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Hammond, M (2018) Spatial Agency: Creating New Opportunities for Sharing and Collaboration in Older People's Cohousing. Urban Science, 2 (3). pp. 1-13. ISSN 2413-8851

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci2030064>

Publisher: MDPI

Version: Published Version

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Article

Spatial Agency: Creating New Opportunities for Sharing and Collaboration in Older People's Cohousing

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Received: 2 June 2018; Accepted: 27 July 2018; Published: 2 August 2018



Abstract: Older people's cohousing enables individuals to share spaces, resources, activities, and knowledge to expand their capability to act in society. Despite the diverse social, economic, and ethical aims that inform the creation of every cohousing community, there is often a disconnect between the social discourse developed by cohousing groups and the architectural spaces they create. This is a consequence of the building development process in cohousing, in which groups of older people are tasked with making decisions with considerable spatial implications prior to any collaboration with an architect. The concept of "spatial agency" offers an alternative model for the creation of cohousing, in which the expansion of architectural practice beyond aesthetic and technical building design enables social and spatial considerations to be explored contemporaneously. This study uses a two-year design-research collaboration with a cohousing group in Manchester, UK, to test the opportunities and constraints posed by a "spatial agency" approach to cohousing. The collaboration demonstrated how spatial agency enables both the architect and cohouser to act more creatively through a mutual sharing of knowledge, and, in doing so, tests new opportunities of sharing that are currently outside the cohousing orthodoxy.

Keywords: ageing; cohousing; architecture; co-design; spatial agency; sharing; design-research; critical autoethnography; Bourdieu

1. Introduction

The cohousing model is a residential typology consisting of individual dwellings with collectively owned facilities, with most communities seeking to develop strong social bonds between residents through shared management, labour, and leisure activities. There is a growing cohort of "older people" (commonly defined as those aged 50 and over) seeking to develop cohousing as a way of responding to the opportunities and challenges posed by their experiences of ageing. Older people's cohousing uses the sharing of spaces, resources, activities, and knowledge as a way of increasing the agency of those who reside in cohousing communities and developing new relationships between the older individual and the cities they inhabit. Many communities seek to address wider social issues through their sharing practice, such as environmental destruction [1], unaffordability of housing [2], and societal paternalism [3]. Cohousing developments are resident-led and most employ participatory design approaches, with residents having a significant influence on the forms of sharing that are practiced within their community. Despite this, architectural responses to cohousing rarely reflect the diversity of cohousing groups and their different collective aims, with most adopting an orthodox set of shared spaces.

This study develops an alternative understanding of the architect's role in older people's cohousing based on Awan, Schneider, and Till's concept of "spatial agency" [4]. Spatial agency

seeks to apply architectural knowledge in contexts beyond the design of technical and aesthetic form, positioning the architect as one of many agents of change. This new form of practice was investigated through a two-year design-research collaboration with an older people's cohousing group in Manchester, UK, in which spatial agency was used to challenge the cohousing orthodoxy and identify opportunities for new forms of sharing within a cohousing community and within the wider city.

2. Ageing, Sharing, and Cohousing

An ageing population is set to be one of the main demographic shifts of the next century. Whilst this is a positive development that generates many opportunities in society, discussion of urban ageing often focuses on the problems of a large older population, such as the “burden” that older people place on healthcare, pension, and housing systems [5]. This pervasive deficit perspective leads to the marginalisation of older people in urban society. Older people are “... relatively disempowered from the option of managing community and neighbourhood change”, as housing, economic, and cultural opportunities disproportionately favour the needs of younger professionals [6] (p. 334).

One such form of marginalisation for older people is the emergence of the “sharing economy”, or “collaborative consumption”. Whilst there is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding these terms [7] (p. 4), it can be broadly defined as a socio-economic model based on the peer-to-peer exchange of services or the maximization of under-utilised assets [8] (p. 121). Prominent web-based models for “sharing”, such as AirBnB and Uber, have been successful in making goods and services more accessible for many people. The movement from ownership-based consumption to access-based consumption has increased the affordability of some resources or services, whilst online infrastructure enables people to commercialise their own assets or labour with a much larger pool of individuals than previously possible. Despite these benefits for many people, the sharing economy enables exclusionary practices that adversely impact individuals based on race and income, and, in doing so, reproduce existing societal inequalities [7] (pp. 6–8). In terms of age, web-based sharing platforms are disproportionately used by younger people; 18–29 year-olds are 700% more likely to use Uber (USA) than those aged 65 and over [9] (p. 13), and just 5% of properties listed on AirBnB are posted by people aged 60 and over [10]. Whilst some have noted the potential for web-based platforms could offer potential benefits for older people, such as the provision of in-home care support, these are still in their infancy [11].

The opportunities for older people posed by peer-to-peer sharing can only be fully understood through a broader definition of the sharing economy. Rather than limiting the definition to a web-based, profit-driven model of sharing, it is important to recognise that the coordinated acts of peer-to-peer exchange can exist outside of virtual mechanisms, and that these exchanges are often driven by social and emotional rewards rather than economic or material benefits [12–14]. By expanding the definition of the sharing economy to offline and non-profit platforms, it is possible to identify a number of practices through which older people can improve their quality of life through shared, social interaction. For example, the “Men’s Sheds” initiatives in the UK enabled older men to share their tools with each other. The aim of this is not to provide older men with access to assets they do not own, but to enable members to “... sharing skills and knowledge, and of course a lot of laughter” [15]. Similarly, the “homeshare” model offers older people a way of maximising the value of an under-used asset (an empty bedroom), but with social support as a primary motive as opposed to financial income. Tenants rent a bedroom at a below market rate in return for undertaking some domestic tasks (like cleaning and gardening) and offering companionship to the older person they live with [16,17].

The understanding of sharing as a means of creating new social relationships is one of the core elements of “older people’s cohousing”. Whilst cohousing takes many forms, all seek to use the sharing of spaces, resources, activities, and knowledge to achieve more than they could in isolation, and to increase their agency to affect social change within the city.

The cohousing model emerged in northern Europe in the 1970s and commonly consists of privately owned residences and collectively owned communal spaces [18]. There is a range in the size and forms taken by cohousing communities, although 20–30 dwellings are cited by many practitioners as an optimal size [19–21]. Cohousing communities are often resident-led and managed, with the explicit aim of generating social bonds between residents. A recent development in the field of cohousing is “older people’s cohousing”, which has become an established sub-section of the cohousing movement in the last 15 years [19,22–24]. The increasing interest in older people’s cohousing can be linked to the transitions of aspirational baby boomers into older age, who seek “... an alternative to living alone, but reject conventional forms of housing for older people as paternalistic and institutional.” [23] (p. 107). For many, changing residential environment in later life offers a “...meaningful avenue for the elderly to extend themselves into the future, to find meaningful new stimulation and roles, and to enhance their satisfaction during later life” [25] (p. 211). This is, however, predicated on the financial, physical, and social capability to initiate such a change; barriers have thus far limited older people’s cohousing to relatively wealthy and healthy individuals. One of the key benefits of older people’s cohousing is the ability to be open about their own experiences of ageing, and, therefore, access mutual support in response to the changing physical capabilities and emotional experiences of growing older [24]. Other studies have also identified how cohousing can lead to increased participation in civic and political processes [26] and increases the social capital of cohousers within the cities and neighbourhoods that they reside in [27].

It is important to distinguish between cohousing as a form of housing development, and cohousing as a set of relationships enabled by the environment it is situated in. Sharing not only informs the day-to-day experiences within a cohousing community but often contributes to the transformation of the neighbourhoods and cities in which they are located.

The day-to-day experiences within a cohousing community usually focus on opportunities for informal social interaction, facilitated by the sharing of communal facilities. Communal kitchens and dining rooms are ubiquitous in cohousing, enabling groups to regularly share meals together [18–20,28]. Many cohousing groups establish informal club or activity groups to use these spaces, such as a walking group or book clubs. For older people, the mutual support derived from such a rich social network also provides resilience to negative macro-level conditions, like ageism, in society or the medicalisation of support needs amongst their cohort [24].

Although there are some examples of cohousing communities that become inward facing [29] (pp. 2030–2031), many seek to develop strong relationships with the communities and cities they are situated in [30] (p. 324). For example, the “Solinsieme” community in St. Gallen, Switzerland use their communal space to host events for the wider community, including lectures and games nights [31–33]. Cohousing has also attracted political support for the contributions it makes to cities, with cities like Hamburg supporting cohousing in areas with highly transient populations to encourage stability and community resilience [34] (pp. 407–409).

In addition to these immediate interactions with neighbours (both inside and outside their respective communities), many cohousing groups seek to effect change on a wider city or societal level. These are often as a response to a perceived social injustice, or to demonstrate that alternative models of living are possible. Examples of these include communities, such as LILAC in Leeds, UK, whose mutual ownership model was developed in response to the increasingly unaffordable housing in the UK [2]. Sharing is often used as a means of achieving a higher level of environmental sustainability than is possible in an individual home, with communities, such as the Lancaster Cohousing in the UK, installing district heating system and hydroelectric power installations [1]. For older people, cohousing can offer a means of mitigating against predicted drops in state care provision through mutual social support [22,35].

One of the key challenges within cohousing is the difficulty of the development process. Although there is a lack of comprehensive data sources, it has been suggested that just one in 10 cohousing groups ever progress to the construction phase [36]. It is not uncommon for the cohousing development

to exceed 10 years [37], with a DIY ethic, lack of property development expertise, and difficulties procuring land all cited as challenges for prospective cohousing groups [36]. These issues are particularly pertinent in relation to older people's cohousing, where a prolonged development process might account for a significant portion of the individuals remaining years.

3. Architecture and the Creation of Cohousing

Whilst most definitions of cohousing attempt to describe a series of spaces, facilities, relationships, and practices [18,19], cohousing can also be understood as a medium through which individuals define these parameters for themselves. Rather than a fixed model of shared living, cohousing offers older people the opportunity to create and negotiate their own social, ethical, and environmental vision, and, in doing so, increases their capabilities to affect change in their immediate housing community and the wider city. The diversity of motives behind cohousing demonstrates the need for each cohousing community to define their own understanding of sharing, which is based on the collective capabilities and desires of residents. This requires the creation and negotiation of a social vision alongside the spatial environment through which it is practiced. As a result, the cohousing model is notable for the near-universal adoption of participatory design practices in the development process [19] (pp. 19–20).

There is a lack of critical understanding of participatory design within the cohousing field beyond the notion that cohousers should be “involved” in the design process to some extent [20] (p. 201). This is usually manifest as a series of workshops led by an architect to propose the architectural form of the site and building, based on a brief, site, and budget that had been pre-agreed by the cohousing group [38]. The architect's role is limited to the aesthetic and formal design, informed by their own tastes and design expertise, which are augmented to some extent with the views of the cohousing group they work with. Whilst this is cited as an important way of bringing the cohousing group together and making sure that the community meets the requirements of the clients [39] (p. 235), this design process can be seen as limiting. In this design process, cohousing groups are tasked with creating a collective identity and social ethos, but are disempowered from exploring the spatial implications and possibilities of these ideas. By the time an architect has been employed, the social definition of the community is no longer malleable, as it is manifest in budgets, design briefs, and site selections. This results in communities with a strong conceptual ethos, which are often not represented spatially. For example, the Older Women's Cohousing (OWCH) community in London, UK has developed a strong feminist and anti-ageism identity, manifest in a building that is “... beautiful and suited to community living, but not particularly radical.” [40] (p. 29).

Overcoming these limitations demands a new understanding of the architect/cohouser relationship, in which the social discourse within a cohousing group is developed in parallel with the spatial discourse through which it is enabled. This requires a reconceptualisation of the linear development process, in which architects only contribute to the final building design phase.

Awan, Schneider, and Till's model of “spatial agency” is critical of the interpretation of architecture as the aesthetic and technical task of building design [4] (p. 30). In response to this, they argue that architects should seek new forms of practice that engage with the social, political, and ethical aspects of society [41]. They propose that architects take on the role of spatial agents, a transition predicated on two fundamental shifts in architectural practice: First, it calls for the “... inclusion of others, amateurs, in the processes” of design; and second, it dismisses the idea that “... the building as the sole source and representation of expertise” held by the architect [4] (p. 43). This requires the architect to reject their role as the autonomous creator of purely aesthetic or technical form [4] (pp. 27–28), and instead understand that their role is “... not the agent of change, but one among many agents.” [41] (p. 97).

By breaking the link between architectural practices and the creation of a building, spatial agency enables an alternative understanding of the architect's relationship to cohousing. Rather than separating the social discourse within a community (defined by the cohousing group) from the spatial or architectural production of the community (defined primarily by the architect), spatial agency provides a means of developing both in unison. This creates an opportunity to identify and test

new opportunities for sharing that a cohousing group would be unlikely to consider had they not collaborated with a designer. By challenging the idea of the architect solely as a building designer, spatial agency also opens the opportunity for architects and cohousing groups to collaborate at a much earlier stage of development than is seen in most cohousing developments.

In 2014, I began collaborating with Manchester Urban Cohousing (MUCH) in Manchester, UK; a group of older people who were attempting to establish a cohousing community. The group were in the very early stages of setting up their cohousing group, and the group did not have a site, brief, or finances in place. Despite this, the group saw the value in collaborating with an architect to better understand what they could achieve and how it might shape the definition of their collective values. As a result, I took on the role of a spatial agent with the group, supporting the development of a shared, creative, and spatial discourse that would underpin their later aspirations to create a cohousing community. Over the course of a two-year design-research collaboration, we sought to identify the limitations and opportunities presented by spatial agency in cohousing, and how it could help to create innovative forms of sharing both within and outside the confines of a cohousing community.

4. Methodology: Exploring the Potential of Spatial Agency through Design-Research

MUCH was formed in response to a series of conversations between seven friends about what they wanted to do in retirement. The group discovered cohousing after it was featured in a newspaper, which led them to spend four years discussing and researching the model.

My collaboration with MUCH began in January 2014 and finished in April 2016. During this time, the initial group of seven members grew, stabilising at 14 members for the majority of the collaboration. The majority of the group had either retired, reduced their working hours, or had plans to retire in the next couple of years. None of the group came from architectural backgrounds, and none of the group had experience in property development.

The collaboration aimed to establish and test how the group could share spaces, resources, activities, and knowledge, both within their cohousing community and with the wider city. Informed by the concept of spatial agency, the interactions between MUCH and myself took place much sooner than an architect would normally work with a cohousing group, focusing on the early project definition stage, rather than designing the actual building that the group would construct. The purpose of these interactions was to help create a social and spatial discourse about the forms of sharing that would be possible in their community, and eventually produce a design brief based on these ideas. The collaboration adopted a non-linear structure of reflexive, iterative, and generative practices, embracing the transformative potential of “contingency”, a key quality of spatial agency [42]. As a result, the collaboration with MUCH involved participation in a wide range of situations where opportunities could emerge, but, equally, could not be known in advance. Practically, this involved attending or delivering 37 individual practices; meetings, workshops, design charrettes, training events, and site visits. Through these practices, we identified challenges and limitations within the cohousing development process and proposed how spatial agency could contribute to resolving these limitations. The collaboration with MUCH was recorded through contemporaneous field notes, photos, and audio recordings, with additional reflections gathered through a structured focus group after our collaboration.

The collaboration with MUCH took the form of “research through practice”. Research through design is a process through which issues and questions emerge because of design practices, and are tested through the application of new practices [43] (p. 96). My practices as a spatial agent were, therefore, both the research methodology and the object of enquiry. This approach enabled the generation and communication of knowledge that would not be possible as either a non-participant observer or through retrospective case-study analysis. Whilst practice-led research is well established in the architectural field [44], the approach presents a number of methodological challenges, such as the replicability of creative processes in which the researcher is an active participant. The approach employed in this study recognises that any number of variables could have changed the trajectory

of the collaboration, but that this does not undermine the validity of the insight it provides, as “... there are forms of knowledge peculiar to the awareness and ability of a designer” [45] (p. 5), which can only be accessed through the undertaking of creative enquiry [42]. With regards to these constraints and opportunities, this study does not claim to provide a general evaluation of the effectiveness of spatial agency compared to other architectural approaches. Instead, it presents examples of how spatial agency enables older people to act creatively and provide critical analysis through which the architect-cohouser relationship can be better understood.

One of the challenges of research through design is that knowledge is often embedded within the traditional architectural outputs; buildings, models, and drawings [42,43]. By adopting the spatial agency position that building design is not the sole expression of architectural knowledge, this study used critical autoethnography as a means of documenting and reflecting on the interactions within the processes of design, as opposed to analysing the designed outcomes.

Autoethnography is a narrative-based enquiry in which a subject is studied through the experiences of the author. Although written from an autobiographical perspective, the methodological orientation is ethnographic as it seeks to understand the interactions between the author and other individuals, in this case within the act of co-design [46] (p. 48). This approach offers a unique insight into the cohousing development process, as the majority of the research to date has focused on retrospective case study analysis undertaken by researchers who were not involved in the development process. The result of this is a focus on outcomes within the existing cohousing literature, rather than the interactions through which these outcomes were created.

Rather than simply describing the interactions between the architect and cohouser, critical autoethnography demands that a theoretical position is used to analyse the experiences of the author, and therefore provide insight that can be applied to a wider set of situations that other practitioners might face. This critical analysis should not be static, but allow the author to “... openly discuss changes in their beliefs and relationships over the course of fieldwork” as their experiences help shape their understanding of the people and contexts they operate within [47] (p. 384). In my collaboration with MUCH, the critical analysis is informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of practice [48], which are used to identify the limits to creativity and how they can be overcome.

Through a critical autoethnographic account of two workshops, this paper identifies the limitations and opportunities posed by spatial agency. The first workshop was a self-directed design game, in which the self-imposed limits that the MUCH members adopted were identified through a creative exercise. The second workshop was a narrative based workshop, in which participants used narrative to critique the cohousing orthodoxy and create innovative forms of sharing within and outside their proposed community. These two workshops demonstrate how spatial agency can allow creative ideas about sharing to emerge through a propositional critique of the cohousing orthodoxy, but also the creative limits that prevent these from emerging as part of the normal development process when architectural input only occurs much later.

5. Workshop One: Design Game

The MUCH group requested that I design a workshop for their public recruitment event, with the goal of providing an opportunity for prospective members of their group to be creative and get to know each other. I proposed a short design game, in which the 22 participants would be tasked with creating a cohousing community in groups of five to six people, using model making and wooden blocks to produce their design (see Figure 1). The designs would be self-directed by each group without my involvement, thus they demonstrated both the group’s creativity to define shared practices and also the limits of their creativity, which we could build on in later workshops. During the workshop, I circulated between the groups to discuss the decisions each group made. At the conclusion of the workshop, each group presented their design to the rest of the attendees.



Figure 1. Manchester Urban Cohousing (MUCH) members participating in the design game workshop.

The workshop demonstrated one of the limits to defining new forms of sharing; the reliance on past experiences as the basis for proposing new ideas. This was representative of Bourdieu's suggestion that "... it is yesterday's man who inevitably predominates us, since the present amounts to little compared with the long past in the course of which we were formed and from which we result" [48] (p. 79). Many of the propositions developed by the MUCH members were explicitly based on their own past experiences, either directly through their own interactions or indirectly through various forms of media. For example, one of the group wanted to reduce their maintenance burden, noting that they wanted the shared interactions within the community to be focused on leisure rather than labour. This idea was manifest in their design, which included a self-cleaning ceramic façade. One member of the group explained that the idea had been based on a holiday to Vienna, where he visited Otto Wagner's ceramic fronted art nouveau apartments. This demonstrates how past experiences can be the basis of creativity, as the individual transposed his knowledge of an architectural case study in a novel way, rather than as a simple facsimile of the original.

Whilst "yesterday's man" provided the impetus for creativity in this example, there were other situations where the opposite was true. Bourdieu also argues that our reliance on past experiences to inform future practices generates a "sense of limits", in which all actions reproduce the "established order" rather than genuinely innovative ideas [48] (p.164). He proposes that individuals place a self-imposed demand for realism in their actions, which causes past experiences to be reproduced and perpetuates certain ideas as being "sensible" and "reasonable" [48] (p. 79). The "sense of limits" that I observed within the workshops was derived from two interrelated constraints. First, there were examples in which groups regulated their actions to make "sensible" propositions. Second, there were a number of situations in which the participants had ideas and desires that they were unable to propose in spatial forms.

The self-regulating tendencies of the groups were evident in the way they dismissed ideas outside of the cohousing orthodoxy. Whilst a number of people identified unusual ideas for sharing space, including a brewery and a community cinema, these ideas were dismissed as unrealistic by others and not included in their final designs. The designation of these ideas as unreasonable was because they had never seen a housing community with a community cinema attached to it, but this in itself should not have made the idea unreasonable. A small cinema space could take up a similar sized space as an

art room or craft workshop; ideas that can be seen in various existing cohousing communities. The barrier to creativity in this situation was that the participants had not seen one in the past, and thus could not confidently envision what spatial form it would take or whether it would be affordable. As a consequence, this self-regulation (if unchallenged) has the potential to close off opportunities for new shared spaces and activities that might enable a cohousing group to create positive relationships and contributions to their wider neighbourhood.

Another theme was that the group raised conceptual ideas that they were unable to propose because they could not conceive the forms they would take. For example, one group proposed a shared laundry space as a means of reducing their carbon footprint. Whilst the shift from individual to shared washing and drying machines would have contributed to their aims, the group decided they wanted to investigate a natural clothes drying system within the design of their building. The problem they faced was their inability to conceive how this would work. The group raised vague ideas about "... some type of 'dry greenhouse'", but they were unable to progress with the idea any further without the support of a designer. This highlights one of the key contributions that spatial agency can have in cohousing—the potential to overcome the limitations to our own creativity by testing ideas that would otherwise be discarded. The cohousers were proposing exciting ideas but were unable to evaluate the realism of their ideas or convert many of their concepts into spatial propositions. These ideas would be unlikely to make it into their design brief if they had no means of testing their feasibility.

During a structured reflection on the workshop, the MUCH members identified how negotiating different ideas into the same formal design was a challenge. One member of the group noted that:

"... it drove us to think 'how would we manage that?' What it throws up is that you can't move forward with those tensions in the group. We need a framework to overcome these issues ... otherwise you spend the time thinking 'nobody is listening to me anymore'."

In response to this, we decided to create a workshop in which each MUCH member had the opportunity to express their ideas individually. The aim of this was to make clear and discuss the different aspirations held within the group. We agreed that we needed to develop an alternative means of expressing creativity that did not rely on traditional architectural design skills, and I worked with two MUCH members to design a workshop in response to this.

6. Workshop Two: Narrative Workshop

One of the challenges of the design game workshop was that it tasked the participants to act as "architects". Whilst this did demonstrate the wide range of capabilities within the group, it also placed the onus on them to propose the spatial manifestation of their desired shared practices, something that paradoxically acted as a barrier to creativity. Discussing this with the group, it was suggested that it would be interesting to explore other mediums of creativity that might allow them to be propositional without having to express their ideas architecturally. I proposed using storytelling as a way of overcoming these challenges and was asked to design a workshop in collaboration with one of the MUCH members.

During the narrative workshop, I asked each MUCH member to tell a story describing a single day in their imagined cohousing community. Participants were asked to suggest what they would do, thinking about situations inside their home, the cohousing community, and in the wider neighbourhood they would live in. To help the group develop these stories, we gave everyone a scenario within which to frame their narratives, such as a Sunday in summer, a cold and rainy Tuesday, or Christmas Eve. Following this, the whole workshop was repeated with a single change; the cohousers were asked to tell a story based on the same scenario, but when they were 20 years older.

Much like the previous design game workshop, this exercise both enabled creative ideas to emerge and highlighted the limits of the group's creative potential. It quickly became clear that, rather than proposing a radical vision of cohousing, the participants used the workshop to critique and elaborate on the existing cohousing orthodoxy. The workshop showed how a sense of limits was perpetuating the inclusion of common sharing practices seen in cohousing within their narrative, but

equally generated opportunities for the cohousers to interrogate the impact of these norms within specific situations.

For example, one member of the group based her narrative around her children visiting her over Christmas, as they currently did at her present home. Unexpectedly, the participant generated an additional constraint in her narrative. She imagined that the cohousing community would have a guest room (which is a common shared asset within the cohousing orthodoxy), but in her narrative this room was overbooked. Her story proposed that her family had to stay at a hotel nearby, which she argued was not ideal, but that she could not imagine another way of doing it. Through her narrative, the MUCH member had effectively critiqued a “sensible” element of the cohousing orthodoxy as insufficient to her needs, but also identified her own inability to propose an alternative proposition. In a short discussion that followed the story, another cohouser said that they go away at Christmas so the narrator’s children they could stay in her flat instead of a hotel. It would have been easy for the participants to simply suggest that the community would need more shared guest rooms, but by expressing their desired experiences a creative, social alternative emerged.

Other stories developed by the MUCH members expanded upon elements of the cohousing orthodoxy, imagining a different relationship between the cohousing community and wider neighbourhood. One of the stories described how the MUCH members were holding a meal for socially isolated older people in the community. The story described how the meal would take place in a large communal dining room, a space that is ubiquitous in the cohousing orthodoxy, and demonstrated how this type of space could enable the MUCH group to enact the kind of social change that they could not achieve in their current individual houses. This shows that whilst the individual still retained a sense of limits by proposing a standard cohousing element, they also acted creatively by reinterpreting its use to match their social and ethical dispositions. On one level, this story might affect how the dining space could be designed, considering a different use of the space. Equally, the story identified a social vision that could be explored in a multitude of different ways within the design process.

When the workshop transitioned into telling a story that imagined the community in 20 years, it became evident that the group were having a more difficult time imagining what their community would be like. Many of the stories seemed to suggest that the community would start to look inwards and that individuals might not have such strong relationships with the wider community. Some suggested that shared spaces and activities might be used less as people became less active, whilst others proposed that they would be used more because people were less able to attend other events outside of their immediate community. It was noticeable that the stories at this stage had much less clarity and posed fewer definitive uses and interactions than the previous sets of stories. This highlighted the challenge facing the group; the need to imagine and respond to situations that were unknown to them at the time, such as the capabilities and desires they might have later in their life.

7. Discussion

The examples discussed in this paper demonstrate how co-design processes enable older people to investigate and test how sharing might shape their urban environment, and how different spatial constraints can influence what forms of sharing are possible. Although the focus of the collaboration with MUCH was not the development of traditional architectural plans, spatial agency did enable the exploration of how sharing and collaboration might shape the form of their community. A central component of this was the interrogation of the shared/private split within the community, with the group exploring models with much smaller private dwellings in favour of more elaborate shared facilities. Although the group agreed to adopt a fairly orthodox split between private and shared spaces, spatial agency created opportunities for this decision to be made consciously, and with the implications of different options properly investigated. The process of spatial agency did, however, influence the group’s ideas about what form shared spaces should take. Whilst the cohousing orthodoxy is for a single, centralised “common house” where all collective activity is centred, the MUCH group

recognised the opportunities posed by having a diversity of shared spaces. Rather than pre-determining the functions of these spaces, they felt it more important to create spaces with different spatial characteristics that they could appropriate for different uses as they emerged. This position was in recognition that the group's needs would inevitably change as they grew older, but that the types of shared activities the group might want to undertake in the future are unknown to them at present.

In addition to these specific spatial investigations, the process of creating an inclusive, creative process was an equally important element of my role as a spatial agent. One of the ways that older people are marginalised in society is through a widely held stereotype that they lack creativity [49] (p. 25). This should not be understood as a failure of older people to be creative, but the consequence of systemic conditions in which older people's creativity is diminished or ignored. The two workshops described in this paper show how adopting a spatial agency approach can help to develop a shared discourse from which older people are empowered to be creative, and through which novel opportunities for sharing emerge. By challenging the delineation of the social and spatial qualities of cohousing, we were able to identify and respond to our own internalised limits that led us to accept the existing cohousing orthodoxy. This, in turn, led to the development and testing of new ideas for sharing spaces and activities, both inside and outside their proposed community, that would not have otherwise been considered.

One of the ways that MUCH could express themselves in these workshops was the rejection of normative ideas about ageing within their cohousing community. Although there was some discussion about physical decline and building accessibility, the group were primarily driven by a positive vision of themselves in older age, in which they would not be defined by their physiology. This was an explicit response to the medicalisation of other housing options for older people, such as private "sheltered" housing, of which they had reservations. One of the MUCH members referred to the processes we developed as a form of "future-scoping";

"I think one of the challenges for all of us, and you, is to come up with our own ageing, and not be influenced by images of what older people look like. We are using each other to future-scope ourselves, in space. That's really exciting! ...It's been a real challenge because we all have these different ideas about our futures, and the shape and space needs to mirror and enable that."

The capability to imagine possible futures is a key element of the cohousing development process, and is particularly important for older people in making decisions about the homes and communities they wish to grow older in, which are impacted by their "...uncertainty about their future selves." [50] (p. 48). The spatial agency approach offered opportunities to explore possible futures because the focus was not purely limited to defining the architectonic form the community would take. Rather than placing the onus on the individual to imagine whether staying or leaving their home would provide them with a better future, a spatial agency approach to cohousing enables the individual to explore and construct a future they actually desire, and to examine whether this vision is achievable.

Through the sharing of space, assets, knowledge, and practices, cohousing enables older people to increase their ability to reshape neighbourhoods, cities, and everyday experiences. Despite the interest in cohousing in the UK, few new cohousing communities have come to fruition. Cohousing groups face a number of challenges, not least the direct competition with better resourced commercial developers, particularly in desirable urban locations [23] (p. 119). It is perhaps time to question whether the 25 dwelling, single-site cohousing community that is promoted within mainstream cohousing discourse is viable, and instead move to investigate innovative responses. Spatial agency provides a suitable platform for architects to contribute to this and support the emergence of new ideas that challenge some of the norms within cohousing. Whilst the inclusion of architectural expertise at such an early stage of the development process presents a number of challenges, including how such a collaboration can be funded, it also provides a unique opportunity to generate creative solutions to some of the issues that cohousing groups face.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank the members of Manchester Urban Cohousing for their contributions, insight and support during the course of our collaboration.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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