It was technically easier to retrofit than *Stacken*. The restaurant and other common facilities could be placed on the second floor with direct access from the outside. Notwithstanding considerable differences, the two pioneering projects in the first wave of co-housing in Gothenburg are clearly of the same type, the “Swedish model”. They have now been working for more than 30 years, not without problems and conflicts, but in principle according to the ideas of BIG from the late 1970s about “the small collective house” with shared household work. *Trädet* is the better organized collective house with common meals cooked by inhabitants three days a week. *Stacken*, on the other hand, is more activist and “alternative”. When the building was about to be sold by the municipal company to a private developer it was bought by the inhabitants. At the time there was a new form of tenure called cooperative rental, which made it possible to avoid the speculation now connected with cooperative tenant ownership. This means that the house is owned by an association of its tenants, and then each tenant has a share. The residents of *Stacken* could buy their shares for 100 SEK each, which was affordable for everyone. Recently, *Stacken* has also been remodeled into a passive house with a new facade made of solar cells which will considerably decrease energy costs. *Stacken* is an interesting alternative in what today is a

05 Lars Ågren, *Kollektivhuset Stacken*, Göteborg, Sweden, 1969-1980. Floor plans: 40 identical 76 m<sup>2</sup> flats were diversified into one room bigger or smaller flats and even one flat shared by two singles and another made into a double-size collective within the collective house.



problematic situation in Swedish housing. It is an alternative not only, or even mainly, for its collaborative organization, but also for its tenure form and its passive house solution. It is also an exception today with its low living costs, caused by its historical background.

### Still a marginal phenomenon

The Swedish policy of “good housing for everyone” was abandoned in the 1990s. The state subsidies were replaced by a market solution. At the same time Sweden has the highest building costs in Europe. The large-scale builders prefer to build housing with cooperative tenant ownership, which is also subsidized by the state through tax reductions on loans. This means that for those who are new in the housing market and who do not have money, such as young people and immigrants, it is very difficult to find a flat.

Collective houses are built today but like all new buildings

06 Lars Ågren, *Kollektivhuset Stacken*, Göteborg, Sweden, 1969-1980. Watching football together in *Trädet*. © Katarina Despotovic, 2018.



07 Lars Ågren, *Kollektivhuset Stacken*, Göteborg, Sweden, 1969-1980. Ove, age 80, cooking in the common kitchen of *Trädet*. © Katarina Despotovic, 2018.



they are expensive. Groups of future residents who take initiatives to start new projects often prefer to have them built by municipal housing companies as rental apartments, to avoid speculation. They will usually meet some lack of interest or even skepticism from the housing companies who still have a general policy in mind. If residents choose cooperative tenant ownership, they will face the problem of affordability for many potential residents as well as a lack of control over to whom an apartment is sold, which is a problem for a housing form that is built on the residents' active participation in collaboration on cooking and maintenance.

The demand for economically and culturally resourceful residents leads to a bias towards middle-class people inhabiting the relatively few new collective houses in Sweden. This is a problem which has followed collective houses since the beginning. It is underlined by the housing typology of "reversed buildings," which tends to favor "trans-spatial" over "spatial solidarity," that is to favor the detached community over the activist nucleus interacting with its context. This is a critique that has also been launched against the recent wave of co-housing.

At the same time, we are in dire need today of socially and ecologically sustainable alternatives in housing as well as in other fields. Collaboration and collective solutions are part of such an alternative thinking. And the history of collective houses offers us examples to learn from, but they need to be contextualized in their different cultural, social and political situations.

### Notes

- 1 This article is based on earlier research published in Swedish, see Claes Caldenby, Åsa Walldén, *Kollektivhus: Sovjet och Sverige omkring 1930*, Stockholm, Byggnadsnämnden, 1979; and Claes Caldenby, Åsa Walldén, *Kollektivhuset Stacken*, Göteborg, Bokförlaget Korpen, 1984; and also on a recent research project published in English, see Pernilla Hagbert et al., *Contemporary Co-Housing in Europe: Towards Sustainable Cities?*, London, New York, Routledge, 2020. For a fuller version of the argument see these books.
- 2 Jacopo Gresleri, *Cobousing: Esperienze internazionali di abitare condiviso*, Busalla, plug\_in, 2015.
- 3 Bill Hillier, Julienne Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- 4 See Eva Rudberg, "One day we shall inherit the earth - Swedish functionalism as a vision and reality", in *Proceedings of the 5<sup>th</sup> International docomomo Conference - Vision and Reality: Social Aspects of Architecture and Urban Planning in the Modern Movement*, Stockholm, 1998.

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