

NO SHOT IN THE DARK – FACTORS FOR A SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF COLLABORATIVE HOUSING PROJECTS

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to detect factors for a successful implementation of collaborative housing projects based on experiences and lessons learned in various Styrian examples. Styria, as well as Austria, has a long-standing tradition in resident orientated housing policies and a well-established cooperative sector. To gain an insight into current chances, challenges and obstacles to participatory housing initiatives, three expert interviews were conducted. Subsequently, general factors of success were abstracted and discussed as the main findings of this paper. These factors should by no means be understood as a checklist for success. In fact, they can be used as a guideline or general required framework on the way towards successful collaborative housing projects.

Keywords: *collaborative housing, co-operative settlement, participatory housing, cohabitation, community development*

Introduction

The provision of affordable housing is a central concern of Austria's political system since the early 20th century. Until recently, the housing sector had been characterized by stability and adequate productivity compared to international standards. Since 2008, the financial and economic crisis has intensified the economic situation, which increasingly reveals fundamental structural problems: The current ways of living and organizing housing space are based on ecological overexploitation in terms of material and energy consumption, CO₂ emissions, land consumption and soil sealing. Additionally, a growing number of people are not able to afford living in the tenements provided by the real estate market, which severely degrades the quality of life. Currently, housing provision is barely realized in line with national and international sustainability goals, because social and ecological aspects have been subordinated mainly to efficiency and economic growth. These unsustainable housing practices are no longer applicable, because changing framework conditions make financing of housing increasingly difficult. As a result of the economic crisis,

new capital and liquidity regulation for banking institutions, the slump in the housing market and, most importantly, saving requirements in the public budget led to the fact that financing of both refurbishment and new construction can no longer be guaranteed. This systemic financial crisis situation especially affects subsidized housing and causes a big challenge not only for the demand side of tenants, self-supply buyers and house builders, but increasingly also landlords, the real estate industry and housing developers struggle with their business. At the same time, there is a strong immigration dynamic in urban areas and a continuing trend of investment in real estate to ensure capital value.

As building measures are not able to cover this growing demand, property prices are increasing steadily. This is reflected by the declining quality of many residential buildings, especially buy-to-let flats. Often the best price determines investment decisions instead of the quality or concept of the offer. After the crisis is no longer just undeniable, but also increasingly affects larger projects, the call for political action arises. As a response to a decades-long aberration that focused on economic growth and profit maximization, instead of public interest and sustainability, the development of alternative approaches to current housing patterns should be based on the analysis of existing niche innovations to sustainable housing (FELFERNIG et al. 2014).

In response to the ecological and social challenges, more sustainable settlements such as cohousing communities, neighborhood-ecovillage developments, and participatory housing projects have been appearing globally in rural as well as in urban areas since the 1980s. These alternative and often citizen-led housing initiatives have developed small-scale demonstration projects, which aim to reduce the consumption of resources while enhancing living quality. In times of strong influx into urban areas with the simultaneous discourse about densification of cities, extension processes, urban sprawl and affordable housing, participatory housing initiatives can be seen as valuable learning environments to gain insights into the transition towards a more sustainable housing sector (HÖFLEHNER 2011).

The Austrian province of Styria has a long-standing tradition in realizing participatory housing projects on a larger scale. As a critical response to the trend of mass housing developments and urban sprawl caused by the rising demand of single-family-houses in the country side, the Styrian provincial government supported the realization of 60 participatory housing projects under the program “Modell Steiermark” from the beginning of the 1970s to the early 1990s. A political upheaval in 1991 put an end to this innovative phase in Styria. Since then, projects have hardly made it to the stage of full realization, not just in Styria but all over Austria. This reflects the fact, that there has been a lack of forward-looking political ideas and measures during the last decades. Only recently, a rising number of participatory housing projects could be successfully implemented in the Austrian capital Vienna. The city supports these niche innovations by reserving construction areas for such projects in new housing developments. These sustainable housing projects are characterized by thinking beyond their property borders. By considering economic, ecological and social aspects, they are not just able to enhance living quality of their residents, but also to add public value to the neighboring area. Especially the social integration in terms of increased networking of people with their neighborhood, as well as the on-site provision of child and elderly care offers advantages compared to standardized housing. Additionally, the space supplies of individual flats, and the settlement as a whole is carefully considered and complemented by communal areas. The resource-saving implementation represents a main objective of participatory housing developments (JANY 2018).

During the last years, the trend towards participatory housing projects in Vienna inspired new initiatives in

Styria, especially in the surrounding area of the provincial capital city of Graz¹⁶. The aim of this paper is to look at both successful and failed niche innovations in the Styrian housing sector with the focus on experiences of experts in the field in order to gain insight into current obstacles to participatory housing initiatives. This leads to the following research question: What factors affect the successful implementation of collaborative housing projects?

1. Methodology

This paper aims at outlining the influence of factors responsible for successfully putting co-operative settlement projects into practice. First, in depth desktop research was necessary to acquire knowledge about co-operative forms of settlement in general and to gather information about projects in the surrounding area of Graz. Most contributions deal either with the institutional or sustainable component of collaborative housing. Therefore, we detected a research gap when it comes to factors of success. Success in this case is defined as a collaborative housing project, that surpassed the planning phase and was realized. These factors should by no means be understood as a checklist. In fact, they can be used as a guideline or general required framework on the way towards successful collaborative housing projects.

As our goal was to determine which factors affect the successful implementation of co-operative housing projects, we conducted semi-structured interviews with three experts on this topic in the spatial context of Styria. Therefore, we created a guideline applicable to all interviews with open questions to guarantee quality and comparability of the individual outcome and final findings. As one of the authors is professionally and privately involved in the spheres of collaborative housing in the local context, we already had a good access to the experts and the general topic. With this approach we could determine factors for the successful implementation of co-operative housing projects. Finally, we put forward one selected example of a co-operative housing project in the surrounding area of Graz in order to illustrate our findings.

2. Framing the issue

The global financial and economic crisis of 2008 increased the pressure on the European housing market which caused a chronic lack of supply, rising real estate prices and rents, as well as growing homelessness in many parts of the continent. In search for solutions to these challenging developments and their negative effects to the housing sector, interdisciplinary scholars show growing interest in learning from ‘alternative’ forms of housing provision, including different forms of collaborative housing (e.g. CZISCHKE 2018, TUMMERS 2015, WANKIEWICZ 2015, LANG – STOEGER 2018, LABIT 2015, MULLINS – MOORE 2018, DROSTE 2015). These collectively build and self-managed housing approaches are an international phenomenon that cover a broad spectrum of interrelated terms and concepts, both in practice and theory (FROMM 2012). Because of this great conceptual diversity, specifications such as ‘collaborative housing’, ‘community-led’, ‘resident-led’, ‘housing co-operatives’, ‘participatory housing’ or ‘co-housing’ are often used interchangeably (CZISCHKE 2018).

The conceptual roots of these initiatives can be traced back to utopian communitarian settlements and

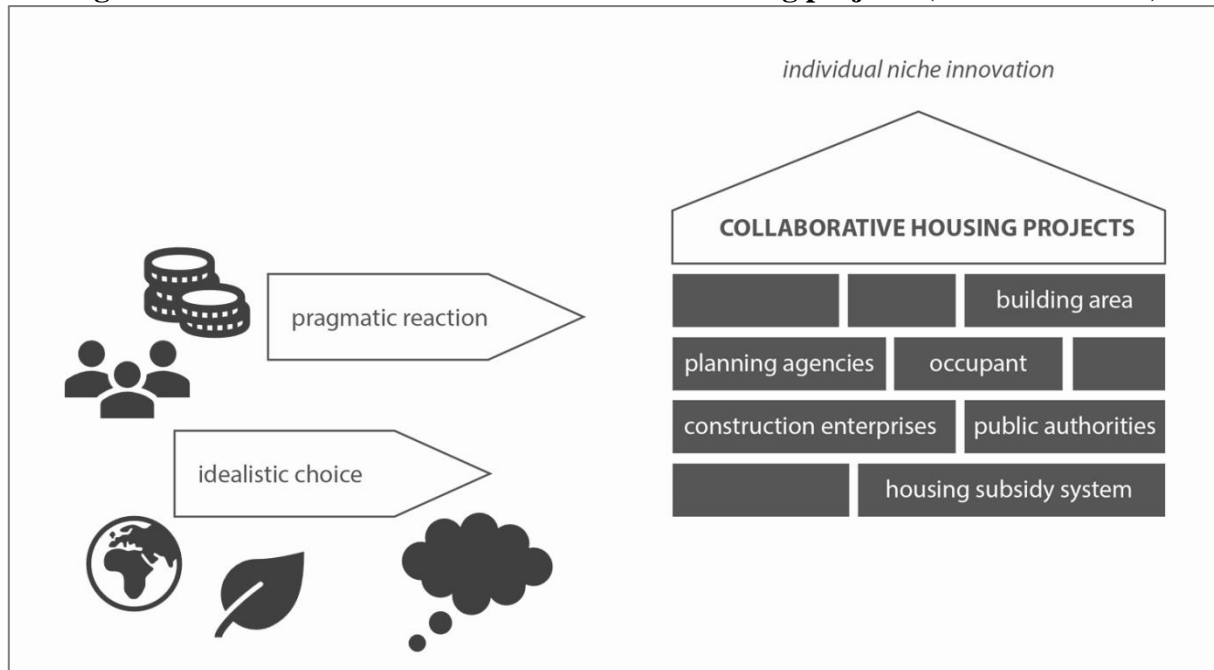
¹⁶ Graz is the capital of the Austrian federal state Styria, counting 325.021 inhabitants by January 1st 2018. (STADT GRAZ 2018)

collaborative residential experiments of the early 19th century. More specifically, current collaborative housing approaches are often based on ideas developed in Denmark, Sweden and Netherlands in the late 1960s and early 1970s (VESTBRO 2012). These classical co-housing developments combine private homes with shared infrastructure and focus on resident's participation in the development process, community self-management, and a design that fosters social interaction between neighbors (FROMM 2012). These approaches gained momentum in the 1980s, when architects introduced the cohousing concept in North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan (RUIU 2016).

In line with Fromm (2012), this study uses '**collaborative housing**' as an umbrella term which incorporates different forms of participatory and community-oriented housing projects. This reflects the fact that current participatory housing initiatives in Austria do not solely build on the traditions of the cooperative or cohousing movement, nor exclusively on community-led developments. Although Austria has a longstanding tradition of non-profit housing and housing cooperatives, contemporary cooperative housing sector does not share the same characteristics with collaborative housing. In the early 1970s and 80s, both approaches developed corresponding features, but during the last years, cooperatives became a synonym for large-scale-top-down housing provision that triggered recent collaborative housing activities as countermovement to it. Since the early 2000s, collaborative housing has gained increased public attention in Austria. Especially in the city of Vienna there has been political support and some state advocacy for so-called *Baugemeinschaften* or *Baugruppen*. However, the Austrian activities in collaborative housing cannot be limited to a single approach or location. This diversity of locally based initiatives is reflected in the establishment of a nation-wide umbrella association '*Initiative for Collaborative Building and Housing*', which serves as an interest group for collaborative housing projects, cohousing as well as self-help initiatives, both in urban and rural contexts (LANG – STOEGER 2018).

The increased interest in collaborative housing can be interpreted as a pragmatic reaction to the financial and economic crisis, demographic change and new life-style options that link energy-efficiency and social interaction in order to reduce the individual costs of living, avoid isolation of elderly residents and allow new life schemes for young middle class families. But these housing alternatives also touch upon idealistic topics that form urban policy objectives of many European cities: social cohesion, care for the elderly, local identities in the globalized world, healthy and child-friendly neighborhoods, sustainable economy, structural change in energy systems, citizen participation in urban development, diversity, solidarity, and inclusion (TRUMMERS 2015).

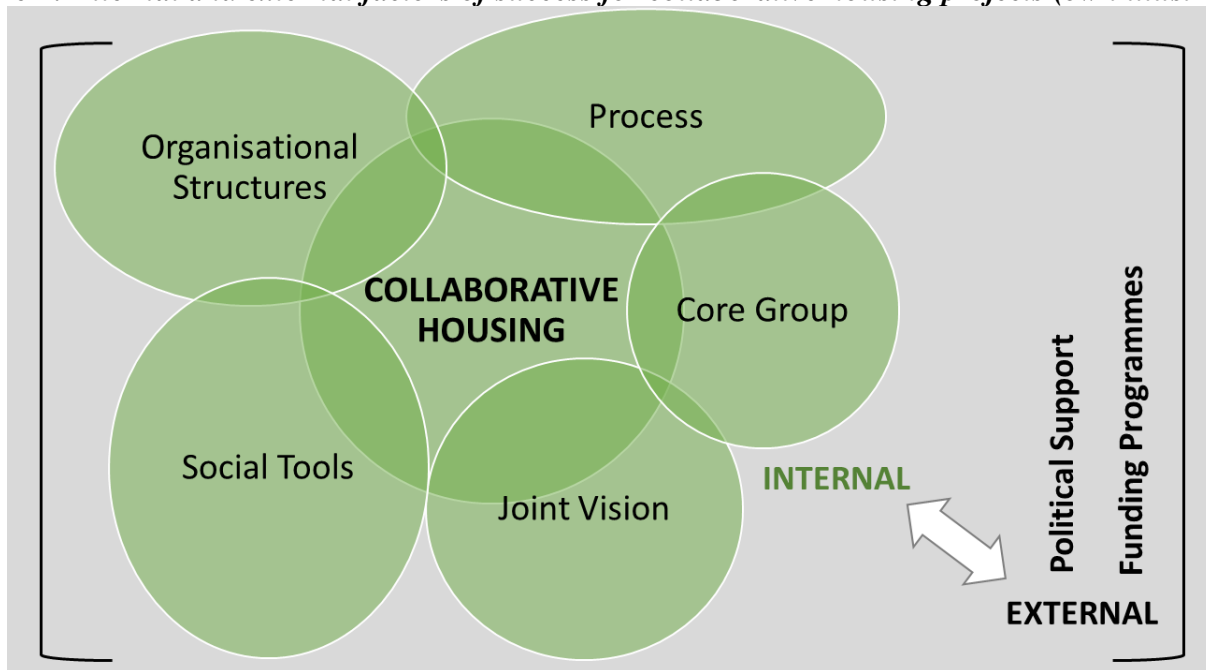
Figure 1: Reasons and actors of collaborative housing projects (own illustration)



Although collaborative housing projects have developed pioneering solutions to current sustainability challenges, the cooperation between occupants, construction enterprises, public authorities, planning agencies, and the housing subsidy system only seem to work for individual niche innovations, with only partial transfer into the conventional planning regime (*Figure 1*). Therefore, advocates of collaborative housing, professional planners and architects call for modifications in current planning and participation cultures, care and infrastructure systems, building regulations, housing subsidy systems and access to building plots. More specifically, scholars argue that planning and housing policies should favour flexible forms of living for all life phases instead of new-build owner-occupied lifetime homes. A revision of building regulations, planning legislation and housing subsidy systems should emphasise flexibility, self-building and self-management. Additionally, cohousing groups could be supported by an upscaling of planning to ensure infrastructures for everyday life from local to regional level to co-create tailor-made housing and infrastructures with good locational qualities. Moreover, planning processes demand a shift of power relations which requires radical changes to favour participatory and civil society-oriented decision-making processes. The housing subsidy system and planning system should be reoriented towards renovation and adaptation and towards community building and mediation processes for the planning phase as well as for the lifecycle of the houses (WANKIEWICZ 2015).

Factors of success and other findings

Figure 2: Internal and external factors of success for collaborative housing projects (own illustration)



The factors abstracted can be clustered in internal and external factors of success (Figure 2). All factors are of equal importance and influence each other at different levels. Internal factors (process, core group, joint vision, social tools, organizational structures) address the collaborative housing project per se. External factors (political support, funding programs) are the main framework that enable but also foster successful collaborative housing projects, they can be seen as a fertile soil for such projects.

All three interviewees highlight the importance of understanding projects of collaborative housing as a **process** of joint and personal development structured in different phases with various challenges. Such a process is time, energy and money consuming but results in new forms of living, that, however, remain a niche innovation. In a successful project, this process does not have an end, but it is the momentum of success.

“Generally speaking, today’s regimes [of living] developed because we tend to look at everything through excel sheets, everything needs to be compact, cost and time efficient. [...] Such projects are processes that need energy, engagement and mainly time, [...] this is not intended nowadays anymore! [...] Such projects are for marginal groups, but it does not mean, that they do not address issues that concern something bigger.” (Interview Jany 2018)

“Mainly important are the processes within the community. [...] It [collaborative housing projects] needs and is a process! [...] With the help of the process and self-reflection projects are successful. Sometimes also short-term irritations emerged – e.g. members leaving the group – but overall it strengthened the project. [...] It is also an individual process of learning and not ‘only’ a group process.” (Interview Schwarz 2018)

The process needs actors, i.e. the **core group**. The core group is connected by the cohesion of a **joint vision**.

“It takes a core group with a clear and joint vision. [...] After a setback it is important to focus on the question ‘What is our joint goal?’. [...] This is success [...], a group with a clear vision, everything else is resulting. [...] Constructional and spatial matters [for example] are secondary, much more important is a group that has a clear vision and is putting their heart into it. The sequence of finding the joint vision cannot be skipped. [...] At given phases the core group needs to open up and grow repeatedly.” (Interview Schwarz 2018)

“This groups have a certain [joint] critique of society against the consisting system and want to creatively deal with possibilities how to do it differently, better or collaborative. [...] If the group members fit and they know what they want, [...] it [collaborative housing] can work everywhere. By being so adaptable and creative with their environment, external factors [e.g. exposition, position, size of building sight, etc.] don’t play a big role. Such projects can even cope with unattractive building land, classical housing cannot [...]. If they play with it, one can wonder, what added value emerges.” (Interview Jany 2018)

As building land is mentioned before, it is important to highlight that the experts interviewed do not agree with each other to the full extent as far as the role and importance of building land is concerned.

“It is important to find the building land at an early stage with the core group or initiators. It should be accessible and fulfill certain criteria. [...] Some examples in Graz failed due to no consent on the decision for an appropriate building land. The group was there, but they could not agree on a location. Therefore, the building sight is the first common denominator” (Interview Schwarz 2018)

“Attractive building land is important as it valorizes the project. It should be easily accessible, other location criteria are depending on the group and need to be agreed on.” (Interview Rosegger 2018)

“When it comes to that [building land] such projects can turn a bad location into something good.” (Interview Jany 2018)

To keep the process on track and the core group together it needs special **social tools** that regulate the cohabitation, set a communication structure and act as conflict resolution mechanisms.

“Clear conflict resolution mechanisms and different structures and processes within the community are substantial.” (Interview Rosegger 2018)

“Moderation, conversation culture, self-reflection, bringing motivation [...] loops of taking time, perceiving and appreciating [...] such social tools must guide the process. This is the cornerstone!” (Interview Schwarz 2018)

“Communication tools help and foster the process. [...] Groups also need guidance. Especially groups here in Graz did not succeed as they were lacking a competent assistance. It also takes planners, architects, [...] openness, social skills and tools [...] and to get help from outside when needed.” (Interview Jany 2018)

All mentioned factors are regulated by an **organizational structure**. Thereby it is not important if strict rules and mechanisms or a more laissez-faire structure regulate the cohabitation; it is pivotal that the group agrees on them. Moreover, it is important to have clear and transparent organizational structures.

“It showed that working groups proofed as a sufficient and satisfactory tool for the organization of such projects. Each work group focuses on one topic, has a certain autonomy of decision and is composed of mainly professionals in that field or people with experience. You concentrate on what you can do best. [...] Different organizational levels are also vital. For example, a cooperative that is the owner of the projects and regulates juridical, structural and financial issues. An association that is the general tenant of the object and regulates social issues and cohabitation. Individually, every resident is the tenant on their own, member of the cooperative and association. [...] Sometimes it is hard as one person has different roles at different levels. [...] One important issue to be solved at the very beginning is the question of ownership. It showed that projects that failed after a longer period [10 years], did not consider the question of ownership in detail, for example when it comes to a generation change etc. This is a brainteaser!” (Interview Schwarz 2018)

“It is important to consider the competences of the group and also to allow guidance and assistance from outside when needed.” (Interview Jany 2018)

At the end of the interviews each expert was asked if there was another aspect they would like to add or other topics that are very important to mention in that context. It is interesting that all three interviewees highlighted missing factors that are summarized here as external factors, i.e. political support and funding programs. The interviewees describe the need for **political support** as follows:

“It needs a special handling for such projects and concrete political decisions!” (Interview Schwarz 2018)

“At the moment mainly legislative loopholes are used, there is no real handling for such projects. To be successful they need a political support. [...] This can only be reached by a more comprehensive look on the housing sector.” (Interview Rosegger 2018)

“Quite a lot is happening, but there are still some steps to take. [...] Especially when it comes to the political level. It needs (competence) platforms and contact points so that interested groups and individuals can find and use information. Moreover, it needs real political support, commitment and responsibility for projects of collaborative housing. [...] One step is to rethink the whole housing sector and find more holistic approaches to the topic. [...] Awareness-raising is indispensable in this context. It is important to mainstream the topic and provide a ‘stage’ for smaller projects to showcase them.” (Interview Jany 2018)

Closely connected to political support are **funding programs**, that can be seen as tools to help implement projects of collaborative housing. Here it is important to highlight, that it is not funding programs in general, but adjusted, focused funding possibilities for such niche projects. They are a sign of political willingness to foster and enable these projects.

“It needs a landscape of funding programs.” (Interview Jany 2018)

“There is a lack of adjusted housing subsidies and funding programs for such projects. [...] At the moment it is a catastrophe! There are no specific funding programs, only calls that can be used.” (Interview Rosegger 2018)

“Funding programs do not address such projects, they only address the big ones. Small projects do not meet the criteria of this strict catalogues, sometimes they just miss the criteria slightly, but the funding programs do not have measures for that. [...] It needs programs for new styles of living, that foster cohabitation, produce social spaces and can be used as an instrument for small groups.” (Interview Schwarz 2018)

Both internal and external factors are developed, installed and fostered by **pioneers** of collaborative housing. Pioneers can be researchers in the field, practitioners, politicians, residents, etc.

“We need more detailed research on the social sustainability of such projects and general evaluation of collaborative housing projects. [...] also as a multiplier. [...] It also needs a special training for architects [and other practitioners]. [...] It takes general leading figures, [...] actors, that are important for a single project but also influence the sphere of collaborative housing on a higher level. It needs a figurehead.” (Interview Jany 2018)

3. Case study “KooWo Volkersdorf”

In order to find out whether the factors of success – we abstracted from our three interviews and our in-depth research – can be applied to reality, we analyzed a co-operative housing project in the rural area of Graz. The case study was conducted at KooWo Volkersdorf (derived from the German words “kooperativ” and “Wohnen”, meaning co-operative housing), a project that is still in process of implementation. Currently, 25 apartments are built for about 40 adults and 20 children who have known each other since 2015. The final moving in is planned for spring 2019. Despite having different age, all “KooWos” – as the members of the association use to call themselves – share the same vision. They see “collective” action as response to the aging of the society, meaning that people tend to live longer nowadays and thus public expenses for elderly care are rising, however, in this case, elderly care – as well as child care – can be provided collectively on-site. The inhabitants see their project also as criticism to the lack of affordable residential property and as a contribution for mainstreaming sustainable forms of living. There is a strong focus on sustainability and agriculture so that the inhabitants can (partly) supply themselves as well as on renewable energies and co-working (SCHWARZ PLATZER ARCHITEKTEN 2017).

Social factors

There was a core group with a joint vision from the beginning on. During the process of planning every now and then some people decided to leave the project, which often caused confusion for a little time, however, the other inhabitants could often well understand the personal reasons for moving out as the inhabitants got to know each other very well through the continuous social process. A common reason for moving out was the fact that the circle of friends would be too far away when living at KooWo in the countryside. In order to establish contacts with the local population the inhabitants of the co-operative housing project purposely went to village festivals and also invited the local community to events for the purposes of informing them about their plans (Interview Schwarz 2018).

Structural factors

KooWo is generally organized as a cooperative called “WoGen” (derived from the German words “Wohnen” and “Genossenschaft”, meaning cooperative for living). “WoGen” serves as property developer. The relation between WoGen and KoWoo could be described as a mutual partnership as KooWo can profit from WoGen’s yearlong experience with co-housing initiatives in the city of Vienna, whereas WoGen can profit insofar as the whole architectural preparations are executed by the architectural office “Schwarz Platzer Architekten”. The inhabitants chose to become a cooperative because they had the experience that it was the easiest way to realize a project like theirs. The whole housing initiative is organized in various task forces, each of them dealing with specific topics.

Financial aspects

As far as financial affairs are concerned, it is clear that the inhabitants of KooWo have an advantage compared to people building or buying single-family-homes. In the case of KooWo the savings are about of 10 to 15 %, however, the inhabitants have to participate in the process of planning, which is extremely time-consuming but pays off in the end. KooWo is not a publicly funded project. In fact, KooWo applied for different types of funding in various contexts but was always rejected, because of not meeting the program's criteria. Despite the financial disadvantage, not being sponsored by public can nevertheless be considered as an advantage as not being dependent to grants and thus not having to fulfill any conditions means being able to act more flexibly (*Interview Schwarz 2018*).

Spatial factors

The site of the co-operative settlement project is situated in Volkersdorf, a local district of the village Eggersdorf, in the rural surrounding area of Graz. The driving distance from Volkersdorf to the outskirts of Graz is approximately 11 km, which equals about 15 minutes by car. It takes also about 15 minutes to get to the closest regional center, Gleisdorf. Despite the spatial proximity to Graz, Volkersdorf is already situated beyond the exurbs (*Interview Schwarz 2018*). In the proximity of Volkersdorf there are no trains but busses, however their frequency is low. The site of KooWo has a size of 3,6 ha whereof 30 % are used as building land, 50 % for agricultural production and the remaining 20 % are left as green area (SCHWARZ PLATZER ARCHITEKTEN 2017).

Figure 3: “KooWo” Volkersdorf



SCHWARZ PLATZER ARCHITEKTEN (2017)

Political factors

The local mayor was curious about the project right from the start and thus supported the project even if not financially. However, the project received support from Johann Seitinger, the responsible member of the provincial government. KooWo had to deal with the problem that it is nowadays still difficult to get subsidies from politics because there are still too little reference projects concerning this special form of residential building – just as many other similar projects (*Interview Schwarz 2018*).

Discussion

“There were several magical moments during the process.” (Interview Schwarz 2018).

Collaborative housing projects can be seen as small-scale demonstration projects, that developed promising processes and methods for dealing with the complex sustainability challenges the housing sector is facing. The transfer of these niche innovations to the wider public requires a paradigm shift in housing policies and practice. The current housing regime favors large housing associations, which often feel little committed to the implementation of national and international sustainability goals. Societal and political concessions are needed to support housing models that allow more sustainable ways of living. Political decision-makers

need an adjusted legal framework and funding programs with pre-defined criteria to promote the implementation of sustainable housing initiatives and transfer these innovative approaches to the conventional housing regime.

This claim is not unreasonable, because Styria looks back on a rich legacy from the time of the "Modell Steiermark". In the 1970s and 1980s, the provincial government promoted innovative housing strategies as part of a comprehensive long-term political programme. Through concrete objectives, new architectural approaches were facilitated that looked at innovative solutions to floor plan design, building technology, and resident participation. Unfortunately, this innovative phase was ended by a political upheaval at the beginning of the 1990s without a comprehensive evaluation of the lessons learned. Thus, the implementation of new funding programmes should start with the analysis of old achievements and a discussion of current trends with regard to the funding guidelines for ecological housing, thermal insulation, fire protection and accessibility. The aim should be to create social spaces that promote coexistence and focus on the needs of residents instead of overemphasising building physics and ecology.

Housing cooperatives could play a crucial role to promote cooperative forms of housing. Currently, they have no interest in financing or implementing forms of cooperative housing because they operate under total different premises. They precisely calculate their building plans with tight financial and time limits. They look for tenants or buyers when the project is already realized and have no interest in opening up the planning process for future residents because this would require more time and budget. The opening of existing schemes of developing residual buildings towards allowing future residents to co-decide upon the design of outdoor spaces, staircases, shared infrastructure or common areas would be a first step of carefully introducing collaborative housing principles to conventional housing.

Conclusion

Our findings confirm that it is hard to measure the success of collaborative housing projects as they differ significantly. One reason therefore is that the outcome of such initiatives depends mainly on the inhabitants and the social structures within. The existence of a core group with a joint vision from the beginning is as important for the successful implementation of co-operative housing projects as external support, such as political or financial support. As a consequence, the number of successfully implemented co-operative housing projects is still very poor, just as the number of potential funding programs. This is due to the fact that there is hardly research as far as these form of alternative, innovative housing is concerned. To encourage quantity and quality of such projects, already existing initiatives need to be undertaken precise analysis. The future implementation of similar projects depends on the success of already realized ones, measured – for instance – in terms of sustainability. Furthermore, the topic of collaborative housing needs to be mainstreamed to exceed the stage of an individual niche innovation and find practice also in the general housing sector.

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