

Collectively Commissioned Housing: The Added Quality of Building in Self-Management

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By collectively assuming the role of client, inhabitants can create more functions in their living environment. This has a positive effect on the time management of inhabitants, social infrastructure and livability of the neighbourhood.

In “Almere is the Future”[\[1\]](#), Wim Derksen was correct in stating that Duivestein[\[2\]](#) is addressing a “hot issue”. There is a bright future for “self-managed” housing projects in Almere as well as in the field of private commissioning. Private housing corporations such as WBR and COM•Wonen and socially-engaged businesses such as ERA Bouw and Hulshof Architects have developed similar initiatives in Rotterdam where the opportunity not only lies in new buildings but also in the existing housing stock. Architect Hein de Haan has realized fantastic complexes in Amsterdam together with the inhabitants. The sustainable qualities of EVA Lanxmeer in Culemborg were made possible primarily thanks to the inhabitants’ initiatives. The SEV Program[\[3\]](#) presented projects in villages in the provinces of Utrecht and Brabant as well as in other parts of the country.

However, as it is often the case with private commissioning, Derksen ignores an important aspect: the role of **collective**. Collectively Commissioned Housing (CCH) is more than just a plot of land with a (catalogue) house to your own taste. Groups who are willing to invest the enormous amounts of energy required in such a collective building process often do so to realize additional functions not present in standard housing. Workspaces, a communal garden with a playground, parking solutions and bike stalls, a multi-purpose room for parties, hobbies or guests, secure and/or accessible spaces for the handicapped, extra investments in sustainable energy and materials for a healthy and economic living environment. Especially the combination of living with working and other facilities creates an urban quality which otherwise doesn’t come into being.

Collective forms of living realized in monumental buildings or complexes since the 1980’s and newly built examples such as “Het Groene Dak” in Utrecht or MW2 in Den Bosch illustrate that these qualities are enduring. Sometimes the initiators no longer live there or there have been modifications in the form of organisation but “there is more demand than supply of these living forms,” according to Bernhard Smit of Housing Association Gelderland[\[4\]](#), “and these projects keep going on.” Definitely not just younger singles are choosing for this. There are numerous living groups for seniors and young families find the “neighbourhood network” which can alleviate this crucial point in life. Nevertheless, developers and administrators still find the realization of collective living projects and communal facilities too great a risk.

Now that private commissioning has been formalized into law[\[5\]](#), CCH can provide the financial and logistic space to broaden the possibilities. It has always contributed to social cohesion and neighbourhood livability: most CCH projects equally open their functions to the neighbours. The knowledge and skills obtained in the building process are shared, passed on further and put into

application elsewhere: there is room for the development of “active citizenship”. This also provides possibilities for investment in sustainable building and energy technology which is individually not feasible but becomes profitable with more houses.

Too many traditional construction parties are still hesitant with CCH. However, it is exactly they who should professionally support “citizens’ groups” during the design and realization phases. Do not expect inhabitants to be experts about building permits and tendering rituals; rather offer them the infrastructure to walk through the processes and to make their own, locally important choices (as opposed to generic solutions). The expertise of inhabitants lies in their usage and management, a phase which lasts much longer than the construction itself. The benefits can differ per age group: where the one can easily find a babysitter for a few hours, the other might acquire language skills or insights in procedures and in handling conflicts. The threshold for organizing a shared car or the purchase of household devices is lowered. Talents for gardening, maintenance or accounting find their expression even when they no longer readily fit in society.

CCH is one variant in a spectrum of possibilities; not everyone wants to participate in the building process from the very beginning. However, nowadays it is only appropriate to create more room for self-managed spatial development. The SBR Program ‘Consumer-Oriented Building’^[6] offers a first vantage point for the construction parties: developers offer a number of options to the standard (project) houses. For the few households which can afford it, the allocation of plots of lands is an option (1.8 x the market price, from 350 to 400,000 Euro). On the other hand, *Collectively Commissioned Housing* provides an affordable variant for the vast majority (0.9 x the market price, circa 200,000 Euro). Even social rent is possible when parties to cover the financial risk are involved at an early stage.

Instruments for CCH have been developed such as inhabitants’ assistance and group consultancy, contract and financing models and modular design. A specialized advisor can offer a better service when it can be paid from a communal money pot as opposed to when everyone must finance it with their own budget. In our experience, instruments for the initial project-phase are still missing: especially adequate pre-financing and risk management. In the phase of researching pre-conditions and feasibility, the ideal model and the organisation of actual participation, there are many uncertainties. These can not be simply placed upon the shoulders of (otherwise very motivated) individuals. Local governments need to have confidence in the end result: a built project, where individuals will find a place even when the initiators have already moved onto another phase of life or thus perhaps also to another city. Create an urban infrastructure for CCH initiatives and discover a goldmine of livability, active citizenship and sustainability.

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[1] CoBouw April 26, 2007

[2] Adri Duivestein is Alderman for Housing in Almere, a 'new town' which is presently planning a large urban expansion.

[3] SEV (The Steering Committee for Experiments in Public Housing) is an independent organisation active throughout the Netherlands, which actively supports a broad range of innovations in housing and construction. <http://www.sev.nl>

[4] WBVG is a small alternative housing corporation primarily consisting of combined living and working complexes rented out to self-managing collectives.

[5] In 2000, the Dutch government at that time set the goal for 30% of the housing construction in 2005 to be realized under private commissioning. (increased from less than 5%)

[6] SBR www.sbr.nl <http://www.sbr.nl/cgb/default.aspx>

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