

Social integration through social connection in everyday life. Residents' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in SällBo collaborative housing, Sweden

Social
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through social
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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this article is to explore the everyday life experiences of elderly (+70 years) living with young locals and refugees in a collaborative housing project before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden. The paper discusses the importance of the spatial dimension in the conceptualization of social integration.

Design/methodology/approach – The main method is a qualitative case study based on observations of settings, document/video analysis, online diary entries made by ten residents and eight semi-structured interviews conducted with the residents.

Findings – SällBo was conceived as a new type of collaborative housing in which elderly, young locals and refugees share common spaces with the aim of enabling social integration. In this context, COVID-19 interrupted the ongoing processes of living together after four months of moving to the house. The three main themes that emerge from the empirical material are (1) changes in the use of common spaces and social interactions, (2) residents' resilient coping responses during the pandemic and (3) insights for future design of collaborative housing based on their experience. The pandemic caused a moment of institutional vacuum, which triggered the agency of the residents whilst developing social bonds and social bridges among them.

Social implications – Social connection created in everyday life at SällBo's common spaces has triggered processes of social integration.

Originality/value – The ongoing processes of social integration have included the spatial dimension. We understand social integration as a process that involves people from different generations and ethnical backgrounds, which takes place in common spaces and everyday life as different modes of socialization.

Keywords Collaborative housing, Social connection, Social integration, Spatial dimension, COVID-19, Everyday life

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Research has shown that the neighborhood where individuals live can affect their opportunities in life positively or negatively. Segregation means separation, and it includes demographic, socioeconomic and/or ethnical segregation (Lindemann and Roelofs, 2020). Recent studies have concluded that residential segregation of foreign-born has increased in Sweden over time (Malmberg *et al.*, 2016). Social isolation of elderly of 70 years and older (thereafter +70 years), who constitute 15% of the Swedish population (Statistics Sweden-SCB, 2020a) is also a problem that has gained more attention in the recent years (Schirmer and Michailakis, 2015). Unwanted social isolation is also increasing among young adults (Thelander, 2020).

In Sweden, public housing through municipal housing companies has addressed the housing needs historically and has been available for the whole population regardless of income level. Thus, no social housing focusing only on low-income people has existed. However, today these municipal housing companies have to be profit-making although with an approach that presupposes social responsibility. This market-oriented housing policy hinders the access of low-income people to affordable housing (Grundström and Molina, 2016). In 2019, 47.2% of the elderly (+70 years) lived in single-family houses (Statistics Sweden-SCB, 2020b), and many elderly lived in condominiums [1]. However, most of them avoid moving to a smaller condominium or rental apartment since they will pay a high amount of tax when they sell their house/condominium (SPF Seniorerna and Skattebetalarna, 2018). Moreover, based on a comparison of monthly expenses, the Tenants' Association (Hyresgästföreningen, 2019) states that it is more expensive to rent an apartment than to pay monthly operational costs of a house or condominium that a person already owns. Although this comparison does not consider the down payment that people had to do when buying a house or condominium, some elderly seem to be discouraged to leave their house since, for the same floor space, they might have to pay higher rental costs. This applies especially for newly constructed apartments. Hence, there is an urgent need to foster alternative ways of living that are affordable and address both segregation and isolation of the groups mentioned above.

Helsingborgshem, a housing company owned by Helsingborg municipality, created SällskapsBoende [2] (thereafter SällBo) as a new housing concept, which mixes elderly, young refugees and young Swedes in the same building. Residents rent small apartments [3] and share large common spaces (Helsingborgshem, 2020a). The residents moved in during November and December 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic started in Sweden in March 2020, and it has changed the conditions for being and interacting with others in society. This paper discusses how these changes are manifested in the everyday life experiences of residents who are living in this collaborative housing, in which the living arrangements were formulated before the pandemic. What opportunities for social interaction did SällBo offer to its residents before the COVID-19 pandemic? How have the residents coped with the pandemic in their everyday lives and become resilient? What lessons can be incorporated in future housing development? What are the key socio-spatial implications of distancing measures? The aim of this paper is to explore the everyday life experiences of elderly (+70 years) living with young locals and refugees in SällBo before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper argues that the built dimension and the residential dimension [4] within this collaborative housing facilitate social integration as a process involving people from different generations and ethnical backgrounds.

Background of SällBo, Helsingborg

SällBo is situated in the neighborhood of Fredriksdal that was mostly built during the 1960s and 1970s and consists of multifamily buildings of 2–14 stories. The neighborhood was

originally inhabited mainly by Swedish working-class families with children. After the second generation moved out, many of the first generation stayed. This has eventually led to a high amount of elderly living in the area. As the area offered relatively cheap apartments, many newly arrived migrant families also moved in.

One of the buildings in the area is Fredriksdalshemmet that was originally built as an elderly-care facility (see [Figure 1](#)). After the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, it was used as care home (*Hem för vård eller boende* [5]) for unaccompanied minors who migrated to Sweden without parents in search of asylum. When consulting with tenants of other properties owned by Helsingborgshem before renovation, it was realized that “*the elderly people do not have everyday contact with other groups of society. They get all the information about society either by people who are as old as they are or by the Media*” (Savage, 2020a, Podcast min 4). While many elderly (+70 years) living in Fredriksdal felt isolated, young refugees needed affordable accommodation but had difficulty in getting first-hand contracts themselves. Helsingborgshem took the initiative of addressing the housing needs of these groups and included young Swedes, which resulted in the integration project SällBo, where elderly, young Swedes and refugees live together sharing common areas.

Fredriksdalshemmet was substantially renovated to become SällBo in 2019. Helsingborgshem formulated the project concept and the architectural program for the renovation and carried out the interior design in order to fulfill its purpose. 72 residents were selected by Helsingborgshem to live in the 51 apartments located in this four-storey building. Residents live in two-room rental apartments –with own kitchen, bathroom and sometimes balcony– and share large common spaces of around 580 m² where they have access to free Wi-Fi. SällBo offers rented apartments and secure housing (trygghetsboende), which is a rental housing concept for elderly that are too healthy for retirement homes but who want more protection and social cohesion than they can get in their current housing (Sveriges Allmännytt, 2020).

Mixing these two types of housing in one building justifies the different types of rental contracts that residents of SällBo have. Young Swedes and refugees have a two-year contract, while the contract for the elderly (+70 years) is permanent or for the period they want to stay. The rent is the same for both groups, and prices are slightly cheaper than market prices. At the moment, all 51 apartments are occupied. More than half of the residents are elderly (+70 years); ten residents are refugees who immigrated to Sweden as unaccompanied minors in 2015 or 2016 and are today aged 18–25 years old. Young Swedes, who are also between 18 and 25 years old, rent the remaining apartments.



The four-storey building to the right contains apartments and other smaller common spaces. Photo: ©Mooammed Wasim Yahia, March 2020

Figure 1.
General view of the building that was renovated for becoming SällBo collaborative housing. The one-storey building to the left contains a larger common area consisting of the lobby, common living room, common dining room and kitchen

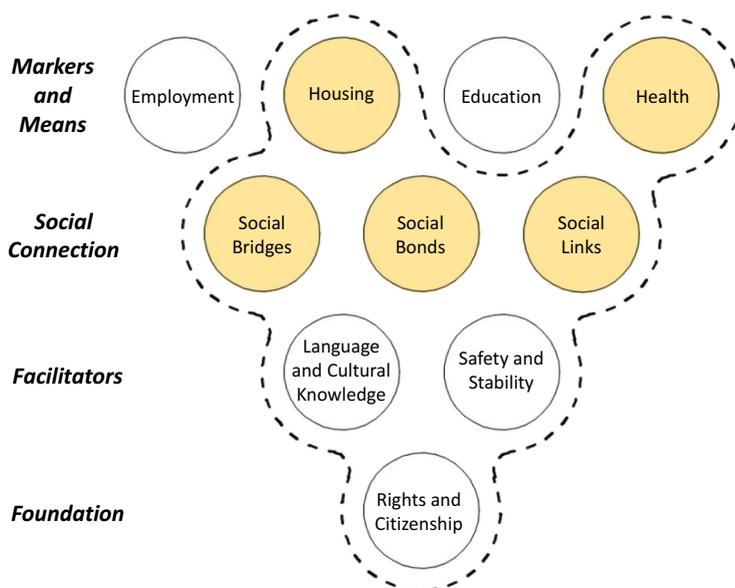
Theoretical framework

Social integration is often discussed as a social problem that only concerns migrant populations (Dahinden, 2016). Several scholars propose an analytical approach to integration that focuses on the whole population (Castles, 2010; Dahinden, 2016; Anderson, 2019). Amin (2012) works from a broader approach and argues that we live in a society of strangers in which (super) diversity constitutes the normality. This author also argues that the main challenge is to create policies and social practices that will contribute to building a society sustained by diversity. A shift, from integration as a problem of migrants toward an understanding of integration as a process involving everyone in a specific local context, focusing on the encounters of everyday life, is needed (Fox *et al.*, 2020). Henry Lefebvre examined the role of urban space and *everyday life* as modes of socialization. For Lefebvre, “social change is never restricted to the economy and ideology but also involves everyday life” (Stanek, 2011, p. 53). Hence, a truly revolutionary social transformation should have effects on daily life in creative ways (Stanek, 2011). The present paper attempts to explore how integration begins with encounters in the everyday life of people and in which types of spaces within the context of collaborative housing such encounters take place; thus, incorporating the spatial dimension in the conceptualisation and practice of integration.

Collaborative housing is a wider term than collective housing [6], and it is used internationally to embrace different types of housing with common spaces or facilities, referring to housing oriented toward collaboration (Vestbro, 2010a), solidarity among residents (Bresson and Labit, 2020) and participation in the re-development or design process (Fromm, 2012; Czischke and Huisman, 2018). Collaborative housing has been recognized as an international movement (Fromm, 2012), and it is becoming an integrative and interdisciplinary new domain of research in the European context (Lang *et al.*, 2018). The initiators of bottom-up collaborative housing projects are self-organized groups that exert strong participation through the design and development processes (Fromm, 2012; Bresson and Labit, 2020). Conversely, top-down collaborative housing projects are initiated by public sector organizations or nonprofit organizations aiming at addressing particular groups of people (Bresson and Labit, 2020). According to Czischke and Huisman (2018), collaborative housing initiated by institutions –a social housing organization, private developer or nonprofit organization– have emerged recently. The same authors highlight that in top-down collaborative housing the common spaces and their uses are co-designed with residents with funding from the institution responsible of the development or re-development.

Integration has mainly been discussed as a policy goal and as a project outcome, instead of integration as a process involving everyone in a local context with a long-term perspective. The European Social Protection Committee emphasizes that *social integration* is a multi-dimensional issue and highlights that housing is a key element for achieving it (Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2017). Ager and Strang (2008) propose a conceptual framework of integration focusing on four overall themes – foundation, facilitators, social connection and markers and means– and ten core domains as shown in Figure 2. Housing is one of the core domains within this framework.

In this paper, we consider that *social connection* is key for social integration between different types of people such as elderly, young Swedes and refugees that are the groups living in SällBo. According to Ager and Strang (2008), *social bonds* are connections between people of the same group – e.g. activities between elderly; *social bridges* are the social interactions that take place between different groups – e.g. activities between elderly, young Swedes and refugees. For Ager and Strang (2008, p. 181), *social links* “refer to the connection between individuals and structures of the state, such as government services” –e.g. residents of SällBo and Helsingborgshem.



Social integration through social connection

Figure 2. Interlinking integration domains through collaborative housing. Elaborated by the authors based on the conceptual framework defining core domains of integration by [Ager and Strang \(2008\)](#)

[Czischke and Huisman \(2018\)](#) carried out empirical studies on integration through collaborative housing in the Startblok project located in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Residents of Startblok are adults between 18–27 years old, 50% are lower-income Dutch young adults and the other 50% are refugees. Drawing on [Ager and Strang \(2008\)](#), the authors argue that social bonds happened between refugees of the same ethnic group and cultural backgrounds and among Dutch residents due to belonging to the same age group and household type. On the other hand, social bridges between refugees and Dutch tenants were created due to structured self-organization and daily interactions among all residents. In Sweden, from a design perspective, recent research has attempted to develop “*housing proposals at the intersection of migrants, students and an ageing population, in a context of sustainability*” using co-creation processes ([Tham et al., 2019](#)). Hence, the potential of studying collaborative housing as a key element for social integration of the three groups mentioned above should be re-examined in the Swedish context.

Building on [Ager and Strang \(2008\)](#), our underlying assumption is that collaborative housing has the potential to interlink eight domains of their integration framework –namely rights and citizenship, language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability, social bridges, social bonds, social links, housing and health– when facilitating integration of refugees (See [Figure 2](#)). Living in collaborative housing such as SällBo –that focuses on integration – implies a process of mutual learning from people with different background and life experiences. Regarding the elderly residents, our underlying assumption is that collaborative housing connects five of these domains –namely social bridges, social bonds, social links, housing and health, coloured in [Figure 2](#). Helsingborgshem expects that elderly residents socializing and living happier at SällBo might be less sick and use less public services ([Savage, 2020b](#)). In this paper, we argue that social connection created in everyday life at SällBo’s common spaces triggers processes of social integration.

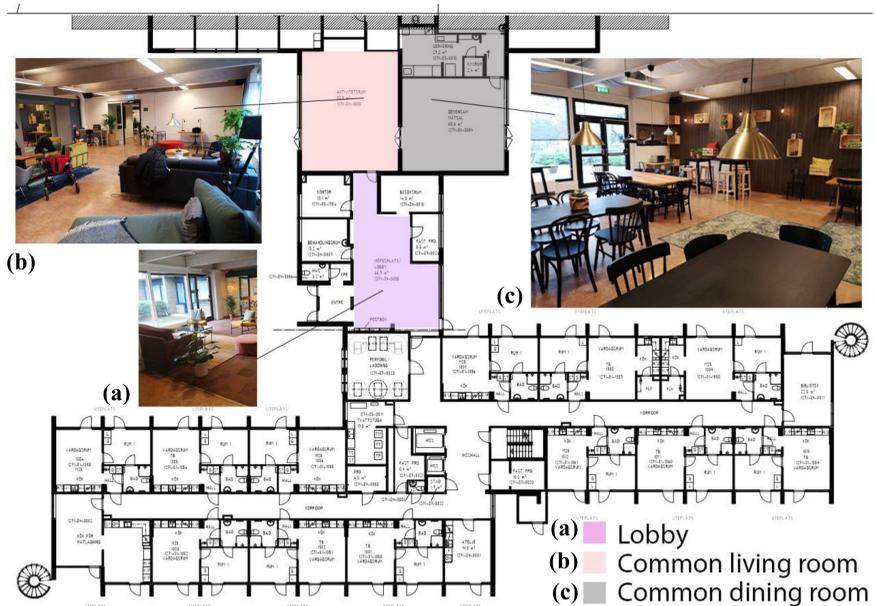
Resilience refers to the coping responses and adaptive capacity of *social systems*, natural systems or the built environment and social learning for improving mitigation and preparedness for the next natural event ([Cutter et al., 2008](#)) or health crisis in this case.

Although the service and care for the elderly is important and valuable, sometimes it seems to limit the *agency* of elderly residents. “A person’s ‘agency freedom’ refers to what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important” (Sen, 1985, p. 203). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the institutional support decreased in SällBo, and the elderly had to develop *coping responses* and adapt their everyday lives to the crisis. These coping responses emerge in the context of people’s everyday life. This paper focusing on the everyday life experiences of the elderly residents of SällBo before and during the COVID-19 pandemic is a first attempt to explore the interplay between the five dimensions of the integration framework mentioned above and the importance of the spatial dimension in the conceptualization of social integration.

Method

The paper is based on empirical investigations from the perspective of the elderly residents of SällBo. The main method is case study research (Yin, 2014), including observations of settings, document/video analysis, an online diary completed by residents and semi-structured interviews conducted with the residents. The qualitative inquiry focuses on the everyday life experiences of the residents of SällBo, bringing recognition to the experiences of elderly residents. The compilation of material was done in two stages. The first one was done before the pandemic, and the second one was done during the pandemic. The secondary references that have been included in the analysis consist of institutional websites, videos and a podcast about SällBo made by Helsingborgshem and by the BBC (see Helsingborgshem, 2020b; BBC World Service, 2020; Savage, 2020a). The interdisciplinary research team includes the disciplines of architecture, engineering and social work. Researchers from architecture and engineering observed spatial qualities in SällBo before the COVID-19 pandemic. For this paper, observations are used to provide a general description of the building, focusing on the larger common area that comprises (a) the lobby, (b) the common living room and (c) the common dining room/kitchen (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Illustration of the larger common area located in ground floor showing (a) lobby, (b) common living room and (c) common kitchen and dining room. Elaborated by the authors based on architectural drawings provided by Helsingborgshem and photos ©Moohammed Wasim Yahia, March 2020



A researcher from architecture and a researcher from social work set up an online diary, conducted semi-structured interviews during the pandemic and carried out the qualitative analysis. Since the compilation process was interrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19, the residents were asked to complete the online diary voluntarily and if they were interested in being interviewed. This paper is based on the analysis of the empirical data from diary entries made by ten residents and the narratives of residents collected through eight semi-structured interviews – six interviews with elderly and two with young residents.

Discussing narratives of regional inequality, [Willett \(2016\)](#) argues that narratives of place contain three elements: the past, the present and the future. In our paper, the semi-structured interviews focus on *the past* – the four months before the pandemic – *the present experiences* occurring during the pandemic and *the perceptions of the future* – insights for future housing design. Researchers focus commonly on past and present perceptions on groups and places; however, interviewed persons also relate their narratives to the future, obstacles and possibilities. During the last months, narratives on COVID-19 relate to this global catastrophe in terms of possibilities ([Harari, 2020](#)).

A reason to focus on the perspectives of elderly residents is a critical statement against dominant perceptions about this group as vulnerable and as beneficiaries of care and assistance: in other words, targets of special care support. We see elderly as actors that exert their agency based on their long-term life experience. The pandemic context conditioned that interviews could not be done face-to-face. Hence, interviews were made by telephone and recorded with the authorisation of the interviewee. Interviews were transcribed, and first level thematic coding was carried out using NVivo 12. Triangulation of researchers and data from different sources –document/video analysis, observation of settings, entries to the online diary and semi-structured interviews– was carried out to achieve validity in the case study.

Findings and discussion

SällBo: a new type of collaborative housing

SällBo can be understood as a new type of collaborative housing because it combines safe housing for the elderly (*trygghetsboende*) and municipal public housing with the purpose of addressing unwanted isolation and social integration whilst making affordable housing more accessible to refugees and young people. SällBo sets the stage for different types of residents –elderly, young Swedes and refugees– to collaborate and socialize. According to the description of the project manager, Helsingborgshem's main requirements are that the applicants belong to one of the three types of residents and their willingness to socialize with neighbours at least two hours per week. In the case of refugees, they should have a residence permit, speak Swedish and know the society ([Helsingborgshem, 2020b](#)). Another requirement for residents of SällBo is to participate in a monthly house meeting and take collective decisions regarding issues concerning the house through direct democracy.

Regarding the project initiator, SällBo can be considered a top-down project because an institution in consultation with a reference group initiated it, whereas the future residents were not involved. Instead of a self-organized group carrying out the self-management of the house –doing activities such as cleaning common spaces, recruitment of new residents– Helsingborgshem manages the project as a rental estate in which the cleaning of common spaces is outsourced.

I am interested in taking care of the kitchen/kitchens and cleaning together with others, but there is someone who has taken this [task] and does not want help. There is a lack of basic community and organization or conditions for participation. Things are privatized more than appropriate (Diary 10).

Helsingborgshem decided the main requirements for recruiting future residents of SällBo because it is a project with an initial two-year period. They expect that residents might agree on rules regarding the use of the common spaces (Helsingborgshem, 2020b) and decide later on to what extent they would like to take responsibility over self-management of some aspects of SällBo. There is a project coordinator based at Helsingborgshem and a full-time housing host based at SällBo “to act as a facilitator and moderator” (Robertson, 2020) and acting as the contact person between the residents and Helsingborgshem.

Economic and social reasons, a change in the own life situation give the initial impulse to search for another housing alternative; SällBo provides the opportunity, and the conditions were established by Helsingborgshem. These conditions include belonging to the category of people classified as elderly, to be interested in this housing form, willing to share some spaces and have weekly social contact with neighbors.

Common spaces in SällBo

The lobby is the first space that welcomes visitors when entering the building, and it is acting both as an entrance and as a meeting spot. The meeting spot is facing the entrance door and has a couch and some chairs as shown in Figure 3(a). A visitor can easily notice that the lobby functions as a spine that connects all parts of the building in the ground floor. Moreover, this lobby divides the building into two separate zones: (1) a larger common area that consists of a common living room, a common dining room and a large kitchen; and (2) a private zone consisting of apartments and some other common spaces such as a workshop, atelier, library, training room, TV room, a kitchen on each floor, etc. Next to the meeting spot, there is a daytime guest room with some furniture for receiving guests during short visits. This guest room is connected to the entrance so that visitors do not need to enter other parts of the building. The lobby also has some rooms such as a storage room, project coordinator office and toilets. In addition, the lobby has physical connection to an outdoor terrace that can be used for outdoor activities such as eating, sitting, meeting friends, organizing parties, etc. (see Figure 3).

Next to the lobby, there is a large common living room. This space is expected to encourage different types of activities for larger groups as shown in Figure 3(b). The arrangement of the furniture provides scattered spots that can also provide semi-privacy to the residents for gathering in smaller groups. The living room also has a physical connection to an outdoor terrace that can be used for outdoor activities.

Crossing the common living room, visitors encounter a common dining room. This space is divided into a large common dining room and a large restaurant-style kitchen (see Figure 3(c)). The common dining room itself has a physical connection to an outdoor terrace that can be used for outdoor activities (eating, sitting, relaxing, organizing parties, etc.) with a small area protected against rain, snow, etc.

Residents' everyday life experiences before COVID-19 in SällBo

Searching affordable housing alternatives to counteract unwanted isolation. Societal representations of elderly (+70 years) as vulnerable individuals in need of some care have framed the conceptualization, organization and some of the intended routines at SällBo. A plausible reason for this might be that SällBo includes the service home dimension (*trygghetsboende*). These representations seem to limit unconsciously the agency of the elderly. A common feature of the interviewed residents is that they were feeling isolated living in bigger apartments or houses or were going through a moment of change in their lives.

You do not understand that when you are 65 yourself and suddenly realize that: well now I belong to a group that includes all kinds of people within a wide age range and then you are treated; either you

are not seen at all or you are treated as someone who does not really understand, as someone that has not been part of society and I think that... for me it was a shock, but I insisted on being the person I have always been... and I am a politician and journalist, interested in society and interested in theatre and music and books and I am never going to give it up. And there they should not come and think that playing accordion and offering cinnamon buns is enough (Int. 09).

People currently living in SällBo learnt about the project through different channels of communication. Direct recruitment was done by Helsingborgshem through advertising to people registered in the housing queue of this municipal company via email. Advertising about SällBo appeared in the main website of Helsingborgshem so that people searching for housing through the internet could easily find this alternative. Indirect recruitment included people not related or targeted by Helsingborgshem who read reportages about SällBo and passed the information about it to their relatives.

The narratives of the residents question established representations of elderly people as vulnerable and in need of assistance in their everyday lives. The elderly (+70 years) exerted their agency in the process of searching for a new housing alternative. After having evaluated their previous housing situation, they searched for a new apartment based on different criteria according to their own stage in life and socioeconomic situation, took the decision of applying for an apartment; and later on, decided to move to SällBo.

Yes, there were many parameters, I had thought for a while how I would do, if I were to sell my apartment and looked around where I could live and never found anything that I would enjoy... and so came this information about SällBo and I thought it was easily interesting and then I applied and so there was an interview... Yes, both loneliness and that I was stuck in a condominium alone in the city... yes, it is a lot of loneliness it is about, you have a condominium and live alone in the city... but also everything that needs to be fixed, then you have to cover all costs, so it is a bit about the economy, you can also say (Int. 04).

Before moving to SällBo, one of the residents was living alone and sometimes did not speak to anybody during days and that affected her (Savage, 2020b). Apart from loneliness due to social isolation, elderly living alone with a retirement pension in condominiums or family houses have to pay operational costs, maintenance and high renovation costs themselves. Banks do not lend money to elderly people who lack good economy. Renovation or maintenance expenses affect the financial situation of the elderly and can even compromise their life savings.

I lived in an apartment not far but it is so that my husband died [recently] and partly it became too expensive where I lived, so I read about SällBo and thought it was a great opportunity to have people around me... so it was not a difficult decision (Int. 02).

Hence, SällBo provided a unique combination of opportunities for the elderly such as affordable housing, becoming part of a community to counteract unwanted isolation and access to common spaces for socializing. When residents were asked about comparing positive and negative aspects of their previous housing with SällBo, their positive experience of living in SällBo was evident.

No, it is not possible to compare, this is a wonderful place to live (Int. 01).

Some respondents miss living in a more central location because it takes them longer to access facilities such as a pharmacy or a grocery store, which are currently lacking in Fredriksdal neighborhood. Other respondents assessed their previous housing as negative due to the lack of social interaction with previous neighbours even if they were living in bigger apartments or houses and even if they were living in mixed neighborhoods in terms of different types of residents and generations. A reason for this might be the lack of common spaces and activities for socializing between neighbors in residential areas.

The residential and built dimensions facilitating social connection. After the recruitment process finished, the selected residents moved in November and December 2019. Unwanted loneliness due to social isolation is a current challenge in other developed countries, and therefore, delegations from Canada, Italy, Germany, South Korea among others have carried out study visits to SällBo (Robertson, 2020). SällBo has also caught attention from international media from Germany, Italy, United States, South Korea and Slovenia (Helsingborgsbem, 2020a) and the BBC from the United Kingdom (BBC World Service, 2020).

The original architectural design of *Frediksdalshemmet* facilitated Helsingborgshem to allocate specific uses to rooms of different sizes located on different floors, which today constitute the different types of common spaces. These common spaces set the stage for different types of social interactions among residents (see Figure 4).

Yes, I think the design of the house. . . there are many different rooms, there are always people sitting in the lobby, there can be some people and you sit there and talk a little and then there is always someone passing by and then another person comes and talks a little. . . It helps, you could say. However, not all rooms have been equally successful but it is a process to figure out how to use them. . . (Int. 03).

Residents recall that socializing started in a natural way immediately after people finished moving into SällBo in December. Someone took the initiative of baking many cakes, place an announcement calling for coffee break – or Swedish *fika* [7]– in the notice board, people gathered in the common dining room located in the ground floor and started speaking to each other. Culturally, Swedish people are known for being shy (Savage, 2020b), private and self-sufficient. Economic independence from family and relatives was possible due to a welfare state taking care of people’s needs since childhood until old age. Therefore, socializing or asking for help regarding small chores or tasks can be a big step. During the interviews, residents state that socializing is a subjective concept that means different things for different people.

It was some common parties; it was a lot of socializing. We used the common spaces a lot (Int. 01).



Figure 4. Residents of SällBo in the common dining room rolling trigger balls for self-myofascial release during training led by Qi Yogic Arts. Photo: ©Rebecka Chytraeus, February 2020

Some residents are interested in socializing in smaller groups whereas others prefer bigger groups. Although residents are expected to socialize at least two hours a week with their neighbors, they choose for what purpose, with whom, where and when they want to meet and interact with others.

Before the [COVID-19] crisis, I spent a lot of time with people in group activities. There was a different distribution of people depending on the activity . . . The garden group was more mixed both regarding gender, age and background. When we have coffee together, we are many people and have the largest mix [of people] (Diary 07).

Some everyday life activities of residents take place in the common spaces of SällBo as different modes of socialization between residents of different age groups. More accessible, well-connected and larger common spaces have the role of facilitating both spontaneous encounters as well as planned activities for larger groups of residents. More private, less connected and smaller common spaces facilitate social interactions of smaller groups of residents living in a specific floor or who share some particular interest.

If you do not want to hang out, you do not go out . . . If you want to hang out, just get out so there is always someone who wants to sit and talk. . . I have never experienced anything like this before, so I mean it is very nice to hang out and at the same time speaking and eating, you get to learn to know people as well (Int 01).

The lobby of the building controls access to the house and facilitates daily and spontaneous encounters. The lobby, the common living room and common dining room seem to be the most preferred and used common spaces according to the interviews. All of these spaces are located in the larger common area on the ground floor, which is accessible through the main entrance for residents, guests and any organization visiting the building (see Figure 3). The clear division between the social and private areas makes it easier for residents to decide for themselves how they would like to interact with each other.

Collaborative housing is a housing concept that presupposes social interaction in everyday life between residents; triggering therefore processes of *social connection* based on social bonds, social bridges and social links as shown in Figure 5.

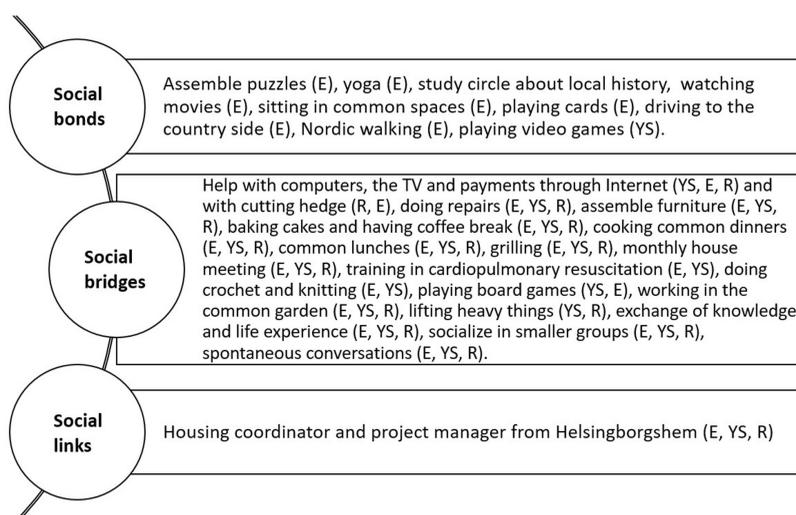


Figure 5. Social connection between residents in terms of social bonds, social bridges and social links that have developed at SällBo. The figure details activities and residents involved, where E: elderly, YS: young Swedes, R: refugees

So far, social bonds have been mostly created among the elderly due to spontaneous encounters and organized activities. Social bridges have emerged through socializing among the three groups of residents and through concrete support, which facilitates and enriches everyday life. One resident teaches how to drive to one of the refugees. A young refugee helps an elderly person with cutting the hedge of his small garden. There has also been knowledge exchange among generations such as how to take care of indoor plants; young residents help some elderly with their computers or refugees regarding how to pay invoices using the internet (see [Figure 5](#)). Residents were planning to establish social links with other organizations in addition to Helsingborgshem, but the COVID-19 interrupted these plans.

Social connection in people's everyday life makes processes of social integration possible within concrete spaces. SällBo's common spaces were planned according to normal conditions. One of the residents compares SällBo with living in a small village in the countryside.

You belong together when you live here (Int. 05).

Spontaneous encounters and conversations between the three groups of residents take place mainly in the corridors, through balconies, in the lobby or in the common garden. The breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic challenged SällBo's initial plans and the ongoing processes of social integration.

Residents' coping responses in everyday life during the COVID-19 pandemic at SällBo

The COVID-19 pandemic started in March, and the [Public Health Agency of Sweden \(2020\)](#) gave the directives in form of recommendations on how to avoid getting the virus. The main recommendation targeted social interactions between people; social distancing became the key recommendation. Swedish elderly (+70 years) belong to a generation who has high trust in the Swedish authorities because they have enjoyed the benefits of well-functioning welfare institutions. Following recommendations from the Public Health Agency of Sweden, Helsingborgshem stopped all organized activities and visits to SällBo and recommended social distancing to all residents, especially to the elderly. This decision was based on the existing knowledge that elderly belong to a group with high mortality risk. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, some routines based on closer social contacts had been established. Initially, residents coping response was to cancel all activities in the common spaces.

Now unfortunately there is the Corona outbreak, right. And that makes us not to gather in the common spaces, at this moment, many are very scared. But before the outbreak we had small parties in the kitchen and we actually had really a great time (Int 01).

Previous activities that implied many people sitting together were canceled, such as house meetings and the study circle about local and regional history. During a few weeks, the residents adapted their everyday life practices to recommendations such as social distancing made by the Public Health Agency of Sweden. Residents decided to reduce the frequency of different invitations to celebrate people's birthdays and similar social activities.

For me, the country of origin is irrelevant. I feel free to socialize with everyone. Lovely and ambitious young people, which we have unfortunately seen very little during the corona period. Partly because they study and partly, I think, that they take a lot of consideration to us in the elderly group (Diary 04).

Some younger residents of SällBo decided to avoid social contact with the elderly because they were studying or working in places that could be considered higher risk places for contracting the virus that causes COVID-19. Later on, residents started searching for ways in which they could continue their social interaction in a safe way.

We received recommendations that you are not allowed to let people in if they are not healthy and they must not be in the common areas. . . but when we organized ourselves, we had joint activities, parties, every Wednesday we grilled (Int. 04).

Residents' coping responses were different, related to their age and health conditions. Regarding the elderly, there were two different types of coping responses. The first group of elderly with previous health problems decided not to attend indoors activities, and some joined outdoor gatherings.

So, the social that we can have here in the house, maybe a little more small- scale, it becomes extra important, we still need to be careful (Int. 05).

The second group decided to organize social activities according to the new conditions. Instead of avoiding social contact, they carried out activities taking care of *physical distancing* among each other but preserving *social connection*. Such common practices contributed to processes of social integration within a small community. These coping responses were possible because of the availability and access to a variety of common spaces indoors and outdoors that residents appropriated and used in different ways. There have not been cases of residents getting sick due to COVID-19 until September 2020 (Robertson, 2020).

Use of common spaces and processes of social integration during the pandemic

The indoor common spaces that are being used during the COVID-19 pandemic are the lobby, the TV room, the common dining room, the atelier and sometimes the kitchens. Some apartments have access to a small balcony that facilitate socializing briefly with neighbors who are in their way to enter or leave the building and to communicate with people from outside SällBo whilst keeping physical distance.

I live on the top floor and if I want to be alone, I am there; I have a balcony. . . If I want to meet people, not always, but usually there are people in the building. We have a hobby room so we see each other there sometimes. I use what is available; there are nice people who live here (Int. 02).

Common spaces that residents are not using during the pandemic are the guest room, and they have limited the use of the common living room for larger groups –e.g. house meetings have been canceled. Hence, small gatherings of different groups such as playing cards or chess groups, movie group, canasta and puzzle groups and workshop group, among others have been active during the pandemic.

I feel that I use SällBo's common spaces more [during the pandemic] because I avoid leaving the building and instead I try to do more at home (Diary 05).

Residents are using social media to communicate about spontaneous gatherings for having *fika* in smaller groups or other activities. They also use social media to communicate with each other and keep track if anyone who has not been seen for a couple of days is healthy or not.

I am cautious not to put myself in difficult situations. However, I am part of the group that often socializes, now it is so Corona has also changed things, but we are a group of people who. . . it has happened so that this large group meet quite often (Int 03).

The lobby continues being the space where spontaneous and short social encounters take place. People who want to meet others sit in the lobby, some read the newspaper there, others show up for picking up their post and others enter or leave the house, creating a dynamic of spontaneous social encounters that helps maintaining social connection and control regarding who is healthy and visible or who is missing.

Indoors, close to the entrance . . . there are even activities outdoors, minimum once a week there is somebody that lights the barbecue, so we gather there, eat a little and speak a little (Int. 01).

One of the residents' coping responses during the summer was to organize outdoor activities, and SällBo's common garden became the preferred space for many residents. This might be because the size of the common garden allowed keeping physical distance and social connection whilst enjoying the fresh air, and this was considered safer by the residents to avoid catching COVID-19. A group of around 25 residents of different ages gathered for celebrating Midsummer and later on for weekly grilling, working in the garden or sitting on the terrace, drinking coffee and talking.

I mean... It sounds awful... *thank you and praise* that Corona came, because of Corona we have stayed in the house in different ways: maybe people had gone out with their friends; instead, we have stayed and we have hung out at home. We have celebrated at least once a week, we have celebrated the Swedish Flag Day, we have celebrated everything possible... it has been nice weather, and we have been sitting outside. Midsummer we have now celebrated at least four days in a row (Int. 04).

Sharing and helping each other during the pandemic have also been coping responses of the residents in their everyday life. The young people and some elderly have offered to buy food for those neighbors who do not want to risk going outside (Robertson, 2020). If they grill and someone has no food, there is extra food to include that person. A small group of elderly residents put puzzles together and shared the costs for driving a private car during the summer to visit places like Simrishamn, Österlen and Kivik with beautiful landscape. Being able to leave SällBo and enjoy their freedom together contributed to their sense of well-being.

I walk every morning, there are very nice paths around here to walk... so, it is ok. I have my walker that I go around with (Int.10).

The pandemic has triggered the individual and collective agency of residents of SällBo not only for organizing themselves and continuing to socialize in a safe way but also regarding how they can appropriate, adapt and improve common spaces and impact their everyday life in creative ways.

Insights for future design of collaborative housing based on the lived experience of SällBo's residents

SällBo's residents highlight that some design aspects of the renovation of Fredriksdalshemmet have been missed such as the echo that makes it difficult to follow a conversation in the common living room. They also claim that some soft furniture in the common living room is not suitable for the elderly. Hence, some improvements are needed in the common living room so that people can sit comfortably and use this room for different types of activities. Residents' current experience of living in SällBo adds to their previous knowledge of other housing alternatives, which should be considered as a valuable input for future design of collaborative houses like this.

Add a kitchen to each floor, common areas around the entrance so that there are possibilities for group activities; so, they can sit together and talk... definitely not long corridors, find other ways to build it... that the common spaces are placed in the middle and not as they are now... And when you build make sure that you meet those who are interested to move in and create focus groups with them... there are many experiences and thoughts in this house... I mean here there is a lot of knowledge. I mean it's so easy to involve people [in the design], during the pre-stage of the collective housing (Int 02).

When inhabiting spaces, a natural process is to assess how such spaces suit people's needs and aspirations. Residents wish they had been involved in the co-design of SällBo at an earlier stage. They also recommend that houses such as SällBo should be considered as a *process* instead of a finished product that is delivered to the future residents.

I wish they had more nerves to wait, wait for the residents, just do a very simple furnishing from the beginning and then take in the residents' opinions. There is a lot of life experience in this group. And that you are brave enough to say 'but we will wait to decorate here' and ask: 'What do you need, we have 6 rooms, if you had to decide? What should we use them for?' That you had the courage to wait, ask, and collect the opinions of residents instead of presenting everything just furnished . . . for the kitchens they had also calculated exactly what you need and how it will be used for. So, you cannot control adults in that way. . . I mean this courage lacked (Int. 03).

Residents criticize the implicit modes of socialization concretized in a spatial distribution that conditions daily encounters. They have started discussing about the common spaces and how to make them more suitable for their needs before the pandemic caused Helsingborgshem to stop organized activities.

Now we know the premises, some rooms are not used at all. You could tear down some [room] and create a [bigger] studio. . . we have said that we will start to give our opinion so that we get some change. Now the old men have got a workshop and they have got workbenches, someone is sitting and painting, someone is doing something else (Int. 08).

Residents question the current practice of elderly-care facilities that separate the elderly from other age groups, proposing indirectly a new approach to social integration through collaborative housing.

I would really encourage not to only place all elderly people alone. . . why not mixing different age groups. It is so nice that there are young people around too. It is so awful to gather the elderly people in one place. . . and everyone is more or less demented, it is so terrible to be +70 years and still quite alert. So, meeting young people who can help you and you can talk to is so invaluable (Int. 10).

From the residents' narratives, it is possible to realize that the pandemic has triggered residents agency at individual and collective levels when searching for creative ways of coping with the crisis whilst continuing to socialize and develop social connections. The ongoing processes of social integration have included the spatial dimension in which a well-located lobby, spacious and diverse indoor common spaces, several kitchens, balconies and a large common garden have become essential social infrastructure for this micro-community.

Conclusions

In this paper, we explore the spatial dimension of social integration at the micro-scale level focusing on the case study SällBo. In the Swedish context, public institutions or third sector organizations are supposed to carry out integration activities focusing only on migrants. Considering the diversity of contemporary societies, it is crucial to rethink social integration in relation to current societal challenges such as segregation, unwanted isolation and increased poverty expressed in the limited access to affordable housing. We understand *social integration as a process* that involves people from different generations and ethnical backgrounds, which takes place in common spaces and everyday life as different modes of socialization. These modes of socialization are possible due to the conditions and possibilities created by SällBo for its residents, who have been living during this specific historical moment of global pandemic.

We understand SällBo as a new type of collaborative housing that offers opportunities for residents to interact, socialize, integrate and bring about social change. Studying SällBo at the micro-scale level disclosed the economic struggles that low-pensioned elderly (+70 years) face in the context of lack of affordable housing in Sweden today. Residents' decisions of moving to SällBo have addressed access to affordable housing as well as a search for social contacts and social recognition. The dominant discourse regarding the elderly (+70 years) is

that they belong to a vulnerable group in need of assistance. In their reflections, the residents criticize these institutionalized perceptions of the elderly and reclaim their role in society. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided residents an opportunity to exert their agency when developing coping responses to adapt to the crisis in their everyday lives.

Disaster sometimes knocks down institutions and structures and suspends private life, leaving a broader view of what lies beyond. The task before us is to recognize the possibilities visible through that gateway and endeavor to bring them into the realm of the everyday (Solnit, 2020, p. 313).

The COVID-19 crisis interrupted the normality of people's everyday life and institutionalized practices. This crisis caused a moment of institutional vacuum, which elicited building social bonds and social bridges between residents. This enhanced social connection has reinforced a sense of local community. Social connection created in everyday life at SällBo's common spaces has triggered processes of social integration.

More community today than when Corona started, it is in the back of our minds, not so spontaneous; everyone knows it is risky; the attitude has changed (Int. 07).

Hence, an important conclusion from this study is that social integration happens through encounters in everyday life in common spaces –both indoors and outdoors. Inhabiting and sharing common spaces in a search of coping responses during the pandemic have triggered processes of redefinition and appropriation of common spaces –both indoors and outdoors.

Based on Ager and Strang (2008) framework of social integration, we have explored the interplay between five dimensions when studying SällBo, which are *collaborative housing*, social bridges, social bonds, social links and health. Ager and Strang framework was created to understand the particular case of integration of migrants (refugees). We have applied the framework to study social integration as a process that concerns elderly, young Swedes and refugees. Such an approach contributes to understanding and valuing the diversity of contemporary societies.

The small apartments and common spaces facilitate encounters in everyday life, enhancing social connection. The new situation has opened for residents' involvement in decisions regarding the organization and use of common spaces, assuming responsibility in relation to the pandemic. Further research should follow processes of appropriation and adaptation of common spaces that might be carried out by the residents of SällBo. Researchers should incorporate the experiences of residents living in different types of housing alternatives during the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences of coping with the crisis in everyday life will contribute to rethinking post-pandemic housing and to fostering a more integrated community.

Notes

1. The tenure form referred to here is *bostadsrätt*, which is a cooperative tenant-owned apartment (share) where the price of the share of the cooperative is regulated by the market.
2. The name SällBo is a word blending the sounds and combining the meanings of the Swedish words for companionship (*sällskap*) and living (*bo*) (Robertson, 2020).
3. Rents vary from 4,620 SEK to 5,850 SEK (Robertson, 2020), equivalent to €450 and €570, respectively according to currency exchange on 9 December, 2020.
4. The notions of *built dimension* and *residential dimension* are based on the work of Fromm (2012).
5. *Home for care or housing* is a type of municipal institution for children, young adults, adults or families with children that focuses on nursing, support or education (Inspektionen för vård och omsorg-IVO, 2015).
6. For research on the history and development of Swedish collective housing –*kollektivhus*– see Vestbro (2010b, 2014), Grip *et al.* (2015), Blomberg and Kärnekull (2019) among others. For a contemporary account of collaborative housing projects in Sweden, see Westholm (2019).

7. Fika: is a Swedish word for coffee break. It is a tradition to have fika in the morning (around 10.00) and in the afternoon (around 15.00) at workplaces and other types of facilities that gather people.

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