Cluster Cohousing Revisited

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# Introduction

*"The most commonplace thing we do, housing, is strikingly unexplored."*
- Andreas Hofer[1]

Interest in new types of collaborative housing is again on the rise. As society changes, housing needs do change as well, offering expanded choices in forms of living. Equally important is ensuring that what is built actually delivers the adaptability and connection that people today seek. Collaborative housing exists, but—despite its benefits—there is a distinct lack of research on which to base future planning and design decisions, particularly for affordable projects run by nonprofit sponsors. Some of these collaborative communities are decades old, but issues as basic as creating enduring community and connections among neighbors still aren't well understood.

This book reflects our belief that the pioneers of tomorrow's better housing can learn valuable lessons from the examples of earlier experiments. By helping to fill in an important missing piece in housing research, we hope that future models will draw from lived experience.

**The cluster model**
When new forms of collaborative housing were being developed in the 1970s—Danish cohousing (Bofællesskaber), Swedish collective housing (Kollektivhus), and Dutch Central Living (Centraal Wonen), all designed

with the intention of increasing social contact and co-locating some tasks with neighbors—the Dutch organized differently. Their cluster design created small subgroups, each with shared living and dining, an additional layer of social organization between the private home and the residential community as a whole. In essence, two communities of different scale, with common facilities, are made: smaller clusters nested within the larger community.

Collaborative clusters, built in the Netherlands (Holland) mainly in the 1980s and 90s, are once again being constructed. In Germany, Switzerland, and in other countries new and interesting examples, many as nonprofit rentals, are emerging, and they too concentrate some common facilities among smaller groups of private households.

**The evolution of our research**

The authors, Els de Jong, a social researcher, and Dorit Fromm, an architect, have both studied a wide range of housing models, but from different perspectives—and clusters caught our attention. Our shared interest in collaborative and experimental housing kept us in contact, exchanging questions about the various models we encountered over the years. We asked one another about a design that builds in divisions of residents and common facilities: how does that affect neighborly connection?

We had seen that design itself, even with an abundance of common spaces and the best of intentions, does not alone generate long-lasting resident collaboration; but when combined with the organization of social connections that collaboration is much more likely to occur. In theory, the design and social connections of small clusters would seem to increase resident collaboration—but do they in reality?

So we began to look at this unique variation in the history of collaborative design—the cluster— and to study its particular resident connections over time, asking three interrelated questions:

1. What were the founders' intentions behind collaborative housing, and why did they choose a model with clusters?
2. How were these intentions translated into design and social relationships?

3. How are these intentions holding up after 40 years? (Did the results turn out as expected?)

To answer these questions, we chose the Wandelmeent, the first Dutch cluster cohousing community. Still thriving today, the Wandelmeent was the prototype for clustered developments that followed and has been researched by others since its completion. In the 1970s, a study of residents' experiences and social and spatial conditions was made by two researchers of Wageningen University, Tiny Backus and Beatrice Kesler.[2] This research allows comparisons between today and the ideals and reality at the start of the project. Dorit also studied the community in the 1980s for an article[3] and a book.[4]

Our research on the Wandelmeent began with interviews of the founders, government studies, searches of newspaper and magazine articles that dated back to the late 1960s, and of course visiting and staying in the community. An extensive questionnaire was formulated to gauge residents' views, and we were also able to track down the project architect and hear his reasons for various elements of the design. We began to see our undertaking as a "co-occupancy evaluation" giving us insights into not only the design, but also social relationships and community organization (see Appendix 2 for detailed information about how we conducted our research).

As our research grew, we saw the need for a book to capture what we were learning. Particularly timely, as next year marks the 50th anniversary of the Dutch national organization that helped spur the development of numerous types of collaborative housing. Many of the original pioneers, residents, and designers are in their 70, 80s, or older; some have passed on. The time is right to preserve their ideas and voices for a new generation of collaborative living.

Of the collaborative housing types that sprang from the 1970s, Dutch Central Living is the least well-known model internationally. This is unfortunate, as Dutch examples have much to offer in their experimental use of space and in creating levels of community. No country's nonprofit collaborative housing was as varied and experimental in its layout, levels of common facilities, and organization of dwelling units as the Netherlands'. By taking a look at its origins, we believe insights into the questions about Dutch cohousing design and function will help new housing and design pioneers.

## Reading guide

**Part 1** dives into the history of the Wandelmeent. We describe how it all started in 1969 with an idea, printed in a newspaper by a Dutch housewife, to reimagine another way of organizing our homes and lives. We describe the dreams and intentions of the founders and their efforts to turn them into reality.

**Part 2** looks at how the Wandelmeent is doing now, after 40 years of experience. We consider the social connections, the architecture, and residents' management. At the end of each chapter is a summary impact. In this way the reader can easily find a short overview of everyday life in the Wandelmeent.

**Part 3** discusses the lessons learned from our research and how those might be applied to future collaborative communities.

*See Appendix 1 for explanations of terms used in this book.*

# About the authors

Els is a social researcher on housing and founded her own company "Wono Woononderzoek" (Wono Housing Research) in 1990. She has researched and published on alternative housing forms, participation projects and special housing, like cohousing, energy-efficient housing, healthy housing, and senior housing. She was a student of Beatrice Kesler, who researched the Wandelmeent in the 1970s. See www.wono.nl.

Dorit is a design researcher and writer, an architect, and has worked in communications for the design industry. She has researched a variety of community and housing designs, conducted post-occupancy evaluations of multi-unit housing and presented on new forms of housing internationally. Her book, *Collaborative Communities*, published in 1991, first described the variety of European and American models of collaborative housing. Her interest in clusters was sparked as a student, working with architect Christopher Alexander in Mexicali building low-income housing.

# Notes: Introduction

1 Andreas Hofer is the head of innovation and research for the cooperative housing developer "Cooperative More Than Housing" (Mehr als Wohnen) in Zurich; their development projects include clustered apartments. Mehr Als Wohnen Cooperative. *A vision becomes reality—10 years lessons learned* (Zurich: Künzle Druck AG, 2017), 40.

2 H.C.S. Backus and B.E.T.A. Kesler, *Centraal Wonen Hilversumse Meent: Samenvatting* (Gravenhage: Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieu, 1984).

3 Dorit Fromm, "Living Together Housing," *Architectural Review* (April 1985): 66. The first English-language article on these new types of European communities.

4 Dorit Fromm, *Collaborative Communities: Cohousing, Central Living, and other new forms of housing with shared facilities* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991).

# Part 1

***If you want to live differently, you have to build differently.***
◦ Residents of the Wandelmeent

## 1969–1972

# Beginnings: Central Living

# How It All Started

**Why clusters? What were the intentions of the pioneers of Central Living in creating this model?** Answering these questions requires us to go back in time to the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s: an era of transformation. Dutch society was not alone in experiencing social movements that questioned its conventional structures—including its cornerstone of the nuclear family and independent home, and the position of women within it.

In the Netherlands, the quest for alternative lifestyles was generating new ideas on participation in housing and urban planning. Building experiments were being tried with a focus on human and social scales to respond to emerging values. The government was also engaged in spurring housing experimentation towards greater diversity and choice; citizens, as well as sociologists and psychologists, assumed roles in the design of neighborhoods and dwellings.[1] Women, still tucked away inside domestic quarters, were just beginning to find their voices.

This section describes how these forces converged to give rise to the unique cluster model of centralized living.

## The origins of Central Living

The "Central Living" movement starts when a Dutch housewife, Lies van den Donk-van Dooremaal, writes a letter to a magazine, *De Nieuwe Linie*,[2] on June 29, 1969. She is well-educated, an elementary school teacher before her marriage, and would like to return to work. But, as a mother of four young sons, from one to seven years old, she is tied to her house as a full-time homemaker. The solution she comes up with for her dilemma is nothing short of an efficient model of living, where housework would become a more cooperative, centralized effort.

Her letter, given the title *Centraal Wonen* (Central Living), is a call to action to create centralized facilities: Who will design a living unit with a central kitchen and a dining room, a central laundry, a room for children, study room, communal guest rooms and, around or above, for each family their own small living units…?

Her letter ends by inviting readers to sign up for a meeting in a local training center willing to host a discussion on this new housing possibility. A huge response follows. Van den Donk is asked to give lectures and interviews for national newspapers, radio, and TV. She receives many comments—some critique her abilities as a mother,[3] while others embrace her alternative vision.

When asked about her background, Van den Donk says she is the youngest of six children, from an average family in the south of the country. Yet she has always liked to do things differently: "I started to do things early that the others had not done."[4] She was living on her own when she began teaching. But when she married in the late 1950s, she was told she had to give up her work. She recalled how, to her, marriage meant not only having to give up her job, but also spending her time washing her husband's socks. She wondered: why should all mothers be tied down to the home like this?

As it turns out, her ideas about collaborating on household tasks capture the zeitgeist. In an interview with another Dutch newspaper, Lies van den Donk explains how "the time is ripe. You see it in all areas. A question mark is put behind everything. You now even see articles in the *Margriet* (a mainstream women's magazine) entitled: 'Is the Family Outdated?'"[5]

*At a conference on Central Living, Mrs. Van den Donk with students and sympathizers. De Guldenberg, Helvoirt, The Netherlands, October 1969.*

By October 1969, four months after her newspaper appeal, Van den Donk is sitting around a table with twenty others, talking through what a "central complex" might look like.[6] By the Spring of 1970, that question is being discussed among 150 interested people, in groups of 15, over 10 weekends. Working groups and committees are formed.[7] One of those in attendance, a university student named Ab Pilgram,[8] recalls:

> *"At the end of the 60s, beginning of the 70s, Dutch society changed completely from a segmented country, ruled by representatives of the Christian, Socialist and Conservative elites,[9] into a non-conformist 'free' society. Religion, religion-based education, family life, sexuality, authorities themselves...that all came within a very short time under public discussion. Not in the least stimulated by the rise of television. Within families violent discussions arose about the role of women, who, fiercely supported by an emancipation movement, were encouraged to look for a job or volunteer activity outside the family home, strengthening their position in the labor market. In that atmosphere I started, in 1969, studying Political and Economic science at the University of Amsterdam. In the meantime, I had two young children and my then wife had a part-time job. Needless to say we were very interested in discussions about how to run a family with two parents working or studying and two children at school!"*

## The concept evolves

The initial vision of Van den Donk is a housing project of about 50 dwellings, with shared facilities and services, paid for by the members. In an interview,[10] Van den Donk defines the major motives of Central Living, as she sees it: To reduce the excess of equipment like washing machines for every single household; that it is better to raise children in a larger social context; and that it is a waste for well-educated women to become housewives after marriage.

The 10 workshops are focused on making the vision real: how to work out the idea, determine the aims of collaboration, decide where the project should be built, and find a way to finance it.

Over the course of those weekends, the intentions broaden from freeing the home-bound woman towards a larger vision for social repair: The group agrees that Central Living should be in the city rather than rural; be affordable for all incomes and welcoming of disadvantaged people, thereby counteracting the segregation they are seeing in society; and put children "more in the foreground."[11] To be economically inclusive, there is a strong preference for do-it-yourself rather than a paid-for service packages. Besides, participants like the ethos of "doing what you can together," with central amenities that support greater engagement and connection.

While those basic intentions were shared by all, a split occurs along the lines of how best to achieve them and foster true collaboration.[12]

1. The "small" group sees relationships among residents as primary, proposing a project of 10 to 20 adults, who—because they are more like-minded—are able to accomplish more tasks together.
2. The "big" group advocates for a project with 100 – 150 persons, open to everyone, and more diverse. Each household would have its own private dwelling, while amenities would be centralized and shared by the whole community.

Those in favor of a large development felt there were efficiencies of scale in "doing what you can together," such as laundry or childcare. While those in favor of a small development felt close-knit connections among fewer residents would enable them to accomplish much more together.

But Van den Donk is not happy with the "small" prototype, worried it will exclude people who differ—seniors, single parents, and others who could benefit from this new way of living. In a letter, she writes: "The people with living and lifestyle wishes forget...the people with living and lifestyle needs." Central Living is not, she feels strongly, only for families and young children. Her concern is not about the *number* of households, but about including *a variety* of households that reflect broader society. "A group of more than 50 people," she says, is not Central Living "if it consists of 20 young couples, each with one or two small children."[13] This current of knitting together diverse generations and isolated households holds strong within the movement.

Differences in approach aside, the participants now have greater clarity on what they hope to create, and recognize they need governing structures to

**Government Interest in New Housing Forms**

By the late 1960s, a growing dissatisfaction with housing choices began to be heard. Good economic prospects and new technologies were spurring large-scale housing projects using prefabricated building elements, and these large developments were changing the scale and character of cities and towns.

*Large redevelopment plans resulted in high-rise housing such as the Bijlmermeer, laid out in hexagonal grids. Construction began in 1968; by 1975, all 13,000 of the highrise apartments had been completed; and by the late 1970s, vacancies and problematic incidents were on the rise.*

By the 70s, a shift takes place from a focus on quantity to quality, and a strong preference voiced by citizens for different types of housing. They wanted housing that was not strictly functional, in the traditional sense, but designed on a more human scale and to be more adaptable to its surroundings. General interest grew in planning new housing forms and neighborhoods, with a greater diversity in architectural styles. The Dutch government, a longtime leader in making decent housing affordable to all, became engaged in supporting alternative designs that would improve the available housing stock.

see the idea through. A national "umbrella organization" is formed to coordinate, educate, and develop an overall vision; an association is legally formed, which is necessary for receiving grants and subsidies; and regional project groups take root.

The organization applies for a subsidy for a full-time professional administrator and office costs for a period of one year, to grow and make a start towards a real project. "In this way, the idea of a new housing type grew into a sketchy plan, and beyond the forces of the initiators."[14]

**The government gets involved**

Spurring on experimental housing is a task that the Dutch government began in the late 1960s. By this time, it is particularly interested in catalyzing initiatives that will involve people more directly in the design of their home and environment.[15] The Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work (CRM) therefore grants the organization's request and subsidizes a young sociologist, Michel Thissen,[16] from January through December of 1971, to facilitate research and develop a cost-benefit analysis of the idea. Together with Thissen, the umbrella organization takes its first steps towards visualizing a new way of living.[17] Membership continues to grow, and a board is elected.

In January, Thissen begins the national coordination of activities to create collaborative housing. These are not easygoing countercultural gatherings. CRM creates a top-heavy Guidance Committee[18] for the umbrella organization that includes many official experts: their three representatives (one from Structural Institutions and Community Work, one from General Family Policy, and one from General Planning), as well as a representative from the Ministry of Housing (Social Economic Research). If that wasn't enough, the Committee includes the Director of N.I.M.O. (The Netherlands Institute for Community Organization), a respected co-author of a recent authoritative text on facilitation: *Community Work as a Socio-Agogical Method,*[19] and its chair is Mr. Th. M. G. Guffens, a sociologist and later a renowned professor of sociology. Not only are the group members to work in collaboration, so are government agencies.