

LQ *The Lab's Quarterly*

2020 / a. XXII / n. 1 (gennaio-marzo)



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THE ROLE OF CO-HOUSING

Towards a New Model of Collaborative Housing in Italy

di *Francesca Bianchi**

Abstract

Differently from other countries, the spread of collaborative housing is at the beginning in Italy. In this essay, we will describe the main results of a two case studies. We will conduct a study on two Italian groups of inhabitants, which have been active in the advancement of this practice, a model of collaborative housing aiming to turn urban spaces into new social neighbourhood places. The research has been conducted through several in depth interviews to the members of cohousing Numero zero situated in the town of Turin and to the members of cohousing Ecosol located in Fidenza. The study shows that people are strongly motivated to invest resources in collective projects to realize a model of social and sustainable life. In that way, cohousing seems to become a new model of co-residence in everyday life with particular attention to economic, social and ecological sustainability.

Keywords

Cohousing, urban regeneration, planning, social capital, neighbourhoods

* FRANCESCA BIANCHI (PhD) is associate professor in General Sociology at the University of Siena. In recent years, she has been particularly studying the new forms and practices of social interaction, participation and cooperation in urban contexts.

Email: francesca.bianchi@unisi.it

1. INTRODUCTION

This article deals with experiences of communitarian life and in particular with co-housing, a form of co-residency that is working to turn urban spaces into new social places for neighbourhoods. In particular the overall aim of the authors is to present the results of an empirical in-depth study of contemporary co-housing life in Italy.

Co-housing represents a middle ground between life in apartments and life in a “voluntary community”, where it is possible to share intimately a common lifestyle. In co-housing people live separately in their own apartments but share some common spaces where is possible to meet and socialize. Essentially, we will try to answer the question whether co-housing succeeds in offering a privileged place for people to experience a lifestyle characterized by active participation and sociability. One of the issues that we will try to investigate in this essay concerns the attitude implicit in the choices of those who intend to experiment this housing formula. Some studies have pointed out that the prime objective of people involved in co-housing is not the idea of fleeing or withdrawing from social life but rather rethinking it. This is expressed in the desire to find a different balance between private and community life by exploring a new kind of organization and definition of living spaces (Hasell, Scanzoni 1997; Jarvis 2011). In this article we will give particular attention to the social representations developed by the members of two Italian co-housing units concerning the meaning of living in the same building (that is the concept of co-residence) and their mutual forms of interactions. In order to examine this phenomenon, a micro-sociological in-depth study of two co-housing settlements, Numero Zero in Turin and Ecosol in Fidenza, will be presented. In the first part we provide a review of a recent sociological debate on the theme of co-housing (§ 2) and of methods of research (§ 3). In the second part we introduce our research activity, which was conducted through two case studies of the co-housing settlements Numero Zero (Turin) and Ecosol (Fidenza), both located in northern Italy (§ 4). These studies were conducted following an ethnographic methodology (in each case the researcher lived in the settlement for a week) and using a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews (with a representative of almost every family unit). In the last part we try to analyse the main results of our study in the context of the most significant issues currently being debated (§ 5).

2. CO-HOUSING: STATE OF THE ART

A new wave of collective self-organized forms of housing has taken place in many European countries since the early 2000s. We can observe a wide variety of forms and models, such as co-housing, residents' co-operatives, self-help and self-build initiatives, experimental work-life communities, ecological housing communities, some types of Community Land Trusts (CLTs) etc. Alongside the growth of grassroots activity in this field, the number and breadth of relative research and publications is rapidly growing. In this contribution our purpose is to refer only to the model of co-housing as a housing practice, a term more restrictive than collaborative housing (Lang, Carriou, Czischke 2018, 2).

What is co-housing? In western countries, attention is being given to a way of life that under various names (co-housing, collaborative or self-help housing in England, *baugruppen* or *genossenschaftin* Germany, *collectifparticulier*, *habitat groupé* or *habitat participative* in France) was initially experimented in the Nordic countries in the mid-1960s and then spread, albeit with different characteristics and in various degrees, to the major western countries between the 1980s and the early 2000s¹. If intentional communities are “groups of people who have chosen to live (and sometimes work) together for some common purpose beyond that of tradition, personal relationship or family ties” (Sargisson 2000, 1), then co-housing, literally “housing-cum-neighbourhood”, is a kind of intentional community (Lietaert 2007, 5). This is a housing practice characterized by the three-fold need for economic, environmental and social sustainability.

In co-housing communities residents have their own private apartments alongside common spaces; sharing the common spaces offers economic savings as well as advantages in terms of cooperation, solidarity, relating and social capital (Deriu, Bucco 2013). Thus, the common spaces represent added value for the inhabitants. Moreover, the demand for sharing often involves collateral services that can prove extremely useful, such as car sharing, time banks and solidarity purchasing groups (Raffa 2012). The collective spaces are fundamental for encouraging social practices that foster a sense of community and social belonging (Baglione, Chiodelli 2011).

The people involved play an active part in the realization of the housing project. During the phase of settling in they become learners as

¹ The first co-housing experiences took place at the end of the Sixties in Denmark, but subsequently the phenomenon spread to the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, France, North America and then to Great Britain, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, Japan.

a group. Taking part in the realization of a co-housing project requires close collaboration among the participants, since they have to conceive, construct and manage life-spaces together, and therefore organizational skills and a group spirit are fundamental (Tuckman 1965). Of course, risks of conflict and problems in building the community are always around the corner, since in practice the residents are involved in an ongoing interactive process, with all the risks implicit and typical in any movement (Casby Nichols, Cooper 2011; Baker 2014). Moreover, residents generally manage themselves using the consensus method for taking decisions, which requires hearing out all opinions and developing compromises that will be better than decisions taken following the majority method (Baker 2014).

Co-housing communities are often formed by persons of diverse gender, age and family status; however, there are also co-housing communities specifically aimed at women or the elderly (*Ibidem*). Moreover, it is possible to find considerable variety among these communities as regards typologies, support mechanisms, productive processes, levels of participation, types of settlements, etc. (Williams 2008, 2005). This model allows people to live independently within a cohesive, sympathetic community that provides support and security as well as precious opportunities for socialization and sharing resources. As a matter of fact, co-housing is intended to foster mutual help and conviviality not only inside the group but also with the reality of the surrounding urban territory, with the aim of social *mixité* (Bresson, Tummers 2014; Ruii 2015; D’Orazio 2014; Bianchi 2015).

We can find many different motives for choosing to live in co-housing. The declared intentions of co-housing are “to create living arrangements that are not easily available in the (local) housing market” (Tummers 2015a, 2):

These arrangements are described as representing “more than simply an alternative system of housing” (Jarvis 2015, 102). Indeed, they intend to invent new lifestyles based “on equality and neighbourly cooperation” (Vestbro and Horelli 2012, 315; Roux 2014; Bianchi, Roberto 2016), female emancipation (Jarvis 2013), or new ways of relating to nature and/or work (Cunningham and Wearing 2013) while in any case not breaking radically with dominant social norms (Jarvis, Bonnett 2013) (Lang, Carriou, Czischke 2018 11).

A new interest in co-housing has arisen within the frame of a return to forms of mutual help in society (Guadagnucci 2007). This can be seen as a result of the faltering welfare state ‘safety-net,’ which had previously compensated for social disintegration, especially in large

metropolitan areas.

A wide range of models for the development of co-housing can be found in different countries. In northern Europe the model is often financed by the state, thanks to a robust system of social policies that defend the universal right to housing (Ruiu 2015, 2016). In corporative systems the building industry is more fragmentary, but there are greater possibilities for speculative profits. In both cases the public contribution of land with the intention of redistribution fosters self-promoted building, cooperatives and other forms of non-profit building. Liberal welfare systems, instead, are characterized by the predominance of the private sector in promoting the development of housing construction (guided by the market) and by the presence of large-scale companies. Finally, the Mediterranean welfare regimes are distinguished by the presence of small, fragmented builders, whose possibilities for speculative profits are linked to land use regimes and to a traditional weakness in instruments of planning (Bronzini 2014). Consequently, in the countries of southern Europe there is ample space for the intervention of individual citizens.

In Italy, one of the reasons for the growing interest in co-housing is related to the introduction of new inter-sectorial planning tools, viz. the Integrated Action Plans, Urban Reclamation and Suburbs Recovery Programs, Recognition of Sustainable Development of the Territory, and Participatory Experience of District Contracts (Deriu 2015). In many cases there is a strong possibility that co-residency initiatives have little to do with the gradual transformation of urban policies, even though it is clear that a participatory culture is an essential condition for the development of co-housing. In fact, the role of participatory territorial governance, which sees territorial enhancement as an action system involving a variety of mobilized actors (Bifulco, Borghi 2012), has been growing since the early 1990s. This important trend should, however, be seen in the context of many other factors that appear to contribute to the origin of the development of co-housing.

3. METHODS

As concerns co-residency practices in the various countries involved, discussion has mainly highlighted several relevant issues, in particular those pertinent to the dissemination and generalization of the model. In this regard research has focused on three aspects: 1) what kind of community do individuals develop and how important is the socio-cultural homogeneity of the participants for the success of the initiative?

2) are there processes of self-election or, better, is the concept of the elective neighbourhood applied? 3) are the participants capable of generating social capital? and if so, what kind? is it bridging capital or bonding capital (Putnam, Goss 2002; Ruiu 2016)?

This study, conducted between 2014 and 2015, was carried out using a qualitative approach that envisaged a series of in-depth interviews with residents along with a detailed ethnographic analysis. The aim of this analysis was to reconstruct the genesis of the two co-housing experiences studied by identifying the role of the various actors (agency), the prevalent organizational modes, and the main strengths and weaknesses evidenced.

The cases presented here were implemented in two regions of Italy. This choice was made for two reasons. The first is connected to the considerable delay in the development and spread of innovative housing practices in Italy compared to other European contexts. Consequently, the debate about these issues is not well developed at a scientific level². In the second place, since this is mainly an exploratory contribution, the choice of two cases within a single country allows us to control variables of an institutional nature, such as the regulation of different experiences, the presence and size of incentives and transfers of resources to support practices, and the distribution of responsibilities for housing policies at various levels of government.

With regard to the choice, the two cases were identified starting from the contribution of Sitton (2016) who, based on the type of community (intentional in bottom-up and contractual in top-down projects)³ and on the level of sharing (minimum and maximum), distinguished four groups. The experiences of Numero Zero (Turin) and Ecosol (Fidenza), while having the same features as regards the nature of the project (bottom-up), show different levels of sharing, which leads them to occupy different positions. The comparison between these experiences, considered by Sitton herself as successful and with a medium-high “social value” (Sitton 2016, 178), allows us to grasp elements of similarity and to enrich our understanding of the

² In Italy at present there are about twenty associations involved in promoting co-housing, located mainly in the regions of northern Italy, in addition to forty projects. Differently from what has happened in the international scenario, in-depth studies are rare and researchers have only recently paid attention to this subject.

³A further type has been presented by Giunco (2014) who, in a publication of the Fondazione Cariplo, distinguishes experiences on the basis of the main actor of coalition. Thus, co-housing projects can be guided by the community, the market, the public administration or the third sector. According to this classification, the cases presented here can be associated with the first group, i.e., those guided by the community.

differences.

Regarding the method adopted, the choice of a qualitative approach based on case-studies⁴ allows us to experience more closely the viewpoint of the subjects involved, thereby bringing to the light their conceptual categories, interpretations of reality and the motivations underlying their actions (Corbetta 2003). Since we are dealing with “emerging phenomena” our aim is not to reach a generalization about the results, but rather to highlight the role of context in the analysis of decisions taken. Indeed, the variables at play are complex, interconnected and difficult to measure in quantitative terms.

Furthermore, in studies of matters regarding housing, the relationship between researcher and residents becomes fundamental. In order to enter an “intimate environment” like the home and to avoid the “zoo syndrome”, which makes the inhabitants of these new experiences feel like objects of attention based on mere curiosity, their direct involvement in collecting data and their participation in observation become necessary to create the context of trust indispensable in leading and controlling the interview and in guiding those interviewed towards a critical observation of themselves and their actions.

Participatory observation has been adopted as a method useful for carrying out the series of semi-structured interviews made with the residents. This is a research strategy in which the researcher directly enters a determined social group, establishing a relationship of personal interaction with its members with the aim of describing its actions and understanding its motivations through a process of identification (*Ibidem*). This becomes especially useful in studies of communities, i.e. in investigations that concern aspects of the life of autonomous and territorially defined social microcosms endowed with a precise cultural universe.

To be specific, the author lived in each settlement for a week, observing and participating in the interactive dynamics of the members, taking part in some common activities and conducting semi-structured interviews with at least one representative per family (7 in Turin and 13 in Fidenza), with the goal of maximizing variety in regard to age, gender, marital status and (previous) occupation.

⁴ The technique of the case study can be defined as a type of empirical investigation that studies in depth a phenomenon in the context in which it is born and reproduced (Yin 2003). Further discussion of comparative analysis and case studies in the social sciences can be found in Corbetta (2003) and Gherardini (2017).

4. RESULTS

4.1. *Numero Zero: co-housing as a challenge for urban regeneration*

In the case of Turin, the 8 family units which started the Numero Zero Cooperative purchased the apartments in 2009 and, after refurbishing them, they took possession of the building in 2013⁵. In this case, the group independently planned and managed the entire project in an explicitly participatory way, thanks to the presence in the group of professionals (engineers and architects) who were able to coordinate the renovation of the property. At the beginning the cohousers did not know each other (if only 3/4 of them) and therefore, in order to find other members, they had to advertise their project/venture in the local newspapers. Over time other people have gradually joined the initial group, sharing the same values (cooperation, solidarity, sustainability).

Participants vary in gender, age and family situations, but are homogeneous as regards economic and cultural capital. It is interesting to note that many of them, despite having high levels of education, such as MAs and/or PhDs, have precarious jobs and have therefore resorted to loans and/or mortgages to buy their apartments. For this reason the inhabitants are fleeing from the concept of “elective neighbourhood” implicit in the co-residence model. One interviewee explains the phenomenon well:

[...] neighbours are not chosen, just as you do not choose the people you have next to you in the tram ... we never said yes or no to anyone ... we have really approached many people but there has never been selection, there was the fact that people recognized themselves in what we were doing or not, in our methods (Chiara).

Besides the apartments, whose renovation has followed the principles of environmental sustainability, there are common areas such as a garden, terrace, balconies, cellar and laundry.

All residents are members of the CoAbitare Association and are involved in the many activities that this Association performs, including a Time Bank and a Cooperation-based Purchasing Group (GAS), with the aim of developing urban district renewal⁶. The interaction practices,

⁵ The settlement was built by renovating an existing building in Turin located in the central district of Porta Palazzo.

⁶ Coabitare is a cultural and social association established in 2007 that promotes an alternative way of living, attentive to the promotion of cooperation, sustainability and urban participation through the regeneration of the neighbourhood.

developed thanks to the several associations present in the territory, represent a significant source of cultural and social regeneration. In addition to CoAbitare we should note The Gate⁷, a Local Development Agency which coordinates a social housing workshop that Numero Zero has been invited to join, the Compagnia of San Paolo, and other institutional actors in this area. There is also Fuori di Palazzo⁸, a neighbourhood association that aims to mend the social fabric through the redevelopment and recovery of public spaces through re-launching proximity practices.

The inhabitants of Numero Zero are successful in the management of the complex relations that develop in the buildings and of social behaviours ranging from requests for material aid to mutual respect for privacy:

[...] we made the choice to have a certain type of relationship between us, frank , unvarnished, without hypocrisies, open to reciprocal acceptance, based on respect but also on being explicit and frank ... the degree of intimacy which one reaches is naturally different because of sympathies, these cannot be decided, but no doubt there is mutual respect (Bruna).

In general, the interviews reveal particular satisfaction in living there:

[...] it is a fluid and spontaneous situation, comfortable, warm, you give to others but you also get ... it's different compared to living in an apartment and having the outside and the inside space ... maybe in the housing inside you do not have big spaces but you feel at home everywhere ... there are these spaces to share – me, for example, I never close the door here, it is open, in Turin you cannot do this if you are in a house, this phenomenon here is very nice (Irene).

In the Porta Palazzo neighbourhood there are only a few identifiable stable residents, but housing demand has sharply increased owing to the presence of people from Turin and of non-EU citizens looking for low-cost properties. However, because of its marked multi-ethnicity, this area is deemed dangerous by the majority of the Turin population⁹. For the

⁷ This is the Agency that inherited the pilot urban project “The Gate-living not leaving” to improve the living and working conditions of the neighbourhood through innovative methodologies and approaches. The project has sought to involve public and private partners by triggering the process of revitalization in the Porta Palazzo and Borgo Dora districts. See <http://www.comune.torino.it/portapalazzo/>.

⁸ See <http://www.fuoridipalazzo.org/>.

⁹ Respondents recalled that many people from Turin have rejected the possibility of joining the co-housing because the property is located in a neighbourhood which is considered particularly rundown and risky due to the presence of many immigrants. Indeed,

members of the group concerned in experiencing co-residency, however, the fact that the neighbourhood was chaotic, initially degraded and inhabited by immigrants belonging to diverse ethnic groups (Chinese, Moroccan, Tunisian, etc.) was a challenge to develop interactive practices and cultural projects that could be learned and shared by the members of the various communities in a perspective of social *mixité*.

The first act of the group in creating the settlement was the renovation of the property by an important symbolic gesture -- the demolition of the perimeter wall that prevented people from seeing inside. This was meant to signal the group's opening up to the surrounding territory: a gate was put in to replace the wall, with a sign with translations into Chinese and Arabic, informing neighbours of the renovation works going on and apologizing for any inconvenience caused.

In 2013 an inauguration party was organized with a street lunch that saw the participation of roughly 400 neighbours, including many immigrants who contributed by preparing couscous and mint tea.

Since taking possession of their dwellings, the co-housers have been actively involved in numerous socio-cultural initiatives that have had significant effects in reducing the sense of insecurity in the neighbourhood, improving social cohesion and, more generally, urban life:

[...] a community in a neighbourhood like this ... needs to know, to understand others and to integrate in the true sense of the word, which doesn't mean entering an already organized system, but rather being part of the organizing, trying to find the right keys to enter (Paolo).

I like the fact of being contaminated by the things of the others too, even by things that you probably would not experience, you would not live, certain environments that the others possibly hang out at or certain ideas that come to them, a situation like ours, however, it is not that we lack contamination...it is nice to enter the worlds that you would not know, I find it beautiful and in a very normal way, it is beautiful this thing of the neighbors who are a little family, a little friends (Irene).

Although this co-housing has only recently been established, its inhabitants seem to have been able to create a climate of openness by cultivating social relationships with the other residents of the neighbourhood, an area that had long since lost the characteristics of a

in the course of her many visits to this urban area, both during the day and the night on different days of the week, the author witnessed many illicit activities committed there (such as drug trafficking) and observed the frequent intervention of law enforcement officers.

community, in order to increase their involvement and civic participation (Baglione, Chiodelli 2011; Bianchi 2015). Numerous initiatives have been undertaken -- from football matches played on Thursday nights with non-EU youths and adults, to exchange markets, to the neighbours' party organized with the support of the City Council once a year. Other ideas that have been implemented include the preparation of community meals using the wood-fired oven in the common room and having Maghreb women make their traditional bread on Saturday mornings.

These important activities evidence the desire to create places and times for mixing among the various social groups involved, for familiarizing and finding a space to appreciate the value of differences by re-launching particular customs, thereby showing a capacity for learning and a growth in reflection of all the actors involved. It should also be noted that having to deal with possible risks of conflict and/or social marginality seems to increase the participation and empowerment of the inhabitants.

The Turin experience therefore shows a high level of social innovation, thanks to the choice of the inhabitants not to close themselves off by developing interaction dynamics only within the intentional community, but rather to experiment and promote concrete initiatives for familiarizing with members of neighbourhood ethnic groups, with the goal of re-qualifying the urban space. In short, the group chose to open up and get acquainted with the neighbourhood. Whereas before the group's arrival in the Porta Palazzo district there was no interaction between the original residents and non-EU citizens, ever since the establishment of the settlement the co-housers have been cultivating social proximity relations that have had important impacts on the inhabitants and on the practices of aggregation and inclusion typical of urban spaces. While it is true that in this process personal qualities such as the sensitivity and openness of group members seem to have counted a great deal, a crucial role has also been played by associations that are particularly active and involved in bottom-up participative urban regeneration. Since 2013 the Porta Palazzo district has gradually begun to flourish once again, thanks to the role played by the various actors involved in the network, who have contributed the availability of facilities aimed at increasing opportunities for residents to meet and share experiences and the sense of belonging to the territory. As a consequence, Numero Zero seems to have taken on the role of urban change agent as well as being a generator of widespread social capital (Musolino 2015).

Even if we will have to wait some years to see to what degree having triggered these virtuous practices can change the image of one of the most

traditionally degraded and dangerous neighbourhoods in Turin, the initiatives that have been implemented so far seem highly promising. It is therefore to be hoped that local authorities, and in particular the town council, will give its support to the activities of this settlement so as to enhance its positive effects on the territory, in line with the first formal act, i.e., the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in which the local administration recognized the social value of the co-residence.

4.2. *Ecosol: the role of participation and sharing values*

The Ecosol co-housing project has been developed over five years following a participatory orientation. Its first nucleus was made up of individuals from international and local non-profit organizations committed to creating a settlement in the newly-built urban neighbourhood “Europa” in Fidenza. Over time other people have gradually joined this initial group, sharing its values of cooperation, social justice, group well-being and the promotion of economic, environmental and social sustainability.

Ecosol members have highlighted the concept of the elective neighbourhood. Since members cannot choose among friends, relatives or persons already known, this process begins with perfect strangers and then develops over time:

[...] elective neighbourhood for me means living with people you don't know, even if here this aspect doesn't often happen, because it is difficult in a city of only 26,000 inhabitants, but also from other areas when we happen to talk to people who want to start the journey none of us thinks of saying as characteristic the fact that you must already know people, no, you must think of a process that begins with unknown people, too, but then develops over time and produces a community ... where everyone has the possibility to feel good without forcing, they arrive where they think they will arrive (Stefano).

After an initial period fraught with problems¹⁰, the property was inaugurated in 2015. There are apartments and common areas including balconies arranged on the three floors of the building and located in front of the apartments, a kitchen, a vegetable garden, a laundry room and a large salon. Although initially the salon was to count as an apartment because of its large size, it was recognized by the city council as a

¹⁰ In 2014, owing to the bankruptcy of the construction cooperative of which it was a member, the group decided to buy the building from the cooperative and took possession of it when almost all the works were complete, apart from those related to the common spaces.

communal area when the group declared that it would be made available to the whole neighbourhood.

As in the Turin experience, we can note the professional skills of some of the participants (an architect/designer who directed the renovation works, two engineers who assisted him during the works, and a facilitator who has used theatrical methods to animate and strengthen group spirit). In this property, which meets all the requirements of environmental sustainability, there are 13 family nuclei, heterogeneous for age, gender, and socio-occupational conditions. The socio-cultural status is high: apart from a couple of elderly people, all the others have bachelor or master degrees. Furthermore, since 2002 five of the families have been members of the “Camminando” Community, which has joined the “Mondo di comunità e famiglia” (MCF)¹¹, an association that promotes income sharing. From an economic point of view, incomes are low to average.

Respondents admit that even if there are conflicts in Ecosol, they do not affect their relationships with the “Other”, a feature that, as in the case of Turin, may perhaps be explained by the sensitivity and cultural openness of the co-housers. As recalled by two interviewees:

[...] for us, participatory planning was fundamental ... it allowed us to form a group, to get to know each other, to clarify our ideas, to share the expectations that were different among us, and some expectations fell by the wayside ... Together trust is built and it was clear that we would do what we had decided together... we would decide together ... everything else has gone to combine with expectations, hopes, dreams and the possibility of realizing them (Anna Maria).

I was looking for collaboration, brotherhood, true friendships ... living in this way is a different thing ... especially in times of difficulty ... and here we understood each other from the first moment ... if there is good will it doesn't take much, and we were born as a group with this willingness to get along, to help each other ... the co-housing group started with just these objectives, to make a building in a certain way but above all to manage the group with certain values ... it was to be seized on as an opportunity (Ivana).

Despite the existence of a set of rules which the group decided to adopt to organize everyday life, it was decided to manage both the function of spaces and collective activities with some flexibility¹²:

¹¹ See <http://www.comunitaefamiglia.org/>.

¹² Collective activities include a common meal every 15 days, baby-sitting services for children, meetings with experts and qualified observers, movie showings, building maintenance work every three months and building management meetings.

[...] co-housing gives you the opportunity to live peacefully in a condominium and also have access to the common places, let's say to take advantage of spaces that maybe you could not afford ... we are very young, we have been living this experiment for only two years, but for me now nothing is missing" (Giovanna).

A goal that everyone has shared, and which will be especially focused on in years to come, is openness to neighbours:

[...] our daily life is very normal ... it reminds me that when we came to live here this neighbourhood saw us as a bit 'bad' ... the people in the neighbourhood looked on us as a strange phenomenon ... and the township came to our aid ... but you also need to make yourself known or else people see you as a bit strange ..." (Anna Maria).

To this end, projects have been created to promote the exchange of skills between co-housers and neighbourhood residents. For example, a nursery-school teacher who teaches the children that live in the co-housing painting and puppet-making is planning to organize open meetings with other children in the neighbourhood. The settlement welcomes and hosts neighbourhood groups and associations, such as Cooperation-based Purchasing Groups (GAS), as well as individuals looking for accommodation (for example, during the *Festadeipopoli* / Peoples' Party). The salon is used weekly by outside groups for initiatives that see the joint participation of co-housers and district residents. Festivals, celebrations and sports events often involve relatives and friends of co-housers, who in turn ask to use the common spaces, thereby further opening the community by making it a place where people interested in learning about the model of co-residency arrive continually. Considerable interest is also shown by associations and/or groups that want to use the settlement for specific social activities¹³.

As for as relationships with the public actors are concerned, through the Emilia Romagna Regional Coordination for Cooperative Economics (CRESER)¹⁴, a structure that has become the main interlocutor in the

¹³ Regular active guests include a theatrical improvisation group, a theatre group with psychologically disturbed participants, a Caritas youth group, a Qi-gong group coordinated by the instructor (daughter of the architect who designed the co-housing premises), associations representing the cooperative economy (GAS, DES), a referent of BancaEtica, and organic horticulturists.

¹⁴ CRESER unites the various actors of the cooperative economy, including the Cooperation Business Districts (DES) and the Cooperative Buying Groups (GASs). Thanks to CRESER, Emilia Romagna was the first region in Italy to issue a law on the cooperative economy (Rules for the Promotion and Support of the Cooperative Economy - LR 19/2014).

Emilia Romagna Region, Ecosol has supported the request made to the Region to recognize a new approach to the idea of housing by instituting a discussion table specifically dedicated to the question. In 2016, the last reference year useful for this analysis, co-housers were involved in a project aimed at realizing social housing: indeed, there is an empty apartment in the building that the members of the group would like to assign to disadvantaged users and manage with the collaboration of local associations.

What is more, at the district level Ecosol has taken on the role of promoter of a project for participatory planning of public areas supported by the municipality (which has allocated a budget for the residents' project). This participatory project, called "Europa Europa", has just started, and so far certain important procedural phases have been carried out¹⁵. The project has moved into the operational phase and meetings will soon be scheduled for the realisation of the final phase.

Since this is a very recent settlement, it will be necessary to monitor its effects on the surrounding neighbourhood and on social inclusion practices over time. Furthermore, considering that the settlement has been built in a new area in the town's outskirts, the coordinating and animating role taken on by the co-housers together with collateral associations and the public actor will be especially crucial in determining outcomes.

5. DISCUSSION

Through participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews in two co-housing communities, it is possible to highlight the experiences of community members as they take practical steps to make their communitarian ideals a reality. The cases studied allow us to explore some theoretical considerations as well as to comment on the results achieved by the co-housings' practices.

Starting from one of the first questions in the interviews and according to other studies (Sullivan 2015), we note that co-housers recall particular instances of life in a communal arrangement and link this experience to

For further information, refer to <http://www.creser.it/>.

¹⁵ These are the three steps: a) presentation of the settlement to the district; b) establishment of a working group to manage the process, made up of five residents of the settlements (including Ecosol's designer), five residents of the district extracted by lot, two municipal councillors who sponsored the Project, the engineer of the municipal technical office and an external facilitator; this group has met several times and acts as a link between the public administration and residents; c) administering a questionnaire to all residents with data elaboration and presentation of results at a district assembly.

their current search for community. We learn that all the respondents often refer to the common need to trust people and the importance of a balance between the need for privacy and for sociality. Co-housing communities are neighbourhood developments that creatively mix private and common dwellings to recreate a sense of community while preserving a high degree of individual privacy, and the inhabitants underscore the existence of this challenging dialectic, an interesting balance they have to get used to. Even if groups take part in every aspect of the development of the community, including designing physical layouts, managing sites collectively and sharing common facilities and spaces, they have private homes and do not have a shared economic system (Ruiu 2014). We know that people want to cooperate with others at the same time as they want to live in co-housing units where they can be free and independent.

From the outset we see that co-housers are seeking to re-establish imagined close community ties¹⁶ (Spreafico 2005; Esposito 2006; Labit 2015). Co-housing units are populated by people who have chosen to live (partially) together while searching for responsiveness and a sense of community in their everyday lives. This is the reason why Sandstedt and Westin (2015) criticize the categories of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies 1887) and propose the new concept of *Bund* (Schmalenbach 1977). *Bund* is a concept useful to explain the dynamics of all types of these groups and life styles; it can be defined as 'an elective form of sociality' whose main features are that it is small-scale, spatially proximate and maintained through the affectual solidarity its members have for one another in pursuit of a particular set of shared beliefs. In the *Bund* it is the individual who chooses whether he/she want or don't want to join the others. *Bund* is a form of sociation that involves affective as well as value-rational conduct and this appears particularly evident in the two cases investigated. In fact life in cohousing presupposes a continuous search for a balance between friendship and affectivity and, at the same time, the achievement of some relevant objectives related to co-residence. This seems particularly evident in the two cases considered. Both in the case of Porta Palazzo and Ecosol, the interviewees declared that it is fundamental to live together, to pay attention both to the social/relational aspects and to the practical factors

¹⁶ These can be traced in many organizations dealing with volunteering, associationism and the social economy, where individuals share goals, common values and a lifestyle which by strengthening bonds creates positive feelings along with responsibility, reciprocal commitment and trust (Spreafico 2005; Ambrosini 2005; Bruhn 2005).

linked to the need to pursue common goals, essential for the whole group.

Another question concerns the concept of elective neighbourhood. This is one of the principles on which the definition of co-housing is based and for which it has been severely criticized. In reality, an a priori selective orientation seems to be rare: the elective element concerns the selection methods, but it is more an abstract principle than an actual recruitment criterion. Both in the case of Numero Zero and Ecosol, the group originally interested in setting up the co-housing has promoted various forms of communication to involve the interested people. There were no selections decided from above for those who were to join Porta Palazzo and Ecosol. There were rather people, who, after understanding the housing model, decided to give up of their own.

It is, however, indisputable that to join an intentional community one must adhere to common values inspired by the principles of sharing and economic, environmental and social sustainability (Labit 2015).

Since their appearance, the intentional communities have been described as characterized by a certain uniformity of socio-cultural interests, since the purpose of creating communal living entails adherence to a common ideological basis (Ruiu 2015) – to implement the model, it is necessary to share core values, especially those of sustainability and mutual help. However, the arguments of those who most criticize co-housing are in fact related to the cultural, professional and social homogeneity of the participants (Sanguinetti 2014; Fromm 2000; Labit 2015). One of the most controversial issues for those who study co-housing is the presumed openness or closure of the settlements, a question that leads one to ask if they do not wind up as basically closed residential enclaves. According to some authors, co-residence is a covert case of a gated community¹⁷(Barbieri 2015). Others, while distinguishing some features of co-housing from those of gated communities, inscribe them both within the category of residential communities¹⁸ (Chiodelli 2015). Finally, for others again co-housing is a phenomenon very different from the enclave or closed community models (Ruiu 2014, 2016).

In the two cases we have studied we can observe a certain social and cultural homogeneity among the participants. However homogeneity is

¹⁷ Gated communities are residential communities surrounded by walls, fences, gates or natural barriers inside which only residents and their guests are allowed to enter (Vicari, Haddock 2013).

¹⁸ The two types apparently belong to the same family of contractual communities, i.e., organisational forms based on territorial belonging (therefore linked to a specific territory), whose members adhere to a contract signed unanimously, in view of the benefits that can result in terms of services (Brunetta, Moroni 2011).

mainly linked to the symbolic component of shared values, indispensable in the planning phase of these interventions, rather than to socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, income, employment and schooling.

Another important characteristic of the cohousers is that many of them are personally involved in the voluntary sector and/or are member of associations. More than a specific political membership or militancy it looks like a notable commitment in the social sphere. The cohousers of Numero Zero and those of Ecosol are personally involved in social networks, associative and volunteering groups operating in these area. This is a relevant aspect that explains, in some way, the attitude of the two groups of cohousers toward the external world and the ability to engage socially not only the group of insiders but the neighborhoods of the two settlements as well. If it is true that compared to Porta Palazzo, Ecosol has yet to develop forms of exchange and interaction with its neighbors, many interviewees recalled that opening up to the neighborhood represents one of their next common commitments.

Finally, we come to the type of social capital originated by co-housing. This is capital that tends to develop from the sense of community and belonging, from support networks and mutual assistance, and from the sense of security generated by collective social control and civic engagement. As Ruiu observes, few authors refer to the relations between co-housing projects and the surrounding environment; in the majority of cases, researchers tend to show the origin of social bonding primarily as an effect of sharing group goals and rules and of internal cohesion and trust. But another type of social capital also needs to be taken into consideration: that of the bridging that arises out of the desire to open to the outside by creating amicable relationships with the surrounding neighbourhood (Ruiu 2016). According to Sargisson, in many cases the common aims in co-housing communities can be seen in their intention to create a “friendly neighbourhood” that will recreate and redefine relations among neighbourhood units (in other words, neighbourliness), besides finding a way to escape alienated, isolated and disconnected social life in the city (Sargisson 2010; Ruiu 2014).

To bear this out, we can often see among the initiatives considered here the intention to activate social relations and exchanges not only within the group but with the surrounding area as well. Residents organise regular activities (e.g. social, educational and cultural events, exercise classes, etc.) inside communal spaces. Often these activities and spaces are open to the surrounding community to encourage greater integration. This, in turn, acts as a catalyst for community development across a wider

area (Williams 2008). This does not mean that there is always positive interaction between the settlements and the residents of the district and/or territory, but these in-depth studies show that among the intentions that accompany the formation of groups the idea of openness to the original residents of the neighbourhood is always present and that it is progressively implemented, albeit at times with difficulty. Consequently, while in active settlements the spread of bonding social capital is a constant thanks to the ability to create strong interactive processes within the community through participatory processes, social contact design and common activities, all aspects that are reported by the insiders themselves, bridging social capital practices with outsiders are present as well (Ruiu 2016; Bianchi 2015).

To sum up, life in co-housing should not be romanticized, but neither should it be ignored, despite possible preconceived notions. Co-housing provides an important alternative form of living that can meet the needs and wants of many people in today's society (Sandstedt, Westin 2015).

6. CONCLUSIONS

We have presented two relevant experiences within a context such as the Italian one, where the phenomenon of co-housing is rather recent and still not very well known.

The cases were selected on the basis of the existing literature and have been investigated using qualitative methodologies: specifically, through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Albeit with some limitations, these methods proved to be suitable for reconstructing the profile of the culture we wished to study from the point of view of its members, by probing the worldview and horizon of meaning underlying their social actions. They also enabled us to identify the (sometimes implicit) rules that govern the social interaction, reconstructing the itinerary that bonds the values and beliefs of those who inhabit these spaces.

Though of an exploratory nature, our research highlights some elements common to the two experiences: i.e., the characteristics of the participants (mainly professionals) and the role of associations as catalysts. At the same time, however, certain differences emerge regarding both the social capital connected to the co-housing experience (high in the experience of Numero Zero, more limited in that of Ecolsol) and the areas involved (central in the case of Turin, more peripheral in that of Fidenza). These differences have a consequent influence on the social outcomes of the two experiences. Thus, while in the former case

settling into a densely anthropized area characterized by the presence of many different ethnic groups has over time generated forms of social integration with the surrounding context, in the latter case this sort of interaction is, at the time of our study, merely “hoped for”, since in fact significant bonds with the surrounding local context are as yet lacking.

Regarding the question as to whether co-housing can be a privileged place where it is possible for people to experience a lifestyle characterised by active participation and sociability, the research seems to confirm what has emerged from prior literature on the subject.

However, since these are medium-term processes (an impact assessment will necessarily be medium-term), some questions remain open. If it does not seem that there are any critical elements with respect to social sustainability, the questions related to the repeatability of the experience and the role of the local context are more complicated, since Turin is a large city with an important bank foundation, while Fidenza is a small city in a regional context where the regional public actor plays a central role in economic and social planning. Thus, these contexts seem to underscore the role of "external actors" as facilitators in the traditional co-housing network.

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