

## **Do-it-yourself– the stony road to cohousing in Sweden**

### **Introduction**

The interest in cohousing has grown dramatically in Sweden, as in many other countries in Europe, during the last years. More and more people are forming groups and associations to create their own dwellings with common premises, participating in joint activities such as cooking and eating together. They look for a new way of living where they can take responsibility for their situation in cooperation with their neighbours, based on mutual support, self-governance and active participation.

In Sweden, as in Denmark, cohousing boomed for a period in the 1980s, with multiple urban and rural communities designed and realised at that time continuing to thrive some four decades hence. Despite the positive lived experiences of these and later projects the road to developing new cohousing communities in Sweden today has not been smoothed by the efforts of earlier travellers as might be expected.

Many start-up cohousing groups today still meet difficulties finding partners and suitable plots. The process of planning and designing together is unfamiliar, not only for start-up groups, but also for property owners and industry professionals such as developers, builders, consultants, financiers and municipalities. due to the fact that process from starting groups until a house in reality is every time new to the group involved. Tools and techniques to develop the capacity within self-initiated groups to collectively share responsibilities in the start-up phases are lacking, with group momentum sometimes lost when initiators tire or experience changes in personal circumstances. How can a project move from being someone's dream to be everyone's collective responsibility?

The same challenges faced by contemporary cohousing groups in Sweden are experienced by many other groups around the globe. International eyes have for decades viewed the Scandinavian nations as the birthplace of modern cohousing success, asking 'What can be learned from Sweden?' In this article, the question is internalised to ask 'What lessons can new Swedish cohousing groups learn from earlier projects?' What helped groups to succeed? What similarities and differences existed then compared to today's situation? Such reflection on our Swedish experiences can provide guidance both within and beyond national borders. Many questions, not many answers.

The article draws on four decades of direct experience in, and research on, the Swedish cohousing sector. It seeks to engage the aforementioned questions through (1) contextualising early Swedish cohousing via historic precedents, and reflecting on the inception and experiences of cohousing from the 'boom' period of the 1980 - 2000, (2) revisiting tools, resources and community support structures developed over the intervening decades, and (3) providing an overview of contemporary efforts to support and encourage ongoing innovation.

## 1. Precedents and context

### From shared-services to self-work. 1905 – 1979.

Sweden's long tradition of collective housing extends from 1905 onwards, starting with the one-kitchen housing project Hemgårdens Centralkök (The Home Yard Central Kitchen) in Stockholm. In Hemgårdens Centralkök the flats had no kitchen but were served by a central kitchen in the cellar with the help of dumbwaiters to each floor. A few more of this kind followed in the 1910s and 1920s. The first modernist collective house in Sweden was built in 1935 in Stockholm. It was designed by the architect Sven Markelius, who lived there himself for many years. These first collective housing units were based not on cooperation, but on paid services. The tenants themselves were not expected to do any house work, with their homes services by collectively employed staff, even for laundry and room cleaning (Vestbro, 1982). Around 15 collective houses of this type were built from 1935 – 1956, most by private landlords but some also by public companies.



*Figure 1 John Ericssonsgatan 6, the first modern collective house in Stockholm. Entrance to the day nursery, still functioning. The restaurant is to the left. Photo Kerstin Kärnekull.*

Many collective houses in Stockholm had been initiated by the developer and building contractor Olle Engquist. His idea was that smaller private apartments should be completed with a dining service, run by professionals. This was created in 5-6 projects, all in Stockholm. After his passing, his company started to close down the restaurant services in 1976. A group of active residents in one of the complexes, Hässelby Familjehotell objected, but after several years of struggle they lost the battle about the meal service. The restaurant was closed. In this situation the activists started to cook for themselves in the restaurant kitchen. They found this work attractive. Subsequently, the purchase of food, division into cooking teams and the selling of meal tickets were organised on a long-term basis among those who participated in the new activity. The self-work model was born (Vestbro, 1982; Blomberg et al, 1986) and still works after 40 years.

In the late 1970's interest in collective housing grew in Sweden. But the focus had changed from paid services to 'let's do it together' or self-work, partly due to the experiences from Hässelby Familjehotell. Researchers, architects and journalists engaged in ideas of new ways of living formed the association Bo i Gemenskap (Living in community), or BiG, in 1977. Founding members included the authors. The BiG group developed their new ideas in the research report 'Det lilla kollektivhuset. En modell för praktisk tillämpning/The small cohousing project. A model for practical implementation' (Berg, 1982).

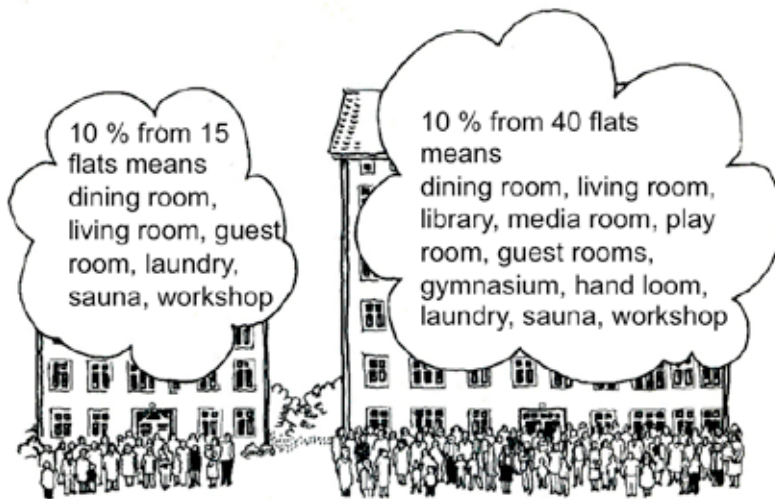


Figure 2 The principle behind BIG. The sketch shows how much common space residents in cohousing can acquire if they abstain 10 percent of normal private apartment space. Ill. Inger Larsson.

The vision of BiG was a cohousing unit with 20 – 50 smaller private flats and common spaces like a big kitchen, dining room, living room, workshops and guest rooms. Common meals, cooked by the inhabitants and collaboration between residents instead of services from employed staff. Proximity to other people and working together should make daily life easier and more fun. Children should have more adults than their own parents to learn from; elderly people the opportunity of living closer to younger people. User participation in the planning phase and self-organisation and self-work after moving in was important as well as a broad mix of inhabitants, non-speculative forms of tenure and conserve energy and other resources.

### The 'boom'. 1980s

'The small cohousing project' report and other books written by members of BiG inspired most of the cohousing projects built in Sweden from 1980 onwards. The model was tested in more than 50 projects in Sweden, in new as well as converted buildings. Almost all projects were initiated by local start-up groups, in collaboration with a municipal housing company or a national cooperative building organisation. Most houses were rental, which differed from cohousing projects in many other countries.



Figure 3 Cohousing in Sweden. Red = rental, blue = condominiums, green = cooperative rental, yellowgreen = forming or building.

Following the uptake of the BiG vision, the authors undertook study visits to the new ‘small’ collective houses, publishing their research findings in ‘15 collective houses’. The model turned out to be durable, robust and adaptable to people’s different needs and desires. It worked in the inner city as well as in suburbs, in rented apartments or condominiums, and in newly built houses as well as rebuilt. And shared work with common meals was the key to the success. (Lundahl & Sangregorio, 1992).

The BiG group formulated and actively spread the ideas of ‘small cohousing projects’, but was in reality part of a much wider movement. Feminist activists, architects, town planners, civil servants at the National Board of Housing, researchers like Dick Urban Vestbro, local politicians and starting groups all over the country formed a loose network and succeeded to engage some of the municipal housing companies as developers and landlords. This loosely knitted network was one of the prerequisites for the successful implementation.

### **Cohousing for the second half of life. 1990s**

The cohousing projects in the 1980’s were very popular with parents with children; but some groups looked for an alternative when growing older:

*‘In 1987, we were a handful of 50–60 years old, sitting around a kitchen table worrying about the future and housing for seniors. Friends, relatives and colleagues joined us and the group rapidly expanded. By 1988, we had formed an organisation, ‘The Allowance’ (Swe:Undantaget) and were asking ourselves the following questions:*

*How can middle-aged people and elderly help each other achieve a better quality of life and reduce dependency on social services?*

*Can family and workplace relationships, which decrease with age, be replaced with collaborative housing?*

*How can housing be designed that induces people to leave their ‘empty nest’ after the kids have flown out, which would make larger living quarters available for new families with children?*

*The answer is found today in the collective housing Färdknäppen, planned and projected in close cooperation between the prospective tenants, the landlord and the architect. When we moved in 1993, we were a close-knit bunch that during the planning and construction period had many occasions to talk us together around the big and small issues’ (William-Olsson, 1994).*



*Figure 4 One of many meetings during the planning of Färdknäppen, Swedens first senior cohousing project. Photo Elly Berg.*



Collective housing for middle-aged and elderly was not a new idea in Sweden. In the 1940s collective houses with restaurants and many other amenities for seniors were introduced, again with a focus on shared-services. More than 20 such private senior service houses have been built in Sweden, initiated by churches, banks and insurance companies as well as local groups. Noticeable is that these projects with services, intended for seniors, has proved to be more sustainable over time than those for families. The latest was finished in Uppsala in 1993, the same year as Färdknäppen was created.

Färdknäppen in Stockholm was the first Swedish senior cohousing project with a self-work focus following the BiG model, but adapted to the needs of ‘the second half of life’ by the initiative group. During the six years from idea to occupancy the group put a lot of work in finding good solutions both for design and the daily life together (William-Olsson, 1994). Their ideas have slowly been spreading to others through newspaper articles, study visits, lectures, open-house events etc. Local groups have taken initiatives to build new senior cohouses or to adapt existing buildings into senior cohouses. In the beginning of 2018 at least 12 similar projects exists in different parts of Sweden; in Stockholm, Falun, Norrtälje, Trosa, Gothenburg, Mölndal, Tanum, Lund and Malmö. Färdknäppen has not only become a role model for senior cohousing projects in Sweden but also in Tokyo, Finland and Germany.



*Figure 5 Dunderbacken, Stockholm, a senior cohousing project from 2010. 61 flats and common spaces. Rental, owned by the municipal housing company AB Familjebostäder. Photo Kerstin Kärnekull.*

Färdknäppen and other senior cohousing projects have proved to be good answers to the questions asked by Monica William-Olsson and her friends around the kitchen table in 1987. Although there is no Swedish research to probe this statement, there are many satisfied residents and more than twenty-five years of good function and no failures. A review of 25 years of annual reports shows that Färdknäppen continues to work in the same stable manner year after year (Lind, 2018).

## **Beyond 2000**

The 1980s boom saw thirty-three cohousing projects completed before 1990. Between 1990-2000 the number dropped to just eight, with a further seven completed between 2001-2010. The rate of construction appears to be slowly increasing again, with ten from 2011 to 2018 and at least five new projects scheduled to be completed during 2020 - 2021.

However, overall growth in cohousing requires not just new constructions, but the ongoing success of existing projects. A study initiated by the national cohousing association ‘Kollektivhus Nu’ (Cohousing Now) asked why some cohouses had ceased to exist (Kärnekull, 2015). The study showed that 9 out of 55 cohouses had been converted to ordinary housing, mostly within their first ten years.

None of those were of the BiG model, in which inhabitants are active in the planning and design phases and the importance of co-working is emphasized. Three main reasons for the failures were identified. Firstly, a lack of ambition for user participation on the part of municipalities; both politicians and officials. Secondly, housing agencies' lack of commitment to allocate cohousing flats to the right target group and, finally, problems that arose when cooperative flats was sold on the market and purchased by people not interested in cohousing.

Past and present Swedish cohousing experience have shown it offers unique possibilities to design and build together, to get to know each other during the planning process and to grow a social capital together. It is also a sustainable solution from different aspects; social, economic and ecological. By sharing facilities, work and ideas those with low incomes can live a rich life. Sharing is also a key to lesser consumption (Vestbro, 2012). The communal cooking five days a week saves both energy (Sundberg, 2014) and money, and food tastes better eaten in company with others. Cohousing could be one of the answers to the housing question in the future. But many obstacles first must be removed.

To be able to move into a cohousing project means lots of hard work. To form a group, write a program, find a plot or a housing company to cooperate with, engage architects and builders, convince banks and other financiers about the project and all the time recruit new people takes a lot of time and effort. It also requires enormous power and knowledge of the starting group to manage the process in dialogue with the developer, architects, financiers, municipality and contractors (Koyabe, 1994). The process is unfamiliar, both for start-up groups and for 'the professionals', i.e., property owners, developers, builders, consultants and municipalities. Very few in the building sector knows about cohousing or have cooperated with startup groups. The way of working is totally different from building homes for the market.

But to form a project together is also to lay the foundation for a good future life together. This is something you have to do together and it does take time. What is needed is not a smooth process but good tools for the work that has to be done.

Among the difficulties start-up groups meet are finding partners to cooperate with. In Sweden municipally owned housing companies plays an important role on the housing market. They were the main partners to starting groups during 1980 – 2000. Municipal-owned housing companies are again engaged in new cohousing project but only in the three biggest cities, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. Their engagement is the result of local political decisions to forward cohousing (on a small scale). In recent years there seems to be a new trend with private companies engaging in cohousing, in the countryside as well as in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. Not the old and established private property owners or construction companies, but small local developers and builders interested in trying new ideas.

Cohousing the Swedish way has typically meant cooperation between start-up groups and professional organizations. Very few groups have managed to act as clients on their own. A big barrier is lack of knowledge among professionals, in municipalities and the housing sector as well as in the finance sector. Regarding her experiences in the planning processes of four different collective houses, Birgit Assarson writes: 'It is plain impossible for a, never so active and knowledgeable but non-professional interest-group, to implement a project of this nature without proper support from society' (Assarson, 2005).

## 2. Support structures

Collective action by interested citizens has provided tools, resources and community support structures to Swedish cohousing groups since the early publications by BiG and continue in a variety of forms. Most cohouses in Sweden are actively engaged in sharing their experiences by inviting study visits, talking to journalists and curious students, and arranging seminars and events like 'Open door'. The existing cohousing units act as ambassadors and spread the message, so too do several organisations, all voluntary, at both local and national scales.



*Figure 6 Open House in the collective house Färdknäppen, Stockholm 2018 with more than 140 visitors. Three students of architecture are introduced to the project. Photo Kerstin Kärnekull.*

### **National Association: Cohousing Now (Swe: Kollektivhus NU)**

The national association Kollektivhus Nu was formed in 1981 with cohousing and starting groups as members. The prime purpose was to inform about cohousing, to learn from existing projects and to influence authorities to facilitate the creation and running of new units. The organization has so far gone through three stages. During the 1980s it was an active member organisation advocating for more cohousing projects. The cohousing units were built and functioned well, but Kollektivhus Nu became dormant. Perhaps all energy was spent on daily life and not on new projects. In 2005 Kollektivhus Nu was restarted by Dick-Urban Vestbro and has since then acted both as an advocate and as a member organisation with a website and an electronic news journal 'Bo tillsammans/Live in Community'. Almost all cohousing units in Sweden are members as well as many starting groups.

### **Local Associations**

Local start-up groups are the key actors behind all the successful cohousing projects in Sweden. Diffusion of ideas and mobilising interest locally is vital in forming new starting groups. These starting groups are the most important driving forces behind new cohousing units, in cities as well as in the countryside.

The Stockholm-based association The Future (Swe: Framtiden) is one example. The association supports new cohousing locally by organizing those looking for an alternative way of living and by searching for interested housing companies and developers to connect to the forming start-up groups. Framtiden arranges study visits, study circles and acts as a process consultant. The association was founded in 2002. Up till today two senior cohousing units have been built in cooperation between Framtiden and the public housing company AB Familjebostäder and the construction of a third cohousing project, for all ages, has recently started.

Another partner to Framtiden is the private housing company Svea Fastigheter Bostad AB with one cohousing project in Uppsala for seniors, another forming in Vaxholm, north of Stockholm and two municipal land allocations in southern Stockholm and Tyresö, southeast of Stockholm. The cohousing units are part of a mixed combination of different forms of housing and types of tenures. More is in the pipeline. Svea Fastigheter is one of several examples of the growing interest among some private developers and property owners for cohousing.





*Figure 7 A cohousing project in Uppsala to be finished in 2022. Cohousing association Rudbeckia in cooperation with Svea Fastigheter Bostad AB (Belatchew Architects).*

Live Together in Gothenburg (Swe: Boihop) and Cohousing Malmö (Swe: Kollektivhus i Malmö/KiM) are both associations similar to Framtiden. Boihop has parented two cohousing units and is at the moment involved in at least two more projects, all in cooperation with two local public housing companies. KiM took the initiative to a new cohousing project, Sofielund, together with the local municipal housing company, MKB Fastighets AB, in Malmö. At the moment, the association is engaged in three more projects, one with a private property owner, one with a public-private company and one with a housing initiative by the crowd-founded organisation ETC Bygg.



*Figure 8 Sweden's latest senior cohousing community, Hogslätts vänboende on the west coast, inaugurated June 2018. In the center project pilot Lena Jarlov. Photo Per Pixel Peterson.*



### 3. Contemporary innovations

During the 1980s and 1990s several research projects about collective housing received grants from the National Board of Building Research (today Formas). The results were important inputs and inspiration as well as feed back to the cohousing movement. Since 2000 almost no research has been funded until the 2015–17 research project ‘Cohousing and Sustainable Urban Development: Cases from Denmark, Germany, Spain and Sweden’, supported by the Swedish Foundation for the Humanities and Social Sciences and led by professor Håkan Thörn at the Department of sociology and work science, University of Gothenburg. The aim has been to analyse what learning experiences different forms of co-housing provide for social and ecological sustainability in the context of housing policy. This is done through case studies of co-housing in Denmark, Germany, Spain and Sweden, all countries were interest in senior cohousing is growing. This research is ongoing, with outcomes anticipated in the coming years (Scheller, 2018).



*Figure 9 The cohousing unit ‘UnderSammaTak/Under the same roof’ is under construction and will be finished in December 2019. 55 rental flats and common spaces. Architect Ferrum/Helena Westholm, owner Trollängen Bostads AB. Illustration Ferrum Arkitekter.*

Denmark is the the home of modern cohousing, starting 1972 with the two bofællesskaber/cohousing projects Sættedammen and Skråplanet, both in greater Copenhagen. Today there are at least 350 units (Kähler, 2010). There are many similarities between Swedish and Danish cohousing, but two major differences. In Sweden, most cohousing projects are rental, but in Denmark dominates owner-occupied projects. Almost all Swedish units are multi-story buildings with indoor communication between dwellings and common spaces. In Denmark most cohousing projects consist of low-rise buildings around a separate common house.

Recent studies have shown the many benefits of senior cohousing, to inhabitants and to society (Pedersen, 2013, Schulze, 2016). The results are probably also applicable to Sweden. These studies made the Danish philanthropic association Realdania start a project 2016 – 2018 called ‘Space and community for elderly’ (Dan: Rum og fællesskaber for ældre) to inspire private and public property owners to build senior cohousing projects. At the moment nine different are on their way. The first, ‘Kamelia Hus’, in Valby, Copenhagen, was ready for occupation in 2019 and the eight coming will be

in the next five years. The projects will be followed by researchers in order to learn more about the process. The question is if these Danish examples once again will be an inspiration to Sweden and demonstrate how professional bodies can engage in cohousing.

In November 2018 the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Swe: Boverket) published a guidance titled 'Building Communities. Building groups as part of housing supply.' In the guidance, the benefits of building groups (starting groups that also act as clients and owners of their project) and their small scale projects are described, based on experiences from Germany. Municipalities can promote building groups in order to encourage housing alternatives that the building market doesn't offer. In Germany, it is often emphasized that building groups contribute to social stability and demand for small-scale variations in the neighborhoods. Experience is also that those who engage in building groups are often keen on a sustainable lifestyle and place high demands on material choices and energy solutions.

The municipality can facilitate building groups by land allocation and other means. Designated contact persons is another important step. The tips in the guidance on ways to facilitate building groups also benefit small scale development and cohousing starting groups (Boverket, 2018).



*Figure 10 A conference about self-build projects in Uppsala, arranged by the city of Uppsala in cooperation with the innovation project Divercity in 2019. Uppsala forwards co-building and cohousing projects. Photo Katja Jahn.*

Only a handful municipalities has yet realised growing interest in cohousing and self-build projects and actively engaged. One important example is the city of Gothenburg, where start-up groups are actively invited to apply for land. The result is that there are considerably more starting groups in Gothenburg than elsewhere. The city of Uppsala has also started to cooperate with building communities and cohousing projects. Start-up groups are forming in many parts of Sweden, not only in the big cities. The four most recent completed cohousing units are situated in the countryside or in small towns. It is difficult to have an overview of all the groups in their different stages. A qualified guess can be between 50 and 60.

## New research and innovation project

The National Board of Housing, Building and Planning is also supporting measures that promote innovative and sustainable housing construction with reduced climate and environmental impact. The research project “Sustainable living in community: a step towards integration and reduced climate impact (working title)” at the University in Lund got one of the 2019 – 2020 grants.

The purpose is to develop guidelines for housing that consist of different degrees of living in community and user influence. The project aims to increase knowledge regarding:

- conditions and challenges regarding housing solutions for immigrants
- how spatial aspects at building level can help to build community
- how different degrees of living in community can be a tool for integration and for reducing environmental impact.

Since 2016, Vinnova, the Swedish government agency for innovation, has founded three innovation projects of interest for the cohousing movement concerning co-living, building communities and elasticity and sharing in housing:

1. Tech Farm: Future’s space-efficient housing. The purpose of the research project is to investigate whether multi-family houses can be built where the living space is 60% less while the well-being increases. The goal is a new international standard for building housing. The solution means shared areas and small sleeping modules combined with life balance and well-being programs. 10-20 people will stay in a test bed for less than 6 months, and researchers will follow these to see how the accommodation affects their perceived quality of life. The project period is Nov. 2016 – Dec. 2018.



*Figure 11 The common dwelling room in K9, a co-living project in Stockholm, created by Tech Farm in 2016. 50 persons from 22 nationalities live in small private rooms and share common facilities. Photo Anton Chernikov.*

2. Divercity: Building communities for diversity in urban development. 19 organizations cooperate together in “Divercity - Diversity Building Development in Urban Development”, a project that will pave the way for more building communities in Sweden. The project will last for two years (2019 – 2020) (and is initiated and led by the Association for Building Groups. Several building groups in different parts of Sweden will take part in the project as well as municipalities and the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning.



This project aims to develop new supporting structures and policies for building communities through collaboration between municipalities/city planning departments, end users, researchers and the private sector in order to make way for idea-driven development in a larger scale.



*Figure 12 Byggemenskapen/The Building Community Årlan, Gothenburg. 29 flats and common spaces to be completed 2021. Architect and project guide Inobi Arkitekter. Illustration Inobi.*

3. Kod Architects: Elastic Homes. Elastic Homes aims at creating new housing models that combine digitization and new technology with social and spatial organization. The purpose is to develop locally adapted accommodation that facilitates a sharing lifestyle, builds on the participation of the residents and lowers thresholds to enter the housing market.

Elastic Homes will be applied to three cases to find feasible applications based on a survey of the willingness of the residents to share and the opportunities offered by the current regulations. The goal is to develop three prototypes that contribute in different ways to a 30% less resource-consuming lifestyle that is based on cooperation, dedication and community. The experiences are summarized in a model for innovative services and products that provide increased elasticity in both new construction and facility management. Cohousing Now is one of the project partners. The project period is Nov. 2016 – Dec. 2018

### **Conclusion: Hope for the future**

Today local starting groups; building groups, cohousing groups and senior housing groups are forming all over Sweden. More than 25 are building, have been assigned plots by municipalities or have cooperation agreements with housing companies. The situation is from many points of view comparable to the 1980s with lots of starting groups and new knowledge from research projects fuelling the interest as well as a positive interest from government agencies.

What lessons can these new Swedish cohousing groups learn from history? Perhaps most important of all is that cohousing projects have showed to be sustainable over time. Good news not only for all starting groups but also for municipalities and property owners. Another important lesson from the

twentieth century is that groups need to be persistent. The process is long and tiresome. A third that a lot of work always will be needed by start-up groups to form sustainable cohousing projects. But the work put in by start-up groups with physical lay-out and social infrastructure is probably a key factor to good functioning and sustainability over time.



*Figure 13 A meeting in the cohousing starting group Kombo, Stockholm. The project is developed in cooperation with the public housing company Familjebostäder AB. To be completed 2021-2022. Photo Kerstin Kärnekull.*

Two things are different compared to the situation forty years ago. One is the growing interest in cohousing from the private housing sector, the second the positive attitude to building communities at state and municipal level. Boverkets ambition to spread knowledge of how to work together with cooperative building groups is an example as well as the many municipalities engaging as partners in the innovation project “Diversity”. This will probably lead to more projects being realised in the coming years.

The three innovation projects, funded by Vinnova, as well as Håkan Thörns research and Realdanias forwarding of cohousing in Denmark will give lots of interesting examples to learn from and new planning tools for groups and municipalities.

Hard work continues to give results even if the roads are stony and winding. Within ten years there could exist not only 50 but 150 cohousing and community projects up and running all over Sweden. A small but hopefully important contribution to Swedish housing.

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