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To cite this article: Peter Jakobsen & Henrik Gutzon Larsen (2018): An alternative for whom? The evolution and socio-economy of Danish cohousing, Urban Research & Practice, DOI: [10.1080/17535069.2018.1465582](https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2018.1465582)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2018.1465582>



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Published online: 22 Apr 2018.



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An alternative for whom? The evolution and socio-economy of Danish cohousing

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Cohousing has caught the attention of activists, academics and decision-makers, and Danish experiences with cohousing as *bofællesskaber* are routinely highlighted as pioneering and successful. This article presents a mainly quantitative analysis of the development of Danish intergenerational cohousing and investigates socio-economic characteristics of residents in these communities. First, the article demonstrates how the development of Danish cohousing has been undergirded by distinct shifts in dominant tenure forms. Second, it shows that inhabitants in contemporary Danish cohousing are socio-economically distinct. This does not diminish the value of cohousing, but it problematises assumptions about the social sustainability of this housing form.

Keywords: Cohousing; tenure forms; socio-economy; Denmark

1. Introduction

‘Danish cohousing remains the gold standard for cohousing world-wide,’ McCamant and Durrett (2011, 37) assert in the latest edition of their influential book on cohousing. Their emphasis should not surprise; after all, it was on the basis of Danish experiences with *bofællesskaber* (approximately living or housing communities) that McCamant and Durrett (1988) first addressed cohousing (and allegedly coined the term). The qualifier ‘gold standard’ can be debated, of course. But cohousing – a housing form that combines individual dwellings with substantial common facilities and activities aimed at everyday reproduction – has over the past five decades evolved into a widespread and well-established alternative to mainstream housing in Denmark. Moreover, Danish experiences is a recurrent referent in international research on cohousing and kindred housing forms. Yet, and somewhat surprising considering how often it is mentioned, Danish intergenerational cohousing has not since the 1980s been systematically analysed beyond often cursory case studies (e.g. Tornow 2015). This also applies to the Danish language literature, the dissertations by Marckmann (2009) and Stender (2014) being partial exceptions. Partly reflecting what has been termed a ‘second wave’ and the ‘re-emergence’ of cohousing in North America and Europe (Sargisson 2012; Tummers 2016a), research on cohousing has in recent years seen a notable upsurge. Indeed, Arbell (2016, 561) remarks, ‘scholars are so fascinated by this growing trend that there are likely to be more cohousing studies than cohousing projects.’ And yet, Tummers (2015) points out, ‘the value and contribution of co-housing initiatives to housing provision and sustainable urban development,

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both quantitatively and qualitatively, has so far not been assessed beyond case-study level.’ In a review of the intensified research on cohousing, Tummers (2016b, 2028) further calls attention to the fact that ‘Compared with the amount of qualitative analyses’ of cohousing, ‘quantitative assessment is rather scarce.’

While by no means devaluing the importance of qualitative research and in-depth case studies, this article contributes to evolving research on cohousing and housing alternatives more generally by presenting an extensive and mainly quantitative analysis of Danish cohousing. Our purpose is first and foremost empirical, but by probing the alleged ‘gold standard’ of cohousing, we hope to qualify and inform more conceptual and theoretical analyses. Specifically, we pursue two, partly related analytical aims. First, the article presents a historical-geographical account of Danish cohousing. While mainly descriptive, this analysis clarifies some ambiguities in existing research and contributes to wider efforts to take stock of contemporary cohousing. Second, and analytically more substantive, we examine key socio-economic characteristics of contemporary Danish cohousing. This aim relates to the stated or underlying argument in much of the literature that cohousing represents a socially, economically and/or environmentally sustainable housing form. With varying emphases, this is clearly the position of the ‘activist’ literature epitomised by (but by no means confined to) the books by McCamant and Durrett (e.g. ScottHanson and ScottHanson 2005). Much academic cohousing research is activist in orientation (e.g. Meltzer 2005; Vestbro 2010b), but also in the more critical research of recent years, there is often an underlying gist of cohousing (at least potentially) providing important contributions to sustainable urban development and living. For Jarvis and Bonnett (2013, 2363), for example, common aims of cohousing ‘include the pursuit of low-impact, participatory and socially just modes of living.’ And looking beyond the literature dedicated to cohousing, Pusey and Chatterton (2017) evoke cohousing as an example of urban commons, for instance. Cohousing as a means to sustainable urban development is also increasingly embraced by policy-makers, for example in Barcelona (Montaner 2016) and in Hamburg and Gothenburg (Scheller and Thörn, 2018). In Denmark, there are similarly recent governmental attempts to promote cohousing (e.g. Dansk Bygningsarv 2016). On the other hand, however, some contend that cohousing generally are enclaves for the privileged that has parallels to gated communities (Chiodelli 2015; Chiodelli and Baglione 2014). In the early 1980s, when new possibilities for cohousing communities emerged, such concerns were also voiced by some in the Danish context. For Mogensen (1981, 49) cohousing communities were ‘snug places’ where the educated class could cuddle up with equals, for example, while Lund (1981, 37) found them to be ‘escape-utopias’ that ‘do not contribute much to the reconstruction of our cities’ (our translations). From a position that cohousing has much to contribute, but nonetheless must be critically assessed, we engage constructively with such issues of socio-economic sustainability and segregation. If cohousing is an alternative to mainstream housing, it seems pertinent to ask for what and for whom is cohousing an alternative? Based on Danish experiences, this article particularly engages the question of for whom cohousing is an alternative from a socio-economic perspective.

2. Conceptualising cohousing

Existing approximations of the scale of Danish cohousing vary considerably. McCamant and Durrett (2011) estimate that there by 2010 were more than 700 communities, a considerable increase on the 140 communities they found had been built in 1993 (McCamant and Durrett 1994). Daly (2015) suggests that 5% of the Danish population were living in cohousing in 1994, while Sargisson (2012) puts the rate at 1% of the population in 2011. Danish sources do not bring much clarification. A recent government-commissioned report aimed at promoting

cohousing does not venture a figure, but it takes a 20% increase in households with more than one family between 2007 and 2013 as indicating an increasing popularity of cohousing (Dansk Bygningsarv 2016). As we will see, the number of Danish cohousing communities has increased over the past 10–15 years. Yet, as individual dwellings in cohousing communities typically count as households in their own right, the report's measure is, at best, very indirect. These examples are not necessarily incorrect. Rather, we evoke them to illustrate that it is not straightforward to gauge the scale of cohousing, partly because the meaning of cohousing (and its various subtypes) must be clarified. The purpose of this section is to establish a reasonably clear understanding of cohousing, which is situated in the existing research and can be applied in a quantitative analysis.

The notion of cohousing intersects with several other alternatives to mainstream housing, such as collaborative housing, collective housing, intentional communities, communes and ecovillages. And the issue of conceptualisation is further complicated by how best to translate and transfer terms and experiences that have developed in distinct historical-geographical contexts, for example *bofællesskab* (Denmark), *kollektivhus* (Sweden), *Wohngemeinschaft* (Germany) or *centraal wonen* (the Netherlands). Rather than trying to extricate such conceptual and historical-geographical differences and affinities, which have been addressed by others (e.g. Tummers 2015; Vestbro 2010a), we will here focus on the notion of cohousing with the aim of establishing an understanding that can be operationalised with reasonable clarity.

In the latest version of their influential book, McCamant and Durrett (2011) suggest that cohousing can be identified by six common characteristics: (1) participatory process, (2) design that facilitate community, (3) extensive common facilities, (4) complete residential management, (5) non-hierarchical structure and (6) separate income sources. A number of studies use the same definition (e.g. Lietaert 2010; Meltzer 2005), or somewhat similar characterisations highlighting particular aspects. Tummers (2015), for example, includes that cohousing is '[n]on-speculative, often looking for sustainable lifestyle.' This helps to illustrate that while there generally is a common core to characterisations of cohousing, researchers tend to emphasise or include specific aspects according to their particular interest. Ruiu (2014) has thus identified three broad strands in the cohousing literature, which respectively focus on (1) physical layouts, common facilities, legal forms, decision-making processes, (2) internal social dynamics and (3) relations between cohousing and the environment. To this we could add a fourth (if emerging) 'contextual' strand in the literature, which seek to understand cohousing in relation to wider social-geographical scales, such as the neighbourhood (e.g. Fromm 2012), or to broader social concerns, for example the production of affordable housing (e.g. Czischke 2018; Garciano 2011).

With important additions and shifts in emphasis, McCamant and Durrett's definition captures much of how cohousing is commonly understood in existing research. Yet, as noted by Meltzer, their definition misses a crucial characteristic, which helps to distinguish cohousing within the broader field of intentional communities:

Cohousing communities place a stronger emphasis on the *balance* between community life and the privacy of individuals and households. Dwellings are self-sufficient, and household autonomy is symbolically expressed in architectural form, as is the importance of the common house with its 'vital social and practical purpose'. (Meltzer 2005, 5)

This balance between the private and the common is also emphasised by others. For Lietaert (2010, 576), ‘Cohousing 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,’ for instance. Based on Swedish experiences, Sandstedt and Westin (2015, 132) similarly see cohousing as ‘an alternative way of living in housing estates characterised by common facilities, private dwellings and intentional architecture with common areas to promote personal meetings and social interactions.’ The private/common character is similarly prominent in Danish understandings of cohousing; as an early study puts it (in its summary in English):

The concept of co-housing community (hereafter referred to as CHC) is used in this publication to denote a housing group which involves a number of independent homes with the addition of common facilities, such as common rooms and open spaces. [...] It is a characteristic of CHC’s that the use of common facilities and the occurrence of activities such as common dining, are a supplementary feature, because the individual dwellings are completely equipped with, amongst other things, their own kitchens. But because many residents have chosen to live in a co-housing community, the common facilities are utilized to a high degree. (Vedel-Petersen, Jantzen, and Ranten 1988, 101)

Cohousing understood as a combination of individual dwellings and substantial common facilities and activities is central to the definition applied in this article. But the private/common nature of cohousing can – at least conceptually – raise challenges to the generally positive interpretation of the phenomenon and to policies promoting it (Chiodelli and Baglione 2014). Using botanical taxonomical terminology, Chiodelli (2015) argues that cohousing and gated communities belong to the same ‘family’ (contractual communities) and ‘species’ (residential contractual communities), differing only at the level of ‘varietas’ – the lowest rungs of the taxonomical ladder. Chiodelli has a point, at least in relation to cohousing communities based on owner-occupation, which (like many gated communities) often are based on property structures similar to those of condominiums. Yet, Ruiu (2016, 403) argues, cohousing is ‘Different from an “ordinary” condominium,’ because ‘cohousing residents usually take part in each aspect of the community’s development: they participate in the physical design process, collectively manage their sites, share common facilities (e.g. laundry, cooking, eating, meeting facilities) and spaces.’ In practice, at least in the Danish context of this article, it is often straightforward to distinguish cohousing communities from ‘ordinary’ condominium-style housing (not to mention gated communities). But the issue of property relations is important and is generally somewhat sidelined or neglected in cohousing research. We will return to this question.

For the purpose of this study, we use what could be termed a bottom-line definition of cohousing as housing developments that combine individual dwellings with substantial common facilities and activities aimed at everyday reproduction. As a rule of thumb, individuality of dwellings can be recognised by the inclusion of separate kitchens. This helps to distinguish cohousing from communes. What amounts to common facilities and activities is less clear-cut. But in Danish cohousing, a common house (or a similar facility) in which the members meet and regularly prepare and eat common dinners has become a defining hallmark. We recognise that this is not a fully satisfactory cut-off point, but it helps us to distinguish cohousing communities from the numerous housing developments that include some limited common facilities (such as laundry or meeting rooms) or activities (like an annual party). In addition, as segregation is a key issue in this article, we focus on intergenerational cohousing, which is to say cohousing that is not reserved

for particular groups, typically seniors, young people or people with special needs (on Danish senior cohousing, see Pedersen 2013; Pedersen 2015). This also entails that we have not included a community like Hertha (est. 1996), which combines ‘ordinary’ cohousing with housing for people with special needs (Hertha, 2016). Likewise, we exclude some eco-villages, for example Dyssekilde (est. 1991) and Friland (est. 2002), which are not primarily concerned with housing (on Danish eco-villages and cohousing, see Marckmann, Gram-Hanssen, and Christensen 2012), or the well-known Svanholm community (est. 1978) that practices a shared economy distinct from the ‘mainstream’ of Danish cohousing.

3. Methodology

Danish cohousing communities are not systematically recorded by any public or private entity. The Internet page bofaelleskab.dk lists many, but there are some omissions. To compile a more comprehensive list of existing intergenerational cohousing communities, we sorted the bofaelleskab.dk list using the understanding of cohousing introduced in Section 2. The result was combined with two older inventories (McCamant and Durrett 1994; Vedel-Petersen, Jantzen, and Ranten 1988) and additional communities were added using literature and inputs from active cohousing residents. On this basis, we compiled a list of 110 intergenerational cohousing communities that were established by the end of 2016 (included as online supplement to this article). The list only includes communities that still existed by the end of 2016. But there are few examples of communities that have dissolved once the group behind them have negotiated the often years-long and not always successful establishment process. There are undoubtedly lacunae in the list. We know of (typically small) communities for which it has been impossible to obtain information or establish contact, and there are certainly communities that we have inadvertently excluded or missed altogether. Nonetheless, the list is the most complete existing record of intergenerational cohousing communities in Denmark.

The main empirical basis for this article is two Internet-based surveys, which were designed and carried out by the authors of this article as part of the wider research project Cohousing and Sustainable Urban Development. The first survey focuses on Danish intergenerational cohousing at the scale of individual communities and consists of 44 questions. On the one hand, these questions concern quantifiable issues such as tenure form, housing units, number of inhabitants, dates and frequency of activities like common dinners and cooking. On the other hand, the survey also includes qualitative (or ‘open’) questions relating to, for example, strategies for sustainability (economic, social and environmental), relations to surrounding community, recruitment of new members and decision-making. Particularly replies to the quantifiable questions are used in this article. The online survey was distributed by e-mail to the listed communities in the winter 2016–2017. 72 communities responded. For the communities that could not be contacted or did not respond, basic data were compiled from other sources, typically the communities’ own homepages.

The tenure forms of the analysed cohousing communities follow the general Danish distinction between owner-occupation, housing cooperatives (*andelsforeninger*), private rental and rental in public housing owned by non-profit housing associations (previously *almennyttige boliger*, now *almene boliger*). For all Danish housing, owner-occupation in 2012 amounted to 51%, cooperative housing 7%, private rental 19% and rental in public housing 22% (Larsen and Lund Hansen 2015). With the exception of a few rental units within communities otherwise based on owner-occupation or cooperative tenure, rental

cohousing is predominantly based on public housing. Therefore, both private rental and rental in public housing is here analysed as ‘rental.’ (A few analysed communities combine two or three of the main tenures. In [Figure 2a](#), these communities are entered as fractions of one in relation to the number of housing units within each tenure.) The three tenure forms points to basic but important relations of occupancy and ownership. It should be noted, however, that ownership structures of individual communities can be complex. The number of inhabitants can be assumed to be correct for those communities that completed the survey. For the remaining analysed communities, the number of inhabitants are either unavailable or should be treated with caution. The number of housing units (which, broadly, correspond to households) is more certain. Cohousing communities often have a long genesis. In this article, we use the year the first members took up residence as the year a community was established.

The second survey focuses on households and adult individuals in Danish intergenerational cohousing communities. In this survey, three questions to the household concerns basic information on tenure type and number of adults and children, while 17 questions to each adult (over the age of 18) in the household particularly aim to capture their socio-economic profile. To enable comparison of results from the survey with the wider Danish population, the categories used in the socio-economic questions correspond to those of Statistics Denmark. In some cases, as we will discuss when presenting the data, this entail somewhat awkward (if not problematic) categorisations. The latest available data for the Danish population are for 2015 for socio-economic status (Statistics Denmark 2017b) and for 2017 for ancestry (Statistics Denmark 2017a). The survey has a temporal dimension by asking the socio-economic questions for both the present and for when individuals moved into cohousing. In the present study, we use data for the current socio-economic status. In addition, the individual questions address motivations for choosing cohousing as well as assessments of positive and negative aspects of living in cohousing. Using information from the community survey, the online survey was distributed by e-mail via contact persons in individual communities in the winter 2016–2017. In some cases, the survey undoubtedly ‘stranded’ with the contact person, but based on replies and direct communication, most contact persons seem to have circulated the survey in their community. 267 households with a total of 436 adults responded ([Table 1](#)).

As we have no means to establish the total population of people living in Danish cohousing with any precision, it is difficult to determine to what extent responses to the survey of households and individuals are representative. But if we take the total adult population of the communities on our list to be 4077, the margin of error is 4.44% (at 95% confidence level).¹ Still, it should be kept in mind that some groups may be more inclined to reply to an online survey than others. Of the 436 respondents, 57.6% are women, 37.4% are men and 5% chose not to answer this question. While the response rate in

Table 1. Responses to household survey of Danish intergenerational cohousing.

	Total	Owner	Cooperative	Rental
1 adult households	115	32	61	22
2 adult households	137	83	49	5
3 adult households	13	9	3	1
4 adult households	2	1	1	0
Total households	267	125	114	28
Total adults	436	229	172	35

cohousing communities based on owner occupation and cooperative tenure is relatively good, responses from people living in rental cohousing are comparatively few. This relates to the fact that rental cohousing is found in fewer but comparatively larger communities (see below), and we therefore depended on cooperation from a small number of ‘gate-keepers.’ In at least one case, the internal regulations of a large rental cohousing community did not permit the survey to be circulated to all households (but the administrator was helpful in circulating it to a smaller group of acquaintances). To highlight that percentages in some cases are based on few replies, we include the number of respondents in all tables. With these caveats in mind, the surveys of Danish cohousing communities and inhabitants are among the most extensive and comprehensive that have been made, certainly in Denmark but also in an international perspective (cf. Margolis and Entin 2011; Sanguinetti 2014; for a survey of residents in Danish eco-villages, see Marckmann 2009).

4. The historical-geographical evolution of Danish cohousing

Danish cohousing emerged from the many-sided challenges to established society and the conventional family, which already in the 1960s prompted the establishment of hundreds of small communes (*kollektiver*) and subsequently spurred larger experiments like Thylejren (est. 1970) in Northern Jutland and the ‘free city’ of Christiania (est. 1971) in Copenhagen. Indeed, one of the first cohousing communities – Toustrup Mark (est. 1971) – was envisioned at Thylejren, but Sættedammen (est. 1972) and Skråplanet (est. 1973) outside Copenhagen have longer histories and are commonly seen as the ‘first’ Danish cohousing communities.

There is a particular geography to the cohousing communities that have emerged since the early 1970s (Figure 1). First, the communities are mainly concentrated around the main cities, particularly the conurbations of the two largest cities, Copenhagen and Aarhus, but also the smaller university cities of Odense, Aalborg and Roskilde. Considering that a significant proportion of cohousing residents have a university degree and work in fields that typically are situated in urban areas, as we will discuss in the next section, it is hardly surprising that cohousing communities are located near the main (university) cities. Still, there are some notable geographical concentrations, for example in and near Trekroner on the outskirts of Roskilde. This is also the location of Roskilde University, which was established in the 1970s with an emphasis on progressive pedagogies, not least project work in groups. While it is beyond the scope of this article to pursue the question, it could be asked whether such geographical concentrations are in fact ‘clusters’, although in contrast to Porter’s (1998) understanding of business clusters, for example, one might expect possible cohousing clusters to be driven by mutual aid rather than competition. Second, although predominantly near cities, all but a few communities are located in suburban or quasi-rural areas. It is suggestive, for instance, that a group since 2009 has sought to establish an ‘urban’ cohousing community no more than five kilometres from the centre of Copenhagen (Urbana, n.d.). The virtual absence of cohousing in the urban core relates to land prices, of course. But the suburban and quasi-rural also reflects the space-demanding spatial form that has come to characterise Danish cohousing. In contrast to Sweden, where several cohousing communities have been established in apartment blocks (e.g. Caldenby and Walldén 1984), Danish cohousing has since the 1970s particularly been established as village-like communities of low, detached or semidetached houses – the so-called ‘low-dense’ style (Jantzen and Kaaris 1984). Indeed, among the cohousing communities surveyed for this article, most consist of purpose-built, one- or two-story buildings.



Figure 1. Geographical distribution of Danish intergenerational cohousing communities, 2016 (110 communities).

Based on an analysis of written sources, Larsen (2016) argues that Danish cohousing has evolved through three distinct phases characterised by shifts in the dominant tenure form of new cohousing communities. Our analysis verifies this proposition (Figure 2). In the 1970s, the first cohousing communities were overwhelmingly based on owner occupation. It should be noted, however, that ‘owner occupation’ can take several distinct forms. This was particularly the case for many early communities, which within the existing legal structures had to find ways to combine private dwellings with shared spaces and facilities. For example, the group behind what eventually became Sættedammen (est. 1972) was first organised as a private limited company (*aktieselskab*), which in 1970 (for tax purposes) was reorganised as a private partnership company (*interessentselskab*) (Bendixen et al., 1997). Some rental cohousing was established in the sector of public

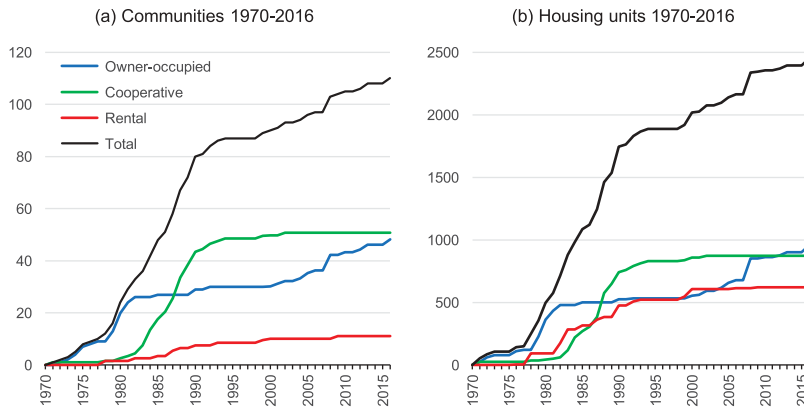


Figure 2. Danish intergenerational cohousing communities and housing units, 1970–2016 (cumulative count of 110 communities).

housing run by non-profit housing associations. But this sector and would-be cohousers never truly found one another. From 1981, however, it became possible to construct housing cooperatives (*andelsboliger*) with state support. Cooperative tenure, which is not confined to cohousing, is characterised by collective ownership of the property in which members buy a share and pay a monthly fee (Larsen and Lund Hansen 2015). This led to the second phase, during which new cohousing communities mainly were based on the lower-cost cooperative tenure – what has been termed the ‘Volkswagen’ of cohousing (Bjerre and Sørensen 1984). State support for the construction of housing cooperatives was terminated in 2004, and new intergenerational cohousing has since then – during the third and current phase of Danish cohousing – again been based on owner occupation. It should be noted, however, that some cohousing communities involve a mix of tenure forms, for example Drejerbanken (est. 1978), Munksøgård (est. 2000) and the soon-to-open Permatopia community (Permatopia, n.d.). Also, even though not included in the analysis of this article, senior cohousing is often based on rental public housing (Pedersen 2015).

While our data corroborate that Danish cohousing has evolved in three distinct phases characterised by shifts in tenure forms, they also qualify and add to this argument in at least three respects. First, the possibility of constructing new communities based on state-supported cooperative tenure clearly facilitated that the rise of cohousing during the 1970s continued and accelerated into the 1980s. But based on quantitative data alone, it is not possible to say whether cooperative tenure spurred this growth, or whether communities that in any case would have been established simply shifted to the lower-cost cooperative tenure form. The answer is probably somewhere in between, in part because both researchers and activists at the time saw cooperative tenure as a golden opportunity to expand cohousing (e.g. Andersen 1985; Byggeriets Udviklingsråd 1983; Reich and Bjerre 1984). Second, if related, it is noteworthy that comparatively few communities were established during the 1990s. Since new cooperatives could be constructed with state support until 2004, and as the number of owner-occupied communities again has increased in the past fifteen years, this levelling out suggests that other factors than tenure influence the establishment of cohousing communities. The ‘growth spurt’ of the 1980s may have saturated demands, of course; but dynamics such as cultural transformations and structural changes may also have played a part. Third, it should be noted that while cooperative tenure remains the prevalent property form at the scale of

communities, with owner occupation quickly catching up, the distribution of cohousing between the tenure forms is more balanced if measured in housing units (Figure 2b). This relates to the simple fact that rental cohousing communities generally have more housing units than both owner-occupied and cooperative cohousing. Based on Danish experiences, McCamant and Durrett (2011) suggest 20–50 adults – and no more than 33 households – to be the optimum size of a cohousing community. This may be the case. Yet, it would be an interesting question for future research to investigate differences and similarities of cohousing life in relation to community size and tenure forms.

5. An alternative for whom?

Although more limited than sometimes suggested, our analysis has so far confirmed that Danish intergenerational cohousing has evolved into a noticeable success in terms of the number of communities and their geographical distribution. For close to fifty years, although with a ‘pause’ in the early 1990s, new communities have continually been established. Similarly, even if most prominent in or near the major urban conurbations, cohousing as a housing form has spread to most of Denmark. But what characterises these communities? There are many facets to this issue, of course. At the most basic, our analysis shows that cohousing residents overwhelmingly thrive in this housing form. Asked to what extent cohousing has influenced their general life satisfaction, 34% responds ‘strongly positive,’ 45% ‘generally positive’ and 10% ‘more positive than negative’ (all but two of the remaining respondents chose not to rate this parameter). But at a time where segregation is mounting, also in Europe (Musterd et al., 2017) and Denmark (Juul 2017), we here address the question of for whom cohousing is an alternative with a particular focus on socio-economic characteristics of contemporary cohousing residents.

In a general sense, segregation – in this case residential segregation – occurs when two or more groups occupy different spaces within a wider area, such as a city, a region or a country. This implies that discussions of segregation necessarily involve some form of group categorisation, typically in relation to variables such as income, socio-economic status, occupation, demography and/or culture, including race or ethnicity (Wong 2009). This also implies that segregation often is a highly charged political and social topic, and that the risk of social as well as spatial stigmatisation is high. With this in mind, and we will along the way address some particularities and problems relating to the measures we employ, we focus on three parameters to address the question of for whom cohousing is an alternative. Following a recent analysis of the reassertion of class politics in Denmark (Olsen et al., 2014), we use position in work life and education as basic parameters of cohousing residents’ socio-economic position. These two parameters provide a rough but suggestive way to gauge what traditionally is seen as key determinants of social stratification in Denmark. But in Denmark, as in many other countries, issues relating to migrant populations have become central to debates on social stratification, socio-geographical segregation and welfare-state politics more generally (Koefoed 2015). These debates are often infused with latent as well as manifest expressions of nationalism and xenophobia. Yet, as identity relating to country of origin has become a stable feature of debates on social segregation, we cautiously include ancestry as a third parameter.

As a first parameter to analyse the social characteristics of residents of Danish intergenerational cohousing, we asked the respondents to indicate their work life position (Table 2). For this we used Statistics Denmark’s standard categorisations for ‘socio-economic status’ (Statistics Denmark 2017b), although we both in the survey and here have merged some subcategories (mainly on types of pension and social security). On the

Table 2. Socio-economic status of adults in Danish intergenerational cohousing.

	Denmark % (2015)	All cohousing		Owner		Cooperative		Rental	
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Self-employed	4.5	6.7	29	7.9	18	5.8	10	2.9	1
Top managers	2.4	4.6	20	6.6	15	2.9	5	0.0	0
Employees (upper)	14.8	19.0	83	24.9	57	13.4	23	8.6	3
Employees (medium)	6.2	24.5	107	17.9	41	33.7	58	22.9	8
Employees (basic)	22.2	5.0	22	4.8	11	5.8	10	2.9	1
Other employees	4.6	1.1	5	0.4	1	1.2	2	5.7	2
Unemployed	2.3	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0
Transfer payments	3.2	1.8	8	0.4	1	2.3	4	8.6	3
Disability pension	4.4	1.1	5	0.4	1	0.0	0	11.4	4
Pensions	23.2	24.5	107	24.0	55	26.7	46	17.1	6
Education	3.8	2.3	10	1.7	4	2.9	5	2.9	1
Outside labour force	2.9	0.5	2	0.4	1	0.6	1	0.0	0
Other	5.6	8.7	38	10.5	24	4.7	8	17.1	6
Total	100.1	99.8	436	99.9	229	100.0	172	100.1	35

Sources: Survey and Statistics Denmark (2017b)
Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

one hand, the results show that the cohousing respondents are above the Danish average in the upper-level categories of employees – top manager (public or private), top-level employee (e.g. medical doctor, lawyer) and, particularly, medium-level employee (e.g. laboratory technician, programmer). The number of self-employed is also relatively high. On the other hand, the rate of unemployed and people receiving transfer payments or early retirement pay is significantly below the Danish average. Although the survey included the job examples used by Statistics Denmark, these categories obviously leave the respondents room for interpretation. Considering the generally high level of education among cohousing residents (see below), it is particularly likely that many respondents have placed themselves ‘lower’ than they ought. Nonetheless, the surveyed cohousing inhabitants are on average overrepresented in the middle and upper strata of society in relation to socioeconomic status based on work life. This is particularly clear for respondents living in owner-occupied cohousing, while respondents in cooperative and particularly rental cohousing fall somewhat below the Danish average in the upper levels of the employee categories but are above average in the middle category.

If the respondents’ socio-economic status suggests that cohousing community members generally are economically better off than the average, the respondents’ level of education unequivocally set them apart from the wider Danish population (Table 3). This is not the place to unpack the particularities of the Danish educational system or to detail the categories from the national statistics we use (Statistics Denmark 2017b). The trend is in any case clear. With no less than 83% of the respondents having completed a medium-long education (e.g. schoolteacher) or a university education, their level of education is significantly above the Danish average. It is in this respect particularly noteworthy that 44% of the cohousing respondents have completed a master or doctoral degree. In the definition of Olsen et al. (2014), this (irrespective of income) places close to half of the cohousing respondents in the ‘upper-middleclass’ (*højere middelklasse*). More generally, we could take the respondents’ noticeable level of educational achievement as an

Table 3. Highest education completed by adults in Danish intergenerational cohousing.

	Denmark % (2015)	All cohousing		Owner		Cooperative		Rental	
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Primary	23.8	2.8	12	2.6	6	2.9	5	2.9	1
Upper secondary	8.2	2.3	10	1.7	4	1.7	3	8.6	3
Vocational	33.5	2.5	11	2.2	5	2.9	5	2.9	1
Short (1–2 years)	4.1	1.1	5	0.9	2	1.2	2	2.9	1
Medium (2–4 years)	14.4	31.9	139	19.7	45	45.9	79	42.9	15
Bachelor	2.1	7.1	31	6.6	15	7.6	13	8.6	3
Master	7.8	40.4	176	51.1	117	29.7	51	22.9	8
PhD	0.5	3.7	16	5.2	12	2.3	4	0.0	0
Not stated	5.5	8.3	36	10.0	23	5.8	10	8.6	3
Total	99.9	100.1	436	100.0	229	100.0	172	100.3	35

Sources: Survey and Statistics Denmark (2017b)

Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

indication of a significant potential for cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986). However, it would take a different methodology than the one applied in this study to establish to what extent cohousing inhabitants actually possess such capitals (cf. Ruii 2016). Also with respect to education, respondents living in owner-occupied cohousing are significantly above the Danish average in completing the longest academic educations. Respondents from cooperative and rental cohousing are likewise well above the average for academic educations, but are particularly strongly represented in the medium-long educations.

In 2010, the then liberal-conservative government published a strategy for vulnerable housing areas, which controversially were termed ‘ghettos’ (Regeringen 2010). As the first of three quantitative criteria for a housing area to be put on the ‘ghetto list’ was ‘immigrants and descendants’ (from ‘non-western countries’). Migrant populations have in such ways become key nodes in contentious debates and policies on social stratification and socio-geographical segregation that often entail flagrant examples of ‘territorial stigmatisation’ (Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira 2014). However, with the danger of stigmatisations in mind, we have included ancestry as a third parameter (Table 4). The cohousing respondents are in this respect overwhelmingly ‘Danish’, defined by Statistics Denmark (2017a) as having at least one parent that is a Danish citizen and is born in Denmark (‘descendants’ are defined as

Table 4. Ancestry of adult in Danish intergenerational cohousing members.

	Denmark % (2017)	All cohousing		Owner		Cooperative		Rental	
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Danish	87.0	96.9	401	96.7	204	97.6	165	94.1	32
Descendant	1.5	0.5	2	0.5	1	0.0	0	2.9	1
Immigrant	11.5	2.7	11	2.8	6	2.4	4	2.9	1
Total	100.0	100.1	414	100.0	211	100.0	169	99.9	34

Sources: Survey and Statistics Denmark (2017a)

22 chose not to state their ancestry. These are not included. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

people born in Denmark by parents without Danish citizenship). Here, as in relation to the other parameters, we should be careful of the conclusions we draw from a voluntary survey. This been said, our study suggests that intergenerational Danish cohousing is noticeably less diverse with respect to ancestry than the surrounding society. As a cohousing resident recently put it: ‘We support diversity in my cohousing community. But it is striking how identical we look’ (Kold 2015, 2; our translation).

6. Discussion and conclusions

An analysis of the sort we have presented can obviously not do justice to the rich and varied lives of cohousing communities. Moreover, we have in this study engaged in what Sayer (1992) terms ‘extensive’ (as opposed to ‘intensive’) research. This is to say that we have investigated the ‘surface’ of Danish intergenerational cohousing – what can be directly observed and quantified with an emphasis on including a large population of cohousing communities and inhabitants. We share Sayer’s concern that extensive research lacks the explanatory depth of intensive research of structures and mechanisms ‘below’ the observable surface, typically in one or a few cases: ‘What causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we have observed it happening,’ Sayer (2000, 14) points out; ‘Explanation depends instead on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions.’ For this reason alone, we advise some caution when drawing conclusions from our findings. This been said, we find that our study provides important contributions to international research on cohousing and, more generally, alternative housing forms. First, the study clarifies some ambiguities in the understanding of the Danish ‘gold standard’ of cohousing, and we hope that it can help to engender similar assessments of cohousing in other countries and regions. Second, the study can provide context for detailed case studies. Third, we believe that our analysis can help to generate propositions (or hypotheses) that can be pursued through detailed studies in and beyond Denmark. In essence, we see the scholarly function of our analysis to be the opposite of the conventional view that a single or a few cases merely can be a tool to generate hypotheses, while the leap into science happens with generalisations across a large number of cases (e.g. King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). Our study is a generalisation that demonstrates some distinct patterns, but we can only from the present analysis provide some suggestions as to how and why these patterns emerge and what they may imply.

With this caveat in mind, our analysis corroborates the image of Danish cohousing as relatively successful. Since first put into practice some fifty years ago, cohousing as *bofællesskab* has become a recognisable housing alternative, and the number of communities continue to grow. The ‘first wave’ emerged in the 1970s and were mainly based on owner-occupation. But aided by the introduction of state support for the construction of housing cooperatives, the number of communities continued to rise during the 1980s, and it seems that the more affordable cooperative tenure form accelerated this development. After a pause in the early 1990s, also Denmark is now experiencing a ‘second wave’ (Sargisson 2012) of cohousing. In contrast to the ‘boom’ during the 1980s, however, contemporary intergenerational cohousing is again mainly based on owner-occupation. Much suggests that the introduction of state support for the construction of housing cooperatives was important for the expansion of Danish cohousing during the 1980s. But tenure

forms alone can neither explain the relative standstill in the establishment of new cohousing communities during the 1990s, nor the recent growth of new communities. This illustrates that other factors than tenure is important if we want to understand broader trends that encourage (and discourage) the establishment of cohousing. However, the main aim of this article is not to discuss what drives or impedes the establishment of cohousing. Rather, taking our point of departure in the seeming success of Danish intergenerational cohousing, we seek to contribute towards an understanding of the social geographies of cohousing. In this respect, tenure understood as relations of occupancy and ownership is important. As mentioned in the introduction, cohousing is often evoked by academics, activists and policy-makers as a way to address issues of social, economic and/or environmental sustainability. On the other hand, if less prevalent, others suggest that cohousing is a rather exclusive housing form that can exhibit parallels to gated communities.

While not gated communities in a literal sense, the analysis of this article suggests that residents in Danish intergenerational cohousing are socio-economically and educationally privileged, and that the increasing multi-cultural character of the wider society is yet to reach these communities. In these senses, Danish cohousing communities are clearly segregated enclaves. But the analysis also implies that there are differences to this general finding if cohousing residents are separated by tenure form. Residents in owner-occupied cohousing are thus well above the Danish average in terms of socio-economic status and education. Residents in cooperative and rental cohousing are similarly above the Danish average, but lean more towards the middle. This suggests that also in relation to cohousing, tenure – and the underlying differences in wealth – is an important factor of inclusion and exclusion. It is in this respect suggestive that the soon-to-open Permatopia community consciously involve both owner-occupation, cooperative and rental tenure in order to make cohousing accessible for lower-income groups (Skou 2015). (In contrast to owner-occupied and cooperative housing, residents in rental housing do not need to buy property or a share in collective property, and they can receive public housing support.) Nonetheless, much suggests that wealth is only one element in accessing cohousing. The high educational level across all three tenure forms indicates, for example, that cohousing also is chosen for reasons that are not directly related to economic capacities. We should again emphasise that while Danish intergenerational cohousing is socially segregated, the surveyed residents overwhelmingly link cohousing to high levels of life satisfaction. Cohousing is valuable to many. For this reason alone, our analysis should not be seen as a criticism, as siding with cohousing ‘cynics’ rather than cohousing ‘believers’ (Tummers 2016b, 2024). Rather, we hope our study can help cohousing researchers and activists relating this housing form to broader societal concerns. More specifically, not least since cohousing increasingly is promoted and supported by public policy, it is at least from a socio-economic perspective important not to view cohousing as a panacea for ‘urban sustainability’.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (“Cohousing and sustainable urban development: cases from Denmark, Germany, Spain and Sweden”).

Supplemental data

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed [here](#).

Note

1. The population size is here based on 2451 adults in the communities for which we have a figure and, with an average of 1.7 adults per household in these communities, an estimate of 1626 adults in the communities for which we only know the number of housing units.

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