

Cohousing for Older Adults

Comparing collaborative housing approaches in Barcelona and London¹

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As cities experience a rapid demographic shift towards ageing populations, meeting the needs of older adults has become an urgent challenge. By 2030, people over 65 are projected to comprise over 30% of Europe's population,² yet up to 80% of housing remains unsuitable for older adults to live independently.³ Traditional retirement communities, especially for those who do not require extra care, are increasingly seen as less appealing. In response, cities promote ageing in place, allowing older adults to stay in their homes as long as possible.

Cohousing, a self-managed and community-led residential model, offers a third option alongside traditional retirement communities and independent living. This webpost examines how cohousing—through the examples of La Borda in Barcelona and New Ground Cohousing in London—addresses housing challenges for older adults, particularly social isolation and affordability, and explores the broader obstacles the cohousing model faces.

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

² European Commission. (2015). *The 2015 Ageing Report*. Brussels: European Commission.

³ Housing Europe. (2021). *Ageing Well at Home*. <https://www.housingeurope.eu/resource-1560/ageing-well-at-home>

Housing Challenges of Affordability and Social Isolation Among Older Adults

Barcelona

Barcelona is facing a severe housing crisis that heavily affects vulnerable groups, particularly older adults. Since the removal of rent controls in 2020, rents have surged due to tourist demand, with prices per square metre up 25% in 2022.⁴ Nearly a quarter (22.1%) of residents over 65 rent their homes, making them especially susceptible to rising costs.⁵

The city's ageing population is on the rise, with one in five residents currently over 60—a figure expected to reach one in three by 2030, with women comprising 66% of those over 80.⁶ High rental prices, low pensions, and property speculation make

housing affordability a critical issue for many older adults, especially women.⁷

Social isolation compounds these challenges, as 26.5% of older adults in Barcelona live alone.⁸ Rising housing costs and limited supply exacerbate this issue, accelerating gentrification, often displacing older residents from their neighbourhoods and away from established social support networks.⁹

London

London's housing crisis, marked by the UK's highest rental costs, remains acute.¹⁰ In 2022, annual rent growth reached 16.1% at the height of the pandemic.¹¹ In 2023, one in every 50 Londoners was homeless, with 170,000 in hostels or temporary accommodation.¹²

Meanwhile, one in five older adults in the UK feel trapped in their homes due to a lack of affordable and well-located housing options.¹³ New developments are

⁴ Goss, A. (2023, August 18). Spiralling rents add to Barcelona's housing struggle. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/d82f2c93-ab1b-46c7-b25f-ba768b813267>; Spain to crack down on holiday rentals to address housing crisis. (2024, July 4). *Financial Times*.

⁵ Barcelona City Council. (2011). *Barcelona Age-Friendly City*. <https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Barcelona-Age-friendly-city-Together-we-build-a-city-for-all-ages.compressed.pdf>

⁶ Vivas, E. (2021, April 14). *Evolving demographics*. Barcelona Metropolis. <https://www.baarcelona.cat/metropolis/en/content/s/evolving-demographics>

⁷ Housing Europe. (2021). Op. cit.

⁸ López, P., Rodríguez, A. C., & Escapa, S. (2022). Psychosocial effects of gentrification on elderly people in Barcelona from the perspective of bereavement. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 43, 100880.

⁹ Blanco-Romero, A., Blázquez-Salom, M., & Cànoves, G. (2018). Barcelona, Housing Rent Bubble in a Tourist City. Social Responses and Local Policies. *Sustainability*, 10(6), Article 6.; López, P., Rodríguez, A.C., & Escapa, S. (2022). Op. cit.

¹⁰ Osborne, H. (2024, March 20). Average monthly UK rent up 9%— the highest annual increase recorded. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2024/mar/20/average-monthly-uk-rent-up-9-the-highest-annual-increase-recorded>

¹¹ Jones, R. (2024, April 29). Average rents in Great Britain climb to record high. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2024/apr/30/average-rents-great-britain-new-high>

¹² Elgueta, A., & Foster, A. (2023, August 3). One in 50 Londoners homeless and in emergency homes—London Councils. *BBC News*.

¹³ Centre for Ageing Better. (2023, August 30). *The housing crisis is a losing game for both young and old*. <https://ageing-better.org.uk/blogs/housing-crisis-losing-game-both-young-and-old>

often built on city outskirts, with limited input from older adults about their needs, such as facilities to make their homes accessible and social aspects that are important for sustaining their quality of life.¹⁴

Loneliness is a growing issue: In 2021, 3.64 million people over 65 in the UK lived alone, with women making up 70% of this group.¹⁵ As the over-65 population is expected to rise from 19% to 22% in a decade,¹⁶ the need for suitable, affordable housing will only intensify.

The Need for Innovative Housing Solutions

Cohousing is a residential model encompassing a range of resident-led initiatives to create shared living arrangements.¹⁷ It can make housing more affordable through mechanisms such as collective property ownership, partnerships with housing associations and developers, as well as government policy. It addresses social isolation through creating a social architecture based on shared values such as mutual aid, inclusivity, and countering ageism. Examples of this model include La Borda, an intergenerational community that has pioneered the "grant of use" model in Spain, leasing public land for 75 years

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Chaudhuri, A., & Mead, J. (2023, August 24). 'We have brothers, sons, lovers– but they can't live here!' The happy home shared by 26 women. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/aug/24/we-have-brothers-sons-lovers-but-they-cant-live-here-the-happy-home-shared-by-26-women>

¹⁶ Ibid.

under collective ownership to make housing affordable. In the UK, New Ground, a community exclusively for older women, partners with housing providers to offer 250-year leases, with a portion of units designated as affordable.

La Borda Housing Co-operative, Barcelona

Completed in 2019, La Borda in Barcelona (See Figures 1 and 2) is built on land designated for state-subsidised housing, using the 'grant of use' model (Box 1). It was established in 2012 as a response to the housing crisis exacerbated by the financial crisis, the rise of the social economy, and a strong neighbourhood movement.¹⁸ With a budget of 3 million euros funded by resident investments and grants,¹⁹ this intergenerational community houses 45 adults (ages 20-70) and 13 children.



Figure 1: Inside La Borda (Source: The Architectural League of New York, 2023²⁰)

¹⁷ Tummers, L. (2015). Understanding co-housing from a planning perspective: Why and how? *Urban Research & Practice*, 8(1), 64–78.

¹⁸ Cabré, E., & Andrés, A. (2018). La Borda: A case study on the implementation of cooperative housing in Catalonia. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 18(3), 412–432.

¹⁹ La Borda. (n.d.). *Funding structure – La Borda*. <http://www.laborda.coop/en/project/funding-structure/>

²⁰ The Architectural League of New York. (2023, May 8). A Cooperative Housing Movement



Figure 2: Outside La Borda (Source: The Architectural League of New York, 2023²¹)

Box 1: Grant of Use Approach

La Borda adopts the ‘grant of use’ model, where the cooperative leases public land from the government for 75 years for an annual fee. This approach, common in countries like Denmark (known as the Andel model),²² ensures long-term affordability by preventing real estate speculation, making housing up to 35% cheaper than market rates.²³

Property is collectively owned by the cooperative, comprising members who joined through an open call by the driving organisation, La Mangala. Residents pay an entry fee and a monthly contribution, securing

indefinite usage rights without ownership or resale privileges. Affordability is further supported by government criteria for state-subsidised housing, including income thresholds and ownership restrictions.

In Catalonia, three cooperatives currently use this model, with three more in the planning phase.²⁴ The first senior cohousing project, Can70, is set to start construction in 2024.

La Borda fosters social connection through communal spaces such as shared laundry facilities (See Figure 3) and weekly dinners.

Resident involvement is essential, with management and decision-making distributed across seven committees (e.g., legal, architecture, and communal living).²⁵ Although not focused solely on older adults, La Borda offers valuable insights into ageing in community. Rosa, a 67-year-old resident, reflects,²⁶

I had always dreamed of growing old surrounded by people who brought me vitality, with their ideas, their music, their longings, and their youth. In the co-operative La Borda this dream is coming true. I feel accompanied by the

Inspired by Barcelona’s Anarchist Heritage. <https://archleague.org/article/a-cooperative-housing-movement-inspired-by-barcelonas-anarchist-heritage/>

²¹ The Architectural League of New York. (2023, May 8). Op. cit.

²² Housing Europe. (2014). Learning from each other: Catalonia meets Denmark. <https://www.housingeurope.eu/blog-291/learning-from-each-other-catalonia-meets-denmark>

²³ Burgen, S. (2022, May 2). ‘Accessible, not speculative’: Barcelona housing co-op wins architecture award. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/0>

[2/barcelona-housing-co-op-la-borda-wins-architecture-award](https://www.urbanagendaplatform.org/best-practice/la-borda)

²⁴ United Nations Human Settlements Programme. (n.d.). *La Borda*.

<https://www.urbanagendaplatform.org/best-practice/la-borda>

²⁵ World Habitat. (2019). La Borda, cooperativa de vivienda en cesión de uso, Spain. https://world-habitat.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/La-Borda_Spain_FULL-Project-Summary.pdf

²⁶ World Habitat Awards. (2019). Press Release. <http://www.laborda.coop/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Press-release-Spain-La-Borda-ENG.pdf>

whole community... Feeling useful to the community makes me grow and I think that's how we enrich each other.



Figure 3: Common laundry area (Source: La Borda Housing Cooperative, n.d.²⁷)

New Ground Cohousing, London

Established in 2016, New Ground is the UK's first cohousing community solely for older women (See Figure 4). The community comprises 26 women, aged 52–89, who are part of the Older Women's Co-housing Network (OWCH).²⁸ It follows the cohousing model (Box 2).



Figure 4: Outside of New Ground (Source: The Guardian, 2023²⁹)

Box 2: Cohousing Approach

Cohousing is a self-managed, community-led form of housing where residents define how they wish to live and the values they prioritise. While common in Europe, it is still emerging in the UK.

New Ground was developed without government involvement, relying instead on partnerships with a non-profit developer, a charity, and a small housing association. Members of the Older Women's Co-housing Network (OWCH) co-designed the residence, which includes privately owned flats and a few socially rented units provided by the charity housing association, Housing for Women. Of the 25 flats, 8 are designated as social (affordable) housing, to address affordability within the community.

Amid declining public investment in social housing, partnering with Housing for Women was essential for securing affordable units. Key funding came from Hanover Housing Association, a British non-profit developer, with support from the Tudor Trust charity.

Policy interest in cohousing is increasing, marked by the establishment of the Community Housing Fund in 2018 to support community-led housing in London.

As of 2020, there are 11 senior cohousing communities in the UK.³⁰

²⁷ La Borda. (n.d.). Life in common. <http://www.laborda.coop/en/project/life-in-common/>

²⁸ New Ground Cohousing. (n.d.). Basics. New Ground Cohousing.

<https://newgroundcohousing.uk/structure-of-owch>

²⁹ Chaudhuri, A., & Mead, J. (2023, August 24). Op. cit.

³⁰ Ibid.

The community is committed to inclusivity, with a mix of privately owned and socially rented apartments to accommodate women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Sharing resources, such as a car, and responsibilities like cleaning communal spaces helps to lower costs and conserve resources. Social isolation is mitigated through a mutually supportive way of living through collective activities, including weekly dinners, film nights, yoga classes, and managing the community through teams dedicated to maintenance, gardening, and legal issues. Shared facilities, including social spaces and gardens, further enhance the communal living experience, and a guest suite is available for visitors.³¹ Residents also support each other in everyday life, offering companionship and assistance, as Clara, a resident, explains,³²

...all we can do is support each other for as long as we can, and the good thing here really is you can talk about it, and we don't expect everyone to be full of beans all the time, and I think that sharing things and being considerate to other people and also making allowances for those that get on your nerves ... I think my job or our job as individuals is to look after ourselves

Beyond practical support, residents cultivate a culture of openness to differences, a key value for OWCH membership. This mutual support demonstrates how cohousing is unique, fostering a deep sense of community and acceptance, in contrast to what is often a

shallow sense of community and a lack of tolerance toward diversity in retirement communities.³³

Discussion

This section compares the housing cooperative and cohousing models, highlighting their shared features and key differences.

Common Features

- Balance of Community and Independence – Residents share a commitment to active community involvement while maintaining independent living.
- Self-contained Units with Shared Facilities – Both models feature private residences alongside shared spaces, such as kitchens, dining rooms, laundry facilities, and art studios.
- Democratic Governance – Residents participate in decision-making and management through teams or committees, overseeing design, maintenance, and operations.
- Cost Sharing – High-cost items like vehicles are often shared, reducing individual expenses.
- Ecological Principles – Shared values emphasise sustainability, such as reduced consumption and eco-friendly building design.
- Community Building Across Social Groups – Regular social activities, shared daily spaces, and collaborative tasks (e.g., caregiving,

³¹ Ibid.

³² Arrigoitia, M. F., & West, K. (2021). Interdependence, commitment, learning and love: The case of the United Kingdom's first older

women's co-housing community. *Ageing & Society*, 41(7), 1673–1696.

³³ Ibid.

weekly dinners) foster cross-group connections.

Key Differences

- **Affordability** – Unlike La Borda, which benefits from state-subsidised land and funding models that cap costs, New Ground's model does not have a comparable level of direct public subsidies or state-mandated affordability measures. This results in higher financial contributions from residents.
- **Demographic Focus** – New Ground exclusively supports older women, while La Borda is intergenerational.

Key Challenges

Securing sustainable funding is a major challenge for cohousing projects. A London cohousing study highlighted challenges in balancing social and economic goals, with its participatory redesign taking four years instead of the planned 1.5. This increased unit costs to closer to market rates as a result.³⁴

Competition for urban land also deters private developers from these projects. A solution, as seen in La Borda, is the grant-of-use model, which relies on government support to stabilise funding and reduce the pressure to prioritise profit.

Managing care as cohousing residents age is another challenge. Neither La Borda nor New Ground currently have community-funded care arrangements, though New Ground is considering shared costs for a future live-in caregiver. A potential

challenge is that paid care could create disparities if wealthier residents opt in and others cannot. This could be mitigated by a cooperative model in which higher-income residents contribute more to support collective services.

Conclusion

Both La Borda and New Ground offer valuable lessons in the development and management of collaborative housing models. While catering to different demographics and operating under different cohousing approaches, the core principles of resident involvement and community building are central to their success. Future research should explore cohousing across diverse socio-economic and cultural settings, and longitudinal studies should examine community dynamics as residents' support needs evolve.³⁵ Studies on gender-specific cohousing could reveal impacts on identity, autonomy, and wellbeing,³⁶ while investigations into public sector support and partnerships with housing associations may highlight ways to ease financial and regulatory issues for cohousing initiatives.³⁷

³⁴ Arrigoitia, M. F., & Scanlon, K. (2015). Co-designing senior co-housing: The collaborative process of Featherstone Lodge. *Urban Design*, 136, 31–32.

³⁵ Arrigoitia, M. F., & West, K. (2021). Op. cit.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Arrigoitia, M. F., & Scanlon, K. (2015). Op. cit.