



International Year of Cooperatives

Living Together, Caring Together?

The Transformative Potential of Cooperative Housing.

TO SEE HOW THE SDG'S & CARE WORK
IN HOUSING COOPERATIVES ARE CONNECTED
SCAN THE QR CODE AT THE BOTTOM



Past Ideas of Care

The understanding of who is in need of care and how to respond to that need has differed greatly over time. In the 19th century, the accelerated urbanisation following industrialisation leads to a myriad of problems known as the **social question**. In response, several forms of organised care emerge, covering the care of the poor, the sick, pregnant women, mothers and children. What unites these practices of care is their exclusionary character. Housing cooperatives are introduced as one part of the social reform aimed at alleviating the **housing crisis**. Specific groups of workers are hereby encouraged to save money through the cooperative and move up the social ladder by owning a home. However, this still excludes the masses of industrial workers, posing the question whether housing cooperatives can be regarded as a form of poor relief and thus, care.

Caring Cooperatives?

Housing cooperatives offer new approaches to privatised urban life by emphasising solidarity, collective decision-making, shared responsibility and prioritising members' needs over profit. Care work often suffers under **neoliberal conditions** that isolate individuals, privatise responsibility and shift it into the private sphere. The cooperative model can resist this logic by creating **communal structures** of support and mutual aid. Cooperatives, by virtue of being both a form of collective living and a financial/institutional structure, allow care to be organised **horizontally**, in everyday neighbourly relations, and **vertically**, through more formal processes of collective governance and institutionalisation. Taking this as a starting point, we ask: How are care practices organised in cooperative housing projects, and what insights can we gain from this regarding the transformative potential of cooperatives for addressing the care crisis and housing issues?

Care is for all of us!

There are many ways to define care work. At its core, it means looking after the physical, emotional and social well-being of oneself, others and the planet. However, it often remains **invisible, underpaid and precarious**. Feminist analyses highlight how care work has been systematically devalued and marginalised during decades of privatisation and commodification. Everyday practices of care concern all of us, and, on account of their ongoing strong individualisation and link to the private sphere, are intimately connected to the subject of housing.

Housing itself has become increasingly commodified due to privatisation and speculation. In fact, many are speaking of a '**polycrisis**', with overlapping and reinforcing social, economic and ecological crises. These disproportionately affect women, single parents, low-income households and marginalised communities - raising urgent questions of social justice and gender equality. Amid the worsening care crisis and housing insecurity, community-based living is gaining attention as a way to reimagine housing. Cooperative housing is one such alternative - but can cooperatives offer a way to rethink care in how we live together?

► How Cooperatives Care

Since cooperatives are **not profit-driven**, they can create opportunities to embed care. We identified some ways in which cooperatives practise care, transforming social relations through collective support and shared duties:

- They enable **communal living** - shared flats, kitchens or spaces - that foster interaction and organise care horizontally beyond the nuclear family.
- Decisions about shared spaces are made through **democratic structures**, strengthening mutual responsibility.
- At the same time, **vertical structures** ensure legal stability and long-term continuity, **securing care networks** and enabling future planning.
- By renting commercial spaces to selected **non-profits at low rents**, cooperatives can support whole neighbourhoods.

► Untapped Potential

Care is fundamental to social life - yet even in cooperatives its organisation often remains precarious. But why is it so challenging?

- Cooperatives are often **difficult to join**, requiring time, financial resources and networks. This often results in homogeneous, privileged groups moving in.
- **Insufficient structural frameworks** including legal and financial barriers, prevent innovative restructuring of care.
- Some practices only serve **symbolic purposes** and run the risk of instrumentalising care for image or profit ('community capitalism').
- Care work is often seen as a **voluntary addition** and usually negotiated in terms of inclusion and community, but rarely understood as structurally gendered work that requires profound transformation.

So Far So Good, But...

...Even though cooperatives offer good prerequisites for collective care, they face structural barriers; sustainable care requires systematic support and political frameworks.



Figure 1: Some aspects of care work; Drawing by Lina Sauer



Our disciplinary backgrounds include urban geography, social sciences, and historical urban studies. We care about care in the city, both inside and outside academic settings.

Further reading:

Fields, D., Power, E.R. and Card, K. (2024). Housing Movements and Care: Rethinking the Political Imaginaries of Housing.

Fried, B. & Wischniewski, A. (Eds.) (2024). Care-Arbeit: Vergesellschaften. Kommunalpolitische Werkzeugkiste für eine "Sorgende Stadt".

For references and further information regarding our research and researched cooperatives, scan the QR-Code!



HOW TO BUILD A BETTER WORLD? IN SEARCH FOR COOPERATIVE TRANSFORMATION

