From Central kitchen to community co-operation - Development of Collective Housing in Sweden

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Abstract

This paper describes the historical development of collective housing in Sweden and presents some of the problems in experimental units built, mainly in the 1980s. The article is based on research about collective housing documented in reports from 1964 and onwards. Collective housing is defined here as *"housing for non-selected categories of people who eat or cook together in communal rooms connected to the private apartments through indoor communication"*. Thus communities living in one big apartment or housing areas with outdoor access to collective services are not included.

"Central kitchen" in Stockholm

The first experiments with collective housing were determined not only by ideas of an ideal place to live but also of rational life. The latter idea gained momentum as industry increased production through mechanisation and penetrated society more thoroughly.

Probably the first European building for a rational way of living was the *"central building"* invented by schoolmaster Otto Fick and built in Copenhagen in 1903. Later, similar buildings were constructed in Homesgarth, Berlin, Zürich, Vienna, etc. In German-speaking Europe they were called *"Einküchenhaus"*, in contrast to the *"multi-kitchen housing"* dominating house production (Pirhofer 1978, Uhlig 1981).

The second one-kitchen housing unit in Europe is the **Hemgården Centralkök** built in 1905-1907 in upper class Östermalm in Stockholm. It was designed by architects Georg Hagström and Frithiof Ekman. In a booklet presenting the project, they referred to prototypes in Copenhagen and the USA. As an important motive for this type of house, it was stated that domestic servants demanded both higher wages and shorter working hours. The purpose was not to facilitate for women to work outside the home, but to save costs by employing fewer servants and reduce the size of the apartment (Hagström and Ekman 1905).

In Hemgården normal bourgeois apartments were deprived of kitchen, maid's room and some storage space. Instead, a central kitchen and a bakery were placed in the basement. Three meals a day could be ordered. These were sent to the flats through dumbwaiters on each side of the staircases. After the meal, china and cutlery was sent back to the basement for cleaning. The servant staff also had the task of doing the laundry, room cleaning, shoe polish, sending messages etc. There were no rooms for gatherings.

The collective services of the Hemgården unit were in operation until the First World War when the unit - owned by a joint-stock company - was declared bankrupt. The new generation of tenants, which moved in later, installed modern kitchens in the flats and restored the basement rooms for parties, hobby activities and tenant meetings.

The collective housing unit - a flagship of functionalism

In Sweden - as in other European countries - modernist architects regarded housing with collective services as a logical expression of modernisation. The word *"collective housing unit"* (*"kollektivhus"* in Swedish) seems to have been introduced by the modernists. In

Sweden the idea was mainly developed by Sven Markelius, architect (later professor) and Alva Myrdal, social reformer (later minister and UN peace negotiator). For them collective housing was not only an instrument to *"collectivise the maid"* as in earlier experiments, but rather to enable women to combine housework and paid employment outside the home.

It was also considered important to provide a socially desirable environment for children in a situation when families became smaller and more isolated. The intention was not to dissolve the family, as was said in the conservative press, but to facilitate everyday life for a modern family with equal roles for men and women. That is why a Stockholm newspaper in 1932 could write *"Will a central home prevent divorces?"* (Caldenby and Walldén 1979).

The first functionalist collective housing unit in Sweden was built in 1935 at **John Ericssonsgatan 6** in Stockholm. It was designed by Sven Markelius, who lived there himself for many years. The kindergarten, established according to Alva Myrdal's concepts, was the first one in Sweden where modern educational methods were used. Those who did not want to use the restaurant could have meals sent up through the dumbwaiters to the flat. Thus, housewives did not have to plan for meals until they returned back from their work in the evening.

The ideal of rational living is revealed not only by the food lifts and the internal telephone system, but also in the layout of the flats, which were designed according to the functionalist idea of minimum requirements. Despite the small apartment sizes the John Ericssonsgatan unit did not attract working class households. It was radical intellectuals who occupied the building. For them the small flats constituted a low standard, and many moved away to bigger houses, especially those with several children.

The first collective housing units of Sweden were based, not on co-operation, but on division of labour. The tenants were to be served by employed (and underpaid female) staff, even for laundry and room cleaning. The tenants themselves, however, were not supposed to do a single piece of work. This probably contributed to the labelling of collective housing as a *"special solution for privileged people"* (Vestbro 1982).

Progress and resistance

One of the most active promoters of collective housing was the professional women's organisation, Yrkeskvinnornas Klubb (YK). It had a unit of its own built in 1939, designed by the female architect Hillevi Svedberg together with Albin Stark. In the **YK House** the kindergarten played an important role for life in the building. As in the John Ericssonsgatan unit, the restaurant gradually became more dependent on outside customers and, therefore, acquired a public character, instead of being a part of the collective.

An interesting example, which functioned well until it was closed down in 1975, is the **Marieberg collective housing unit**, built in 1944 by contractor Olle Engkvist, who spearheaded development of collective housing in Sweden from the 1940s. He introduced a system of 24 meal tickets per adult each month, to be paid as part of the rent. This would keep meal prices low and secure that only people interested in collective services would move in. Tenants could either take their meals in the dining hall or carry the food in a basket to their flat. The Engkvist philosophy included uniformed staff, which secured order in the house, besides serving the tenants. Some of the employees lived in the unit themselves.

The Marieberg unit was designed by architect Sven Ivar Lind, who, despite the corridor solution, created much appreciated communal and private living spaces. Besides a pre-school nursery there was an afternoon kindergarten for school-children. There is ample evidence that

the children’s environment was both stimulating and secure. When larger families left the building, more and more single mothers moved in, thus maintaining the unit as *"a paradise for children"*. This process also meant that the upper class character of collective housing was weakened.

Before 1950 altogether nine collective housing units were built in Sweden. It seemed as if the prediction in the modernist manifesto (Asplund et al 1930), that collective houses would be one of three dominating house types in the future, was about to be verified. Two Danish visitors, who wrote a book about the Swedish experience (Waagensen and Rubin 1949), considered Sweden to be in the forefront and tried to convince Danish opinion to embark on the same course. In Sweden a government investigation committee was appointed to study the problem of collective housing and collective facilities in housing areas. In its first report the committee proposed that collective housing should be promoted (SOU 1954:3).

However, under the impact of the cold war, with its subsequent campaign for the housewife ideal, the committee turned against collective housing in its final report (SOU 1956:32). One of the major arguments was that collective childcare - which was seen as an integral part of collective housing - was detrimental to the moral development of the child. Ample reference was made to the British physician Dr Bowlby who had found that children in orphanages suffered from *"mother deprivation"*, which in turn was said to promote juvenile delinquency. These references were made without taking into consideration that children in collective housing were not deprived of their parents except during normal working hours.

Collective housing experiments were carried out in opposition to the official housing policy, which was strongly geared to the private family. Possibly one can say that the idea of neighbourhood unit planning, which gained momentum in the 1940s, aimed at community cooperation, but this ideal was combined with a policy to promote the housewife institution, and was therefore seen as almost the opposite of collective housing. Furthermore, the social motives for neighbourhood units were soon replaced by functional goals such as traffic separation, enough customers for shopping centres and underground stations, which all meant that neighbourhood unit planning deviated even more from collective housing (Vestbro 1982:122).

Hässelby family hotel from service to cooperation

In the midst of the housewife euphoria of the 1950s Olle Enkvist built his fifth and last collective housing units in Hässelby near the famous Vällingby suburban centre. In line with Engkvist's philosophy it was named *"family hotel"*, further motivated by the fact that *"collective housing"* was associated with left-wing radicalism.

The **Hässelby family hotel** was designed by professor Carl-Axel Acking, who consciously turned the communal spaces into attractive rooms to supplement the private flats. He succeeded in linking all 328 apartments to the communal rooms without making the 750 meters of corridors just dull passages. As in the other units the dining hall became the heart of the building.

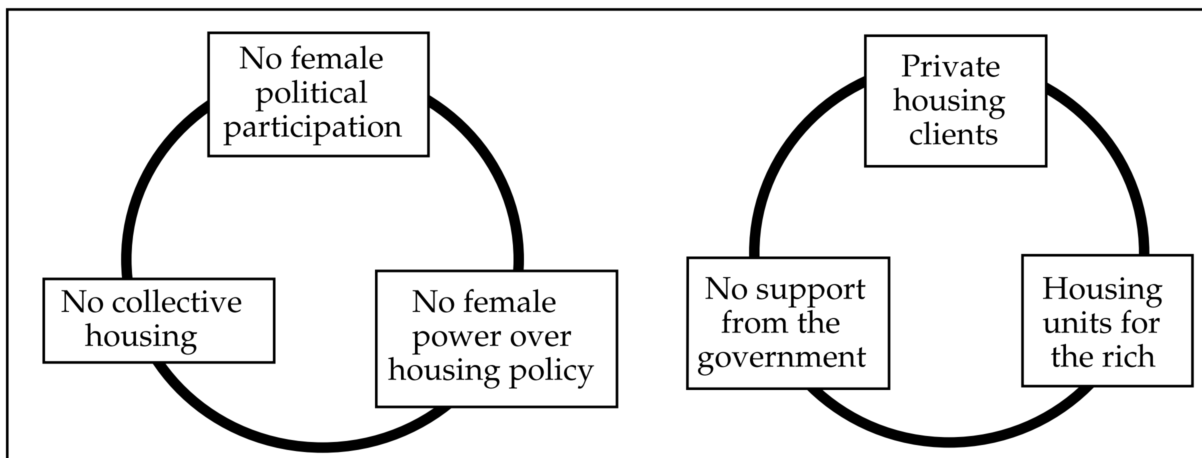
In the beginning the family hotel attracted rather aristocratic inhabitants, but in the 1960s younger radical families moved in, introducing more relaxed forms of living. They also voiced their protests against increases in rent and meal prices. The communal facilities probably contributed decisively to solidarity between the tenants. After the death of Engkvist in 1969, the leadership of the company wanted to dismantle the services in all five collective houses.

Following several years of struggles, the inhabitants of Hässelby family hotel lost the battle about the meal service, and the restaurant closed down in 1976. As they still did not want to give up, the collectivists started to cook themselves in the restaurant kitchen. By this collective work they discovered a new quality, and subsequently the purchase of food, cooking teams and selling of meal tickets was organised on a long-term basis for those about 150 of the 300 tenants who participated in the new activity. The housing company was confronted with new protests when it decided to clear the restaurant to be used for other, more profitable, purposes. Finally the police was sent to evict tenants from the dining hall.

Service or togetherness?

The new type of collective housing, without employed staff, but based on the inhabitant's own collective work, had its breakthrough in the 1980s. Before these changes took place there was an intensive public debate on collective services in housing areas, a debate which actually ended in the turning down of collective housing altogether.

Owing to the economic boom of the 1950s a shortage of skilled labour occurred. The leaders of Swedish commerce and industry found that married women constituted a tremendous potential, if only they could be liberated from housework. Thus those who had propagated the ideal of the housewife in the 1950s became advocates of women's liberation in the 1960s. Collective childcare was no longer described as an emergency solution for poor single mothers but as constructive contributions to children's social development.



Two vicious circles related to communal housing, relevant especially before 1980. Later on the viciousness of the two circles have been weakened.

On the whole there was a positive response among married women to the appeals from commerce and industry. Yet, how could women with pre-school children combine housework with employment? For some, the answer was that men should take their share of housework. Realising that this would not suffice, demands were raised that service facilities in housing should be provided. Swedish women's organisations started to push for those collective housing units, which the male dominated organisations had turned down just a few years earlier. The response of the establishment was, however, that nurseries and other service facilities should be provided without tying them to special types of houses.

One alternative to collective housing, which was introduced at the end of the 1960s, was the so called **service block** containing pre-school centres, old age care, laundry facilities, ready made food service and a reception office with a variety of services. Several such housing areas were constructed at the beginning of the 1970s. They were servicing between 3,200 and 15,000 inhabitants, which meant that people had to walk up to two kilometres to reach the

service facilities. Commercial interests became dominant, while social goals, such as neighbourly contacts, were forgotten.

One example of this type of service ideal is the **Brickebacken service centre** in Örebro, constructed 1969-73. Investigations showed that the service facilities functioned well as such, but the centre did not serve as a forum for social contacts (Söderman-Fleetwood 1981). Therefore it did not become an alternative to the collective housing unit.

A different example from this period is the **Servicehouse of Sollentuna** north of Stockholm, constructed between 1968 and 1972. All the 1,246 apartments were connected through corridors with services such as shops, nurseries, primary schools, an old age centre, gymnastic halls, hobby rooms, a restaurant and a staffed reception at the main entrance, providing services to the tenants. These were open to anybody and thus collective spaces acquired a character of public facilities rather than communal rooms for the tenants as in previous collective housing units.

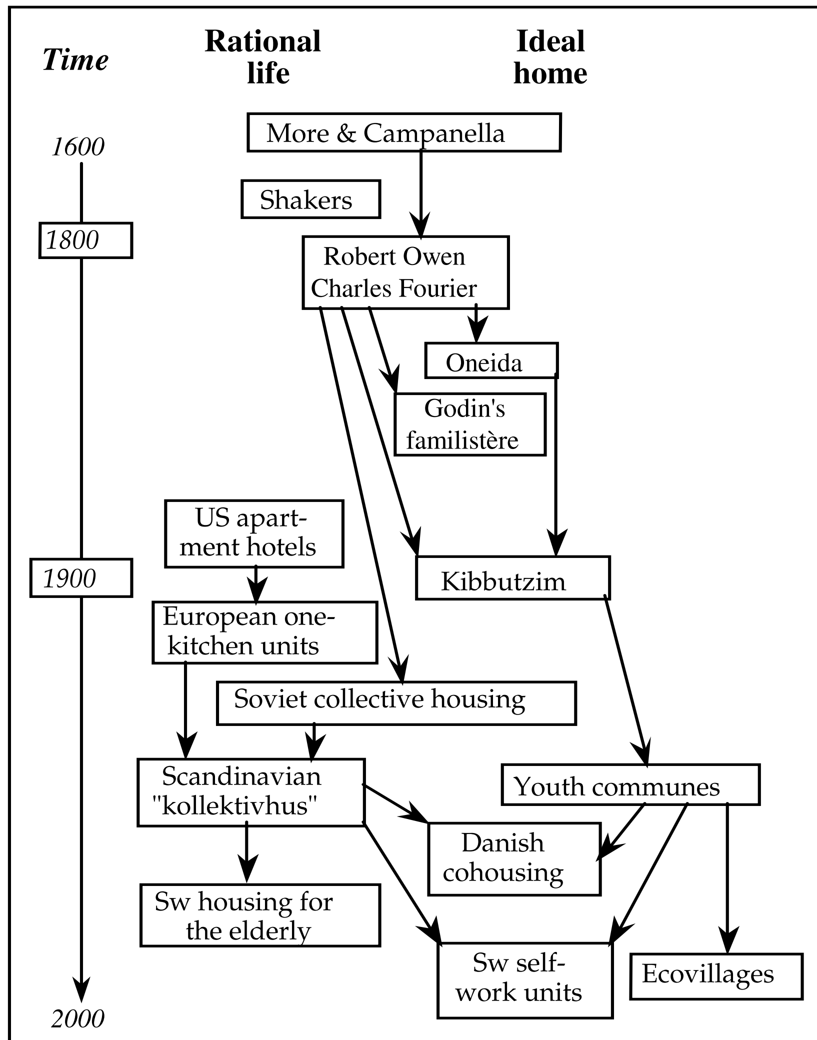
Tenants for the service house of Sollentuna were not recruited because of their desire for collective services. Instead, the block became a dumping place for households with social problems, which gave the experiment a bad reputation. As the unit accommodated about 4,000 people, the tenants did not distinguish each other from outsiders, and it was only a few social services and the reception office which was considered successful before the building complex was reconstructed in the 1980s (Ehn and Thiberg 1987).

As in other countries, economic transformations in Sweden resulted in suburban large-scale housing areas where uprooted people were accommodated without the support of social networks. Multi-family housing blocks, which dominated production up to 1975, were largely run by municipal and private companies, supplying housing where tenants were supposed to contribute nothing but rents. This kind of services provided from above to a mass of consumers were rejected by the emerging youth and student movement, as well as the new feminists and environmentalists.

Breakthrough for communal housing

All collective housing units built in Sweden before 1975 (about 16 units) were based on employed service staff. Rationality was the aim, not communion or co-operation of tenants. The figure below summarises the historical development of collective housing. Although house forms based on collective services through employed staff have goals quite different from those based on the inhabitants' collective work, development shows that the two forms are strongly interlinked. Indoor communications and the common use of spaces contributed to co-operation and communion. In the case of the Hässelby family hotel, this development was very well demonstrated, and became well known because of publicity through mass media.

When the five collective housing units of the Olle Engkvist company were closed down in the middle of the 1970s, it seemed as if collective housing in Sweden had come to en end. It turned out, however, that this moment was the start of a new era for collective housing. This time it was local politicians, social authorities and municipal housing companies who took the initiative. The social aims for collective housing became dominant, and there was no more talk of collective housing as special solutions for privileged groups of people. What had happened?'



Historical development of collective housing. To the left in the figure are housing units based on services through employed staff, and to the right units based on the inhabitants' own collective work. The Soviet experiments of the 20s were based on division of labour as in the service units, but also on active participation of the inhabitants. The communitarian settlements of 19th century USA comprised work in agriculture and industry, as well as domestic work, while communities where members both work and live together are exceptional in later stages. Experiments where members plan and build collectively without eating together are rare in Sweden.

From 1970, the construction of large-scale multi-family units were criticised, not only for lack of architectural qualities, but also for lack of social networks and users' influence. Vandalism and high maintenance costs had become a problem, and around 1975 many municipal housing companies had empty flats. In the same period new institutional house forms were built for the elderly and the handicapped. These institutions were criticised for being too large, inhuman and segregative. In this situation politicians and others were desperately looking for alternatives (Woodward et al 1989:18f).

Units with municipal social care

One alternative, initiated in 1977, was the **Stolplyckan** collective housing unit in Linköping, developed by the social authorities in co-operation with an independent activist group. The idea was to combine municipal care with a collective housing unit of the classical type. The pensioners and the nursery children would provide enough customers for the restaurant so that other tenants would not have to buy a certain number of meal tickets. Thus the central kitchen

functions as a restaurant during day-time, and is used by the active tenants for their own cooking a few evenings a week. The various age groups are also integrated through the common use of a cafeteria, a library, hobby rooms, gymnastic hall, etc.

The private apartment surfaces were reduced by 8 to 15 per cent in relation to normal apartment sizes, so that 2 000 sq metres of communal spaces could be supplied without increasing rents. Many features were taken from the Hässelby family hotel, and in fact one of the responsible architects, Ingvar Törnblom, was himself the chairman of the tenants' association in the Hässelby unit while designing Stolplyckan.

Of the 184 apartments, 35 are allocated for pensioners and people with dysfunctions. Together with the pensioners, the social authorities and the housing company, the tenants are represented in a housing board, which is responsible for the use of communal facilities. The tenants are also organised in a dozen of working groups dealing with planning of meals, interior decoration, gardening, reception of visitors, children's films, etc.

A model similar to Stolplyckan has been applied in some other places in Sweden such as Eskilstuna, Jönköping, Karlskoga, Stockholm, Västerås and Örebro. In the two Stockholm examples **Rio** and **Fristad** a standard service house for pensioners were combined with a collective housing unit. In fact, the buildings consist of two separate parts, and the service house unit is as big as the collective housing unit (altogether 254 and 308 apartments respectively). One purpose of this model was to make several groups of tenants share facilities such as restaurant, clubrooms, library, assembly hall, hobby rooms, gymnastic hall etc, thus promoting contacts between generations.

In contrast to Stolplyckan, the social authorities in Stockholm did not accept the integration model. They regarded the collectivists as disturbing elements who intruded upon the territory of the social workers. Another problem was that many of the collectivists wanted a model based on collective work of their own, while others were strongly for the service model. Therefore a lot of conflicts appeared in these units (Woodward et al 1989).

Units with collective work

The most frequently built collective housing model in Sweden is the one based on the inhabitants' own work. This type was developed by a group of women in Stockholm in 1977. They belonged to the new generation of feminists who rejected the idea that housework should be reduced as much as possible. Instead, they maintained that much of this women's culture had a value in itself. Cooking, baking, sewing, child-rearing and other house-bound activities would be enjoyable if carried out together and would still be time-saving. When carrying out everyday chores together, a simple type of attractive togetherness is created, the group argued (Berg et al 1982).

For the above purpose a unit of 20 to 50 apartments was recommended, The idea was that no employed staff would be required. The women's group could very well have established a housing unit of its own, but it did not want the model to be a special solution for the privileged, and therefore it was proposed that public housing companies should adopt the model. At a big housing exhibition in Stockholm 1980 the group presented the idea in the form of a small model house, and later they published a book (Berg et al 1982), which served as a blueprint for activists and housing companies who were ready to accept the model.

During the 1980s more than 30 buildings of this model were built in Sweden. The first example of the new model was **Stacken**, built in Bergsjön, Gothenburg in 1979. In this low-status area quite a few apartments were empty because of the housing crisis, and the

responsible municipal housing company accepted an experiment when the architect, professor Lars Ågren, asked if he could turn one of the ten-storey point blocks into a collective housing unit.

Tenants for Stacken were recruited through advertising and had their apartments tailored to their own taste as the block was rebuilt. A central kitchen, a dining room and a nursery for children was arranged on the 5th floor, showing that communal facilities were for tenants, but not for outsiders. The inhabitants formed a new type of administrative set-up in order to get full control of maintenance, recruitment of tenants and use of communal rooms. Studies by researchers from the Chalmers University of Technology have shown that Stacken attracted people who wanted to fulfil their innermost dreams in this housing experiment. This also meant that they at the start had conflicts over issues such as type of food, level of cleanliness, use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages, child rearing and internal democracy (Caldenby and Walldén 1984). Some households moved away because of the conflicts and participation in communal activities was gradually reduced.

Another example of the new model is **Prästgårdshagen** in Älvsjö in southern Stockholm. As in most other buildings of this model, the inhabitants were recruited through the special waiting list run by the municipal authority in charge of allocation of rental accommodation. Although the Praestgårdshagen unit was a new construction, tenants were recruited early enough to be able to influence the design of the building. The sizes of the 31 apartments were somewhat reduced in order that communal spaces could be provided without increasing rents.

When signing the contract tenants are requested to join the association of the unit, and also to agree to do some compulsory work such as cooking or house cleaning. Usually each inhabitant cooks in a team of two once every second week. Such a task takes about three hours, and requires that the one in charge is able to leave his/her job about 3 p.m. that day. In Prästgårdshagen the tenants have also taken over maintenance tasks such as the cleaning of communal rooms, gardening and lawn cutting, snow-clearance and minor repairs. In this way they have managed to reduce their housing costs and to make new investments in communal facilities.

Conclusions

In the 1980s, about 60 collective housing units with a communal kitchen have been built or planned in Sweden. Of these, 40 are rental units under the responsibility of the municipality. About 8 are co-operative and 8 are privately owned. More than half of the units are located to the Stockholm area. Sizes vary from 5 to 184 apartments. In contrast to the previous situation, local politicians, social authorities and municipal housing companies often support the collective experiments.

So far collective housing has mainly attracted well educated people employed in the public sector and with independent, socially oriented jobs. They often reject consumerism and look for other qualities of life such as a clean environment, biological food, a warm and secure milieu for children, and good neighbourly contacts. Whether collective housing only suits the interests of this minority group is still an open question. It might well be that these "post-materialists" are pioneers for other groups who will benefit even more from communal housing.

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