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COHOUSING – ALTERNATIVE HOUSES FOR SENIORS

COHOUSING – DOM ALTERNATYWNY DLA SENIORÓW

Abstract

Polish society is rapidly aging, the same as in Western Europe. The problem seems to be very serious because so far, in our country, the way to ensure a good quality of living for old people was not found. The article presents an alternative way of living for the elderly, referring to the Scandinavian tradition of cohousing. A cohousing community is an environment with high utility values and an atmosphere, which helps to improve interpersonal relations and the space where its residents can fulfill their needs.

Keywords: apartments estate, cohousing, old people

Streszczenie

Społeczeństwo polskie jak to w Europie Zachodniej gwałtownie się starzeje. Problem jest bardzo poważny, ponieważ do dnia dzisiejszego nie został rozwiązany problem godnego zamieszkania osób starych. Artykuł prezentuje alternatywny sposób zamieszkania, skierowany właśnie do tej grupy odbiorców. Został zaczerpnięty z tradycji skandynawskiej i znany jest pod nazwą cohousing. Zabudowa cohousingowa jest środowiskiem o wysokich walorach użytkowych i atmosferze sprzyjającej polepszeniu relacji interpersonalnych oraz przestrzenią, gdzie jego mieszkańcy mogą realizować swoje potrzeby.

Słowa kluczowe: zabudowa mieszkaniowa, cohousing, osoby stare

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many authorities and researchers from various disciplines have tried to describe and define what a house or an apartment is. Under the terms of psychology, Jozef Tischner defines the term of house very beautifully. He writes in “*Filozofia dramatu*” *that the closest space of the man is the house. All man’s ways in the world are measured by the distance from the house. The view from the windows of the house is the first view of man on the world. The man, who is asked where he comes from – he indicates the house. The house is a nest of the man. Here a baby comes into the world, a sense of responsibility matured for the order of the first community, here the man recognizes the main secrets of things – windows, doors, spoons – he enjoys and suffers and at the end he leaves to the final rest. If somebody has a house means that: he is surrounded by an area of primary familiarity. The walls protect man from the ferocity of the elements and hostility of people. They allow them to live and mature. When living in a house we can feel comfortable. Be yourself at home means that we can experience meaningful freedom. The house does not allow playfulness and it does not mean slavery. Home space is a space of multiple meaning. Building a house means: be at home.*¹

W. Korzeniewski speaks differently about houses/apartments. He describes an apartment in the following way: *it is a place of people-to-people contacts reaching beyond the family circle. This means courteous contacts with friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and distant family members, but also utilitarian contacts related to services exchange and mutual benefits. Division of the functional apartment has to consider all these elements and thus be divided into: private zone – related to internal needs of both the whole family and its individual members; public zone – promoting social contacts between the family members and the external environment*”.²

The house is often associated with a place that should fulfil many functions. R. Bächtold, having carried out research on shaping the attitudes of residents, concluded that there are 9 requirements an apartment should meet³:

- an apartment should provide a quiet and safe environment to positively influence family life,
- an apartment should provide individual space where one could “hide” after outward-oriented contacts,
- an apartment should be adaptable over time to changing household needs,
- an apartment should provide space for developing individual hobbies and interests,
- an apartment should provide the right to privacy by offering a private area where one can relax,
- an apartment should be noise free,
- an apartment should be sunny
- an apartment should consist of spacious and flexible units,
- an apartment should provide its residents with basic technological facilities.

¹ J. Tischner, *Filozofia dramatu*, Znak, 2006.

² W. Korzeniewski, *Poradnik projektowania budownictwa mieszkaniowego*, Arkady, Warszawa 1981.

³ R. Bächtold, *Der moderne Wohnung und Siedlungsbau als soziologisches Problem*, Kirschgarten – Druckrei AG Bard, 1964.

Some external factors determine the quality of apartments, i.e.: apartment type, climatic conditions, landscape – streetscape, public areas, proximity to industrial companies, window view, community green spaces, gardens, proximity to public transportation, linking with working places, and shopping centres. Along with all of the abovementioned elements, an apartment should provide the residents with:

- safety – apartment design can promote residents' safety and prevent them from atmospheric influences, intruders. It provides the feeling of privacy, and is a place for storing different goods (food, valuables, etc.) necessary in everyday life,
- stabilisation – it is impossible to obtain stabilisation without having at least minimum private space,
- mental comfort – promoted by an area which enables studying, working, doing hobbies, and relaxing. The need for privacy, meditation, and self-reflection increases as the development of personality grows, which, in turn, requires space adapted to doing different activities. Confined space triggers conflicts, mental fatigue, and social pathology,
- physical comfort – an apartment should be equipped with: water and sewage system, gas-fittings, electrical installation, central-heating, central hot water, phone division, and heat distribution units; and have a layout designed to maximise natural daylight (functional solution).

An apartment constitutes our most important living space and binds families together, and hence it should respect two fundamental types of needs: those of the whole family and its individual members. This calls for the creation of zones within an apartment – a shared zone and an individual zone. According to sociologists, it is essential since everybody needs some space for developing their hobbies. E. Lipińska writes: “In solitude a human being discovers himself and perceives the world through his own perspective. Failure to provide such solitary area in an apartment might result in mental mutilation.” Apartment division into zones is a fairly new concept; however, it is already well known. It was introduced by modernists.

Previously developed apartments served different purposes. Many of them were arranged in an enfilade system where the rooms were formally aligned with each other and getting to one of the rooms often required crossing the whole apartment. The family members did not have their own rooms. The kitchen and the space intended for the servants were separated from the rest of an apartment. The rooms were not assigned to particular occupants and room functions intermingled.

Modernism was able to change the course of action by introducing apartment zoning. At present, it is a norm to design apartments that are able to accommodate more people than the number of rooms. Apartment density is regulated by the following formula $A+1$ ⁴ – number of people equal to the number of rooms plus one room extra, usually a living room (all-purpose room for relaxing and socialising). Other rooms are mostly bedrooms. Additional rooms can be introduced to serve various purposes, e.g. a study⁵.

Well-designed green amenities with pleasant and attractive structure are essential for the users (balconies, patios, equipped with window balcony doors overlooking the terraces and

⁴ A – number of residents.

⁵ J. A. Włodarczyk, *Życie w mieszkaniu*, PWN, Warszawa-Kraków 1997.



1



2a



2b



2c



3a



3b



3c

gardens). Designers, therefore, need to adjust the heights of the buildings to the surrounding greenery. In many Scandinavian countries, a lot of attention is paid to spatial planning of the internal and external elements. Lack of appropriate visual link with the outside environment and setting enhances the feeling of isolation and low sense of security.

It is important to bear in mind that our needs change throughout our lives and an apartment should meet these needs. Usually, these changes relate to the size of a family, increasing from two people at the beginning, to three, four or even more (depending on the number of children born over the years). Then, the children grow up and leave the household. The last stage is when one person stays in an apartment. An apartment should, thus, be susceptible to changes.

Friendly living environment adapted to the age is the basis for satisfaction and the proper functioning of the senior age.

It is well-known that the Polish society will grow older. In connection with this state of affairs is very complicated because it combines a lot of problems. Solving the problem of old people living in Poland is primarily related to the creation of Polish practices because the economic, social, philosophical and religious situation differs from the western countries and solutions developed there cannot be directly implemented. Although it seems that some of the west solutions, especially from the circle of Scandinavian countries, can be an interesting alternative to the current residential offer aimed at seniors. It is a cohousing building.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in Denmark, a new model of residence called cohousing was developed. This model soon met the interest of different groups of users and spread to other countries in Western Europe and other continents (USA, Canada). These solutions, originating in past centuries, and developed in the 60s of the twentieth century, are now continued and more widely propagated. In recent years, they are of great interest among seniors, who living in this type of building are not alone and they can pursue their interests and get the help they need.

2. COHOUSING – BEST PRACTISES

At the outset, this kind of building should be defined.

Cohousing (pic.1) – is the way of the investment consisting in the creation of a group of residential units, linked closely by defined rules to help continuously strengthen neighbourhood relationships. It is a residential community that, despite the high integration of a neighbourhood, provides a balance between the intimacy of the apartment and the general availability of the zone of the Community. A community of this type consists of private houses or apartments and public space elements. Each self-contained apartment consists of residential and sleeping space, kitchen and bathroom. The premises are well-connected with a common space. It is called the *home of the Community*, which normally has a large kitchen with a dining area for all residents. Nearby buildings are located in areas intended for recreation: playgrounds, swimming pool, tennis courts and gardens. The functioning of cohousing is based on a bottom-up management, which means that usually there is no management unit, and decisions related to the affairs of the estate are taken with the participation of all residents.

The aim is to create such cohousing neighbourhood relations, which will in a collision-free way manage common goods. The advantage of sharing common space is the growing bond between people, which is based on trust. To speed up this process, residents should come from similar social circles. Their area of interest must promote mutual contacts and their skills should complement. Of great importance is the nature and type of work performed, for example, due to the time of work (shift work) and mutual assistance in fundamental responsibilities (care of children, the sick, protect homes against burglary).

Cohousing could also create a safety space, which is so important for elderly people. Maslow's or Gehl's theories show us how important safety is to living – well-known. According to Maslow, human motivation changes as needs are satisfied at each level of personal development. Human needs are hierarchical in nature and thus need to be fulfilled in a given order: first fundamental needs have to be met in order to effectively meet the higher needs. The most fundamental needs are physical requirements for survival, i.e.: need of food, shelter and clothing. Safety needs, which come second, take precedence when the first are relatively satisfied. A man in extreme hunger (need for survival) will primarily think of food, and only after satisfying this hunger will he turn to the higher need of safety. Once physiological, financial and emotional safety is present, the need of belongingness and love emerges. Man is a social being and needs to feel loved, liked and accepted by others. The fourth in the hierarchy is the need to have self-esteem, related to self-respect, whereas the need of self-actualisation is at the top⁶. On the other hand, the Danish psychologist J. Gehl, who also deals with similar issues, identifies three other types of needs that should satisfy the inhabitants, which are as follows: the feeling of safety (home, protection from pollution and noise, safety of communication), physiological needs (rest, food, drink, sleep, air, light, hygiene), psychological needs (contact, belonging, orientation possibilities, identification).

To accurately define the target group, you should consider the above-mentioned items. It should also be remembered that the people had one overriding common feature, which will unite them and connect with the community, for example, age, profession or area of interest.

Therefore, it is worth to trace the cohousing projects for the elderly and analyse the functioning of such facilities.

2.1. SJOFARTEN – DEVELOPMENT IN THE NEW DISTRICT

The Sjöfarten (Ill.2a, 2b, 2c) community is located in the area of Stockholm in Hammarby Sjöstad⁷, the newly formed picturesque neighbourhood. It is a modern housing estate, located near the Hammarby Lake. The community recently was formed only by people 50+. The Community has decided to expand the group of residents with younger people. The building

⁶ J. Gehl, *Życie między budynkami*, Wydawnictwo RAMA, 2013.

⁷ The estate was founded in the areas industrial area. The construction plan is a multi-stage, the first buildings were erected in the 90s of the twentieth century, and the planned completion date of the investment is 2018. The estate was designed for around 20 000 people. One of its basic assumptions is environmental solution, which has reduced by half the impact on the environment compared to standard housing estates of the nineties. This objective will be achieved, among others, through energy savings, use of renewable energy sources and minimizing road transport in favor of collective, cycling and walking.

was completed in 2008. The project included the construction of apartments in two buildings. The first building contains conventional units for rent, while in the second contains cohousing with cooperative apartments.

Design assumptions:

The building is a complementary development of quarter and it occupies its south-eastern frontage. The project was completed by the office – Värmdö Byggentreprenader AB.

There are 46 apartments with 50 residents and common areas designed on the 5 floors. Common areas occupy 434 m² and include: large kitchen, dining room, meeting room, library, sauna, exercise room and guest room.

Residents also benefit from a common garden and terraces and they create a herbal and vegetable garden – in order to use this products for common meals.

All apartments have a share in the common space. This community brings together the people who do not live in the building. By paying a fee, you can become a member and participate in various community activities, for example: shared meals, seminars, participation in the film club. People, who want to live there must also be accepted into the community and become a member of the organisation that owns the Bogemenskapen Sjöfarten building, and must agree to proceed in accordance with regulations established by the community or to participate in the annual major and smaller meetings related to the organisational matters of cohousing.

Importantly, candidates who wish to live in this place at the beginning have a meeting with consultants representing both good and bad sides of living in cohousing. In addition, they receive informational materials and participate in discussions, during which they satisfy themselves as to the rightness of their decision to move there. The philosophy of the association is to promote a balanced life, with the democratic, economic, social and ecological point of view. Residents must participate in typical tasks, which include management and care at home, taking care of the common parts and cooking. All residents are involved in the kitchen. A community organises common meals on their own. It is divided into 6 task groups, which for four days a week prepare dinner.

2.2. BOO SENIORHEM – modernised buildings on the outskirts of the city

The Boo SeniorHem (Ill.3a, 3b, 3c) community is a large community, consisting of 125 people. It is aimed at seniors who want to live in high quality and comfort environment. It was founded in 2003. However, the discussed team was founded in 2007 and designed by the Swedish offices BSK away from the city.

Design assumptions:

The aim of the project was to reconstruct the existing quarter and it included the reconstruction of the old portion of 10 units for rent and construction of a new building with 75 residential units. The area is part of a new 8560 m² and the developed part is 1420 m². Originally, the area around the old building was undeveloped, and the building was unused. It was therefore designed within the first quarter of the new apartments form a closed courtyard, which gives a sense of community. The decision on such a system was related to ensuring peace and quiet for future residents and the solution to the problem of parking.

The newly created sunny courtyard provides the residents with recreation – there are places to play boule game and recreational areas with gazebos, green and sculptures. 56 new apartments have been designed in 4-storey building, all have large glazed balconies – conservatories with folding glazing – offering a view of the inner courtyard. Balconies are very spacious, allowing their use also residents who are bedridden. After collapsing the walls, they can get both daylight and fresh air.

The project was realised in cooperation with the future residents, which resulted in a large individualisation of solutions for houses of which there are several types and sizes ranging from 1 room flat, 55 square meter flats to the 3 room flats and 95 square meter flats. However, parking is under the building.

The Boo community has a slightly different character than the previously discussed community because it is characterised by greater independence, for example, residents do not participate in preparing meals, but they eat two meals a week together, prepared by a rented chef. Once a month, meetings are organised with buffet, and every Wednesday some of the residents take part in a meeting by drinking coffee. The activity and plans depend on the decision of the residents. They have a communal kitchen, a dining room with a dance floor, a lobby, a workshop, a library, a sauna, a gym, a place to receive the hairdresser and facilities for organising a barbecue for their disposal.

In this case of cohousing, the community is organised in such a way that on the most important annual meeting elects a democratic management, who by another year deals with the management of the community, solving organisational issues, marketing, and is a representative on the outside. During the year there are smaller informative meetings.

The residents are very satisfied with both the organisational and architectural solutions. The project is featured in industry publications and is now seen as a model of house for seniors.

3. SUMMARY

An alternative residence for elderly people may be cohousing building, i.e. community building, and in Poland, it now is known as the co-operative. The idea of creating the cohousing was adopted in the Scandinavian countries, and from there, it moved to other countries in the world. This type of housing complex has a high chance of uprising in the conditions of the Polish residential environment. You could say that cohousing acts in two ways. On the one hand, it helps to increase environmental awareness, and on the other hand, it is conducive to living in good conditions, which take into account the needs of older people, for example: contacts, appointments, care and organisation of free time.

The advantage that comes from living in such housing communities is also a sense of belonging to the group. When joining the group of tenants, the process to counteract the feeling of loneliness is started. Another advantage is to allow development interests, the access to specialised facilities and tools for recreation, rehabilitation and the ability to share them with others. The examples are multimedia room, games rooms, sports halls, cafes, workshops, music rooms and other areas. Building communities aimed at identifying the needs of people of the third age prevents their exclusion from social life and prevents premature moving to care institutions. Equal treatment for all residents of cohousing gives them a sense of security and well-organised living space precludes anonymity, reduces theft and keeps the low cost of living.

It should also be reminded that, in Poland, more and more elderly people are living in the buildings of concrete slabs. Creating a cohousing in this kind of building seems to be one of the best solutions to the current situation and can be offered to elderly people.

The idea is to create communities, e.g. within the stairwell or in one building. Residents can adapt spaces in attics or basements (there are a lot of undeveloped spaces in buildings of concrete slabs) to the Community spaces, where the meetings, dinners, events, training and thematic can be organised. Cohousing community is an environment with high utility values and an atmosphere, which helps to improve interpersonal relations and the space where its residents can fulfil their needs.

R e f e r e n c e s

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