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In Search of Alternative Housing Solutions - When the Collaborative Economy Meets Housing

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Abstract. Collaborative housing constitutes a premise for groups of individuals to self-manage and self-build their own housing according to their own needs. It creates opportunities for social innovation and embracing other sharing practices such as shared childcare, mobility, energy production and consumption, growing food, cooking and eating together, etc. In this paper we present the efforts of Pobail -- a collaborative housing group -- as they build a shared understanding and vision for future alternative housing arrangements in their city. The paper is informed by 14 months of participant observation taken from monthly meetings and a visioning workshop the authors facilitated. These efforts are inscribed in the wider national Irish landscape, where the current national housing strategy, legislation, financing are not supportive of alternative housing scenarios.

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1 Introduction

Collaborative housing is a model of housing in which residents self-manage and often self-build their own dwellings to meet their individual and community needs. While common for many years in Scandinavia, USA, Australia, Germany and the Netherlands, these alternative models of living (collaborative housing, cooperative housing, co-living) have not been supported so far in Ireland. Developer-led housing continues to dominate the country's portfolio, despite the country's massive investment in property during the Celtic Tiger¹ years, and the 2007 economic collapse that exposed the inherent faults of this housing provision strategy. In the past number of years, a new wave of interest in the self-provision of housing has been gaining momentum in Ireland. As the country returns to economic stability, housing prices have risen again and countrywide rental prices have reached unseen heights. This has led to a steady increase in national homelessness figures, officially reported to exceed 10,000 in recent months. These issues surrounding housing in Ireland have led to renewed interest in alternative housing models, as well as in the self-provision of housing.

Our study examines potential ways to develop digital technologies to support the collaborative housing movement in the Irish context. The study encompasses two levels: at national level, we are involved, together with a social architecture research group, other collaborative housing groups, housing associations and local authorities, in developing an information infrastructure for the public interested in alternative housing solutions. In this paper we present findings from our local level work with a community housing action group, Pobail, based in a city with approximately 100,000 inhabitants, as they try to navigate the uncharted landscape of collaborative housing in Ireland. Formulating a shared vision in their collaborative housing endeavour is an issue consistently discussed by Pobail, as this extends into many domains, from location and land purchase, to finance and legislation, as well as issues related to group structure and commitment.

2 Literature Review

Our study builds on existing literature focusing on the collaborative economy, collaborative consumption and collaborative production (Botsman and Rogers 2011; Belk 2014; Lampinen et al. 2016). Collaborative housing - an umbrella term including a variety of self-organised and collectively managed housing models (Lang, Carriou and Czischke 2018) - creates opportunities for social innovation and embracing other sharing practices such as shared childcare, mobility, energy production and consumption, growing food, cooking and eating together, etc.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_Tiger

Research on collaborative housing stems mainly from urban planning, but is also well represented in human geography, sociology, sustainability and aging studies (Lang Carriou and Czischke 2018).

Ethnographically-informed studies on various co-housing communities are wide-spread in disciplines like urban planning and sociology (Brysch 2018; Ruiu 2016). However, ethnographies focusing on community formation and development of collaborative housing arrangements are scarce. One example is that of Sullivan (2016), who joined an intentional community, undertaking 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork with the Sunrise Place group in Texas, following their endeavour at an interim stage. In this study, Sullivan focuses on power balance and the interplay between the individual and the community in creating rules for future living arrangements. While these issues are similar, our study focuses on how group vision is established in a context where there is no history of collaborative housing.

The lack of a dedicated information infrastructure to connect all the interested actors and the lack of existing models to follow are hindering the efforts of emerging collaborative housing groups. This happened in the UK 10-12 years ago (see *The Cohousing Approach to 'Lifetime Neighbourhoods'*, 2008), and is happening again in our context. While researching and discussing available information, emerging groups are striving to create a shared language and a shared understanding of the various steps and of their specific challenges, both at local community level and at national level. Given the fact that such community groups are forming, disbanding and re-assembling occasionally, and their membership is permanently changing, forming shared understandings is difficult, even at local community level.

The Common Information Spaces conceptual framework, introduced by Schmidt and Bannon (1992) as a space that includes “the artefacts accessible to a cooperative ensemble”, together with “the meaning attributed to these artefacts by the actors”, can expose our group’s efforts to formulate a shared vision. The formation of shared understandings in these spaces happens as people interact in the same location - through “looking over each other’s shoulder”, peripheral awareness (Bannon and Bødker, 1997) or at a distance, in online spaces.

3 Methodology

This study uses ethnographically-informed research methods (observations, informal interviews and document analysis) to map the progress of the Pobail group, as well as the challenges faced by the group as they endeavour to create one of Ireland’s first collaborative housing developments.

For this study, the authors have undertaken 14 months of participant observation with the local collaborative housing action group, and have participated in several co-housing networking events at a national level. Pobail was established in May 2018 and hosts monthly meetings in various locations

across the city. Two of the authors have attended all monthly meetings and events hosted by Pobail to date. They have also been involved in the organisation of public events (talks and workshops), and have collected data through informal interviews, questionnaires, workshop activities and group discussions. Online and offline document analysis is also being undertaken, focusing on national and international experiences and attitudes toward housing, more specifically, co-housing.

The ultimate aim of this research is to explore how collaborative housing action groups can be supported in their endeavours to connect, maintain and sustain interaction, and make steps towards realising their goals of creating collaborative housing solutions to the current housing crisis in Ireland. Our paper builds on the first author's research notes from monthly meetings, and on materials collected during the workshop we facilitated in February 2019, entitled 'Developing Our Collaborative Housing Vision'. This workshop was advertised on the group's open Facebook page, and participants in the workshop were recruited through the Facebook page and through a dedicated Eventbrite page. There were twenty participants at the workshop, many of whom had been occasional attendees of the monthly meetings. In contrast monthly meetings had on average maximum attendance of ten.

The workshop organised by Pobail aimed to establish a group vision, which would then become a 'Vision Document'. The vision document is to be used as the group's 'charter', and also a means of recruiting new members with similar interests. The workshop consisted of three activities: a survey, slightly adapted from the OneSharedHouse project²; a brainstorming session; and a group discussion on 'Wishes & Resources', for which we used question cards to reveal the pool of available resources as well as amenities participants wished to have. The paper-based survey was completed anonymously. The purpose of the survey was to allow participants to express their personal opinion on various issues and beliefs related to collaborative housing. For example, the survey asked the participants about the 'ideal' co-housing model, community life, shared and private spaces and potential issues with living as an intentional community. The visioning/brainstorming session used the following brief: "It is 2025 and you are in your home in the new Pobail Collaborative Housing complex. What does it look like? What is happening? Who is around? How did you get there? Who helped? What challenges did you overcome? What do you see in the common spaces?"

After a period of reflection, participants were invited to share their answers using post-it notes on posters placed on the walls around the room containing the relevant questions (e.g., How we made it happen, What challenges we overcame, Private spaces, Shared spaces, Principles and practices, etc.) (see Figure 1). The 'Wishes & Resources' discussion used two categories of coloured cards to prompt anonymous responses. Participants were split into four groups and each participant received a pack of cards with questions about their wishes and their potential

² <http://onesharedhouse2030.com>

contributions (financial resources, skills, time, etc.). The purpose of this activity was twofold; the information provided by the participants contributed towards formulating their shared vision, but the prompts were also designed to encourage discussion on the different issues.



Figure. 1 Workshop participants sharing their insights during the brainstorming session

Regarding the role of the authors, we are actively involved in facilitating discussions in-group meetings, often scheduling the monthly meetings, and we also assumed the role of facilitators for the above mentioned workshop. We have been sharing resources and news with Pobail through a dedicated Facebook page, website and newsletter that we have initiated. Based on our Participatory Design framing of the study, our role as active participants and participant-observers gives us the opportunity to be part of the discussions but also the ability to step back and reflect on the developments from a research perspective. With this comes the immense responsibility of having to carefully moderate our positions and allow other participants to take the initiative.

We performed a thematic analysis on the materials resulted from the February workshop: questionnaires, question posters and the answer post-its, as well as the 'Wishes & Resources' response cards. We have also included verbatim excerpts from our meeting notes from the course of our study. Two of the authors coded the materials separately, and then came together to discuss and refine the resulting themes. A selection of the themes illustrating the emergence of a shared vision/shared understandings is presented in Section 4.

4 Findings

In this paper, we are focusing on the efforts for achieving a shared vision and identity in the Pobail community. The following three main themes resulted from the thematic analysis undertaken: (1) Vision and Principles, (2) Ownership Model, Finances and Legal Framework, and (3) Living Together in Practice. We will discuss and illustrate these themes with quotes from the participants.

4.1 Vision & Principles

The principles the community wish to live by, and the shared vision they have are arguably the most pervasive themes across both the monthly meeting discussions and the workshop. This is a thoroughly environmentally conscious group with a desire to live more sustainably. There is also a socially conscious thread in this group, both in terms of how they want to live, but also how they wish to be identified and related to. In Ireland, property is thought of as an integral part of success and identity, with home ownership being the ‘ultimate goal’ for any individual or family unit. The group is conscious of this cultural attitude towards property, and have discussed extensively the difficulty this poses for co-housing, in which residents share ownership of various facilities.

4.1.1 Environmental issues

An important issue for the participants was alignment with sustainable development values. This issue was displayed across all aspects of the workshop. “Renewable energy” was mentioned as a ‘Wish’ item on 17/20 of the Resources & Wishes cards. A resounding ‘environmentally friendly’ outlook came out of the brainstorming session under the Principles and Practices theme, with post-its listing “*Environmentally friendly*”, “*eco-friendly*”, “*passivhaus*”, “*zero energy usage*” and “*green energy*” as important values. This environmental focus has also been mentioned numerous times in monthly meetings:

“must be a sustainable, eco-friendly, green model”

“We need to think of exactly what we want in terms of things like the structure, electricity supply, waste disposal, if we want to collect rain-water, if it should be modular in nature to cater for different stages of life, things like this, and then bring this wishlist to the council”.

4.1.2 Shared values, Social Consciousness

Participants were eager to define a set of shared values that everybody would abide by. This pursuit of a shared vision is contributing to a community identity, and also considers social values. When asked “what would you consider a deal

breaker in forming or joining a community?" in the survey, participants gave replies such as:

"Ethos is crucial... fairness, respect, inclusion, conflict resolution, etc."

"...that people honour/sign up to agreed shared values and rules, and that there is a 'process' where this breaks down"

During the discussions had in the monthly meetings, participants were adamant about the need of having a clear shared vision, as it seemed that they did not want to continue in a pursuit that was not aligned with their own values:

"It has to be clear what we are signing up for."

"We need to do an exercise to find out what exactly it is that the group wants, because I think everyone has a different idea in their heads about what this is."

"The group vision needs to solidify so that people know what they're signing up for and can walk away if that's not for them."

The shared vision was also considered as an important coordination mechanism for recruiting like-minded members, as well as contacting the local authorities:

"The purpose of the vision document is so we can start lobbying."

4.1.2 The need for a cultural shift, outreach, and preventing rejection

This theme includes examples of the participants' general concern about how the group is perceived by the general public and by the institutions whose support is needed. Again, the issue of the Irish cultural attitude towards property was a concern. Many discussions revolved around self-presentation and gaining support from both authorities and the general public:

"The question is how do we phrase the problem, there's a cultural blindness there..."

"'Co-living' 'cult' 'kibbutz' 'tenement' are all terms giving negative press to the idea of co-housing."

"In Spain, they're building on a culture of apartment living"...they're anarchists; I don't see myself out with placards."

"The biggest challenges we're facing is finding group members, finding appropriate land and battling the Irish culture."

"We don't have a precedent in Ireland."

4.2 Ownership Model, Finances and Legal Framework

The lack of a shared definition for collaborative housing and the plethora of associated terms created confusion and raised discussions on the actual ownership model. Co-living (an alternative to co-housing with individuals renting units and sharing common spaces and services under the same roof) was initially considered by younger participants as an alternative.

Co-operative housing, in which the residents would be considered tenants and shareholders of the housing co-operative as opposed to homeowners, was regarded with suspicion by some, while a collaborative housing solution where people own their own houses/apartments, while co-owning common spaces appeared to be favoured, as it was “*more in line with the Irish view*”. The brainstorming during the workshop produced a mix of opinions ranging from ownership to long-term rental. The preferences were split between self-financing and government assisted financing (inclusion of social housing, rent-to-buy scheme, government grants, etc.)

The economic collapse had a devastating effect on Ireland, and led to many losing their homes. Therefore the issue of ‘security of tenure’ was repeatedly raised in the brainstorming session with post-its listing “*security for long term living*”, “*lifetime tenure*” and “*mixed - ownership and long term rental*” being the most mentioned models of living.

4.2.1 Existing/Required Legislation and Access to Financial Resources

The lack of supportive legislation has been a consistent topic of discussion over the course of our involvement with this group. The fact that another initiative group has succeeded to create an eco-village in Cloughjordan in 2005 was considered inspirational and proof that “*you can actually navigate through the red tape*”. However, the participants discussed possible avenues to request changes in legislation, which at the moment includes “*no social perspective*”. Persistence and persuasion were considered essential for progressing their endeavour:

“Only change will happen if you keep banging on the door.”

“The higher-ups can be in favour but they need convincing that we can do the groundwork.”

Framing the development as a demonstration research project was seen as a possible way to facilitate funding, “*because we could include pertinent energy, consumption and work issues*”. Government grants and subsidies were also mentioned, as well as “*own finances*”; there was approximately a 50%-50% split for these two funding options in the brainstorming session.

Currently, there are no banks open to lending to community groups. No ethical banks are currently operating in Ireland. Credit unions are prevented by legislation

from providing mortgages, and very few social innovation/community financing organisations in Ireland are open to discuss such projects. The sourcing of financial resources was permanently discussed as one of the main barriers to collaborative housing. During the workshop, when trying to anonymously elicit information regarding the financial resources the participants were relying on (ownership/borrowing capacity/eligibility for social housing), most responded with “*don't know*”. We find this to be significant, as we are unsure if this is an indicator of lack of commitment, or if the group were just uncomfortable talking/writing about personal finances in the workshop setting.

4.3 Living Together in Practice

The realities of living as community were discussed in the workshop extensively. Sociability, sharing practices and spaces, and the potential for conflict were the main topics arising across the surveys and brainstorming sessions. This was also spoken about in monthly meetings, but to a lesser extent.

4.3.1 The Potential for Conflict and Need for Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

When asked about traits they would like to see in the future collaborative housing community, one survey participant mentioned: “*Willing to resolve issues, committed to getting involved*”, and another looked for “*Devising and implementing procedures when things go wrong*”. The issue of conflict with neighbours appeared as a theme throughout the survey in particular, which participants filled out individually and anonymously. It is possible that the issue of conflict was less likely to be discussed in groups, and more likely to be expressed as an individual concern.

When asked about their least favourite aspects that could occur in collaborative housing arrangements in the survey, participants mentioned:

“not being able to make certain decisions.”

“forced engagement/committees.”

“legal disputes, neighbours falling out.”

“becoming exclusive/out of reach for ‘normal people’.”

Traits potential residents feared the most were: “*domineering*” (3x), “*anti-social*” (2x), and from the post-its, most participants appeared to worry about “*conflict*”, “*tensions*”, “*arguments*”, “*disagreements*”. “*Lack of privacy*” was also mentioned by some.

4.3.2 Shared vs. Private Space

When discussing what spaces should be private vs. what spaces should be shared, the results show that privacy and a complete living space were important to the group. The participants said:

“private space is an absolute must”

“full amenities as currently understood in private space”

“complete living area - bathroom, kitchen, bedroom, living room”

When asked about the common spaces they would like to have, participants mentioned “*kitchen, common room/common house, workspace, and garden/outdoor area*”. Although many collaborative housing groups have regular shared meals, from the workshop it emerged that the participants only wanted occasional common meals. “*Children’s play area, meeting space, exercising space, occasional communal dining*” were also mentioned in the survey, as well as “*Shared green spaces, garden and vegetable plots, orchards*”. During the workshop ‘Outdoor’ shared spaces received a lot of attention, and were the most responded-to Wish cards, with 18 out of 20 participants wanting a community garden, and 15 out of 20 wanting shared greenhouses and sheds. Similarly, when asked about activities the participants would like to do with their community, activities included “*gardening*” and “*growing food together*”. It is clear that the outdoor spaces and activities, combined with ample private living space were the most desired aspects of living in a collaborative housing community.

4.3.3 Meetings and Gatherings

When asked about the desired types of gatherings and their frequency, the answers varied a lot; in the survey, participants were vocal about the desired community spirit, the sociability of a co-housing arrangement, and their overall desire for social interaction. However, during a brainstorming session, the same participants voiced their dislike of *forced* social interactions. This was an interesting distinction; participants appeared to see voluntary, neighbourly social interaction as a desired outcome of collaborative housing arrangements, but felt that structured gatherings should only happen periodically.

“eat together sometimes, work together for the good of the community.”

When asked about the perceived benefits of co-housing, the participants voiced visions such as: “*supporting each other, feeling of belonging*”, “*having that sense of community, a shared vision*”.

5 Discussion of Findings

From a thematic analysis of the workshop and monthly meetings we have uncovered a number of issues that arise out of an Irish context and present a number of challenges to Pobail as they co-create a shared vision of a collaborative housing model. From our findings it is evident that co-housing and the development of a shared vision for Pobail is a complex integration of social and economic needs. The approach to establishing this shared vision requires the understanding of the needs and desires of the members of the group in addition to external factors such as Irish legislation, financial systems, and housing regulations.

The findings presented here provide a rich picture of the drivers, purpose and characteristics of this self-organised community, and demonstrate how members of the community collaborate and self-organise. The development of this shared vision is crucial for a number of reasons: it provides clarity to the members of the community what co-living may look like for themselves; it also acts as a form of social cohesion amongst the members, which is particularly important for the future development of the internal organisation and governance; and finally, the publication of the shared vision acts as an important external representation of values to other members of the public as the group attempts to integrate into the wider context of the Irish housing landscape.

These regular meetings and workshops are not only forms of social activities for members of Pobail but also are means by which participants in the community can come together to develop shared understanding of potential democratic decision-making, shared values, and co-housing. This is significant as it allows the community to move forward in their activities and acts as a form of social cohesion and partnership between the members of the community. In addition these activities combine both civil engagement and the negotiation of Irish housing and socio-economic systems that link the internal values of the community with external institutions, expanding how the community will develop and become resilient within their city.

The work done so far aimed to elicit information from people interested in principle in collaborative housing in the local area, with the purpose of creating shared understandings. Further on, the draft charter will serve as a coordination artefact, aiming to attract members who are willing to commit to working together, and also to provide a perspective to all the potential stakeholders and the general public into collaborative housing arrangements. One major issue at national level is the lack of models that could scaffold such developments. There are several efforts to adapt models from the UK and Denmark, but none of these has a charter document that is open to other groups and to the general public. Following a consultation process that will open up the draft charter to those who commit to working on it in the following months, we are aiming to support agreement and shared understandings among Pobail members. This process will

be facilitated both via face-to-face through meetings, as well as through digital tools (the dedicated website, newsletter, Facebook Page for sharing the draft charter, as well as a collaborative editing tool to allow participants to comment on the text and alter it).

6 Conclusions

In this paper, we presented the efforts of Pobail, a Collaborative Housing group, in working towards achieving a shared understanding and vision for a future alternative housing arrangements in their city. These efforts are inscribed in the wider national landscape, where the current national housing strategy, legislation, financing are not supportive of alternative housing scenarios.

As Pobail and other collaborative housing groups around the country are becoming more visible, interacting with potential stakeholders like architect groups, housing agencies, financial institutions and local authorities, we are observing the formation of a public “influenced or impressed upon” by the potential of collaborative housing as an alternative housing solution for Ireland. In this respect, we are building on Dewey’s notion of publics, as reflected in LeDantec and DiSalvo (2013), and on Marres (2017) who states “Publics form when issues require their involvement, and these publics are dedicated to ensuring that such issues are dealt with.”

As researchers in this study we have to consider our role in this very carefully. There is a tension between the roles of researcher and participant, and the activities of observation and participation. While it may be a result of good intentions, we must be mindful of crossing the line between participation and interference.

In terms of future work within this study, we are assessing the potential role digital technology can play in the Pobail group, as well as in other social innovation projects. We intend to undertake participatory design workshops with Pobail to design a tool or platform, which would allow the group to collaborate and coordinate both internally as a community, and externally with other stakeholders in their endeavours. We also hope to include other stakeholders in these workshops as we see potential for this tool or platform to cultivate a national network and repository of information on collaborative housing in Ireland.

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