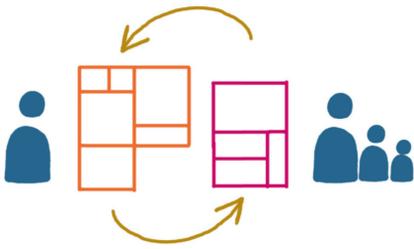




International Year of Cooperatives

Rethinking cooperative housing - for a fairer distribution of residential space?



Residential space efficiency

Efficiency in the area of housing means optimising the ratio of input to output. The aim is to achieve the same or even greater benefit with fewer resources. This includes making the best possible use of existing residential space and the associated resources.

Example: Dividing a detached house into several residential units in order to optimise the use of existing residential space.

"The housing crisis is not a problem of housing shortage, but a distribution problem." (Welter & Herzog, 2024)

Residential space sufficiency

Objectively, there is no fundamental need for more residential space per capita. Nevertheless, per capita housing consumption has increased in recent decades. The space exists, but it is unevenly distributed. A sufficiency-oriented lifestyle focuses on conscious and reduced consumption without compromising individual well-being or quality of life. Concepts such as 'de-growth' support this view by challenging the paradigm of unlimited growth and emphasizing the need to operate within planetary boundaries. To achieve a socially and ecologically fair distribution of housing, the sufficiency approach proposes low-threshold measures such as flat swap, rather than relying on new construction.

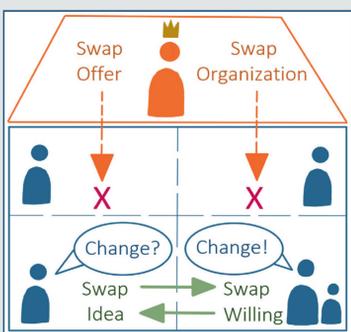
1991 = Ø 34 m²
2022 = Ø 47,4 m²

Flat swap - a contribution to the housing issue?

Housing allocation requires a re-evaluation, aligning it with principles of sufficiency and efficiency. A key approach involves flat swaps between households, based on their size and needs. This optimizes existing residential space for more efficient and needs-based utilization.

The main idea is to retain the original usage fee for the flat after the exchange. This prevents price increases while incentivizing exchanges. This principle is widely discussed and implemented within housing cooperatives, lauded for their long-term housing security, community focus, and member co-determination. Unlike profit-driven housing companies, cooperatives operate on solidarity and community, lacking economic incentive to raise rents upon re-allocation.

Horizontal organizational structures simplify low-threshold flat swaps. Conversely, rigid, top-down **vertical** structures impede flexible solutions due to associated anonymity and inflexibility.



Various interviews were conducted as part of the research with members of traditional cooperatives, such as BWV zu Köpenick eG and WG Altglienicke eG, as well as newer cooperatives, such as SelbstBau eG, to find out what conditions need to be met to swap a flat.

Barriers and boundaries for flat swaps

systemic	lack of communication/ anonymity	intransparency	low proactive offerings
user fee	non-transferable	new allocation = new user fee	inflexible system
emotions	overidentification with residential space	low willingness to swap	more within-house than across-houses

Swap yourself happy!

Smaller (< 1000 members), more recently founded or, in particular, alternative cooperatives offer considerable potential for intra-cooperative flat swaps (horizontal). The close social ties in these structures promote solidarity and facilitate the coordination of exchange processes. This enables a redefinition of residential space and thus makes it easier for new members to join the cooperative, too. Cooperatives with participative, bottom-up structures are predestined for this approach, as they have a higher level of member involvement and co-determination. Strategies within a cooperative are therefore not only an act of individual housing adaptation, but also a collective strategy for optimising their space efficiency ratio.

Possible strategies for action
exchange platforms - personal initiative - regular capacity utilisation surveys

About us

Our perspective is shaped by theory and practice: studying urban geography while navigating housing in Berlin ourselves. Authors: Antonia Täsch, Kim Fähnrich, Isabelle Sockellofski, Sandra Iwasieczko, July 2025

Further reading

Fuhrhop, Daniel (2023): Der unsichtbare Wohnraum – Wohnsuffizienz als Antwort auf Wohnraummangel, Klimakrise und Einsamkeit. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.



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

