

## **The dream of a house with a garden**

Is there another way?

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The decision to buy and live in a 'single-family house with a garden' is not always rational: the long-term financial burden, the sole responsibility for a house, from the basement to the roof, the location and immobility ... even on an individual level, there are many arguments that actually speak against this housing decision. Despite these arguments, it is a persistently popular form of housing. In the sub-project *Wohnwünsche und ihre Erfüllung zwischen Gemeinschaftsprojekt und Eigenheim*, we asked ourselves why.

Various scientific publications have already addressed this issue, and we looked at these for the beginning. For example, the desire to own property and enjoy a high level of housing security, to contribute in the design of living spaces and to have a garden are mentioned (see Menzl, 2007; Simon-Philipp, 2016; Smigla-Zywocki, 2019).

In addition, we held discussions with other housing researchers as we approached our research question. We noticed that, under certain conditions, co-housing projects also meet similar housing needs to those of single-family homes. Both forms of housing - as contradictory as they may seem at first - have large overlaps in their target groups.

This insight led to the question: *Under what conditions could co-housing projects represent an attractive alternative to single-family houses in the countryside?*

With the help of narrative interviews, we wanted to paint as broad a picture as possible of people's housing preferences, ranging from shared projects to owner-occupied homes. We decided to contact people in Weimar housing projects across the board. There is a comparatively high density of housing projects in the city, covering every legal form (cf. Löffler, 2016, p.108f .) A test interview was used not only to try out the method, but also to check various initial hypotheses. We specifically asked for interviews with people who had either dreamed of a single-family house, were still dreaming of it or had lived in one and left it to live in a cooperative housing project. Therefore we looked for people with experiences or a desire for both forms of housing. We wanted to know from them how their housing decision came

about, how they feel about their housing decision and what similarities and differences they perceive between the two forms of housing.

In August 2023, we dropped 140 professionally designed letters with matching envelopes in the research workshop's typical violet into the letterboxes of eight different housing projects in Weimar. In this way, we wanted to ensure that our letter would not be overlooked among other letters and that the contacted people would feel addressed in a friendly and personal manner. These were housing projects of different sizes, legal forms and ages of residents.

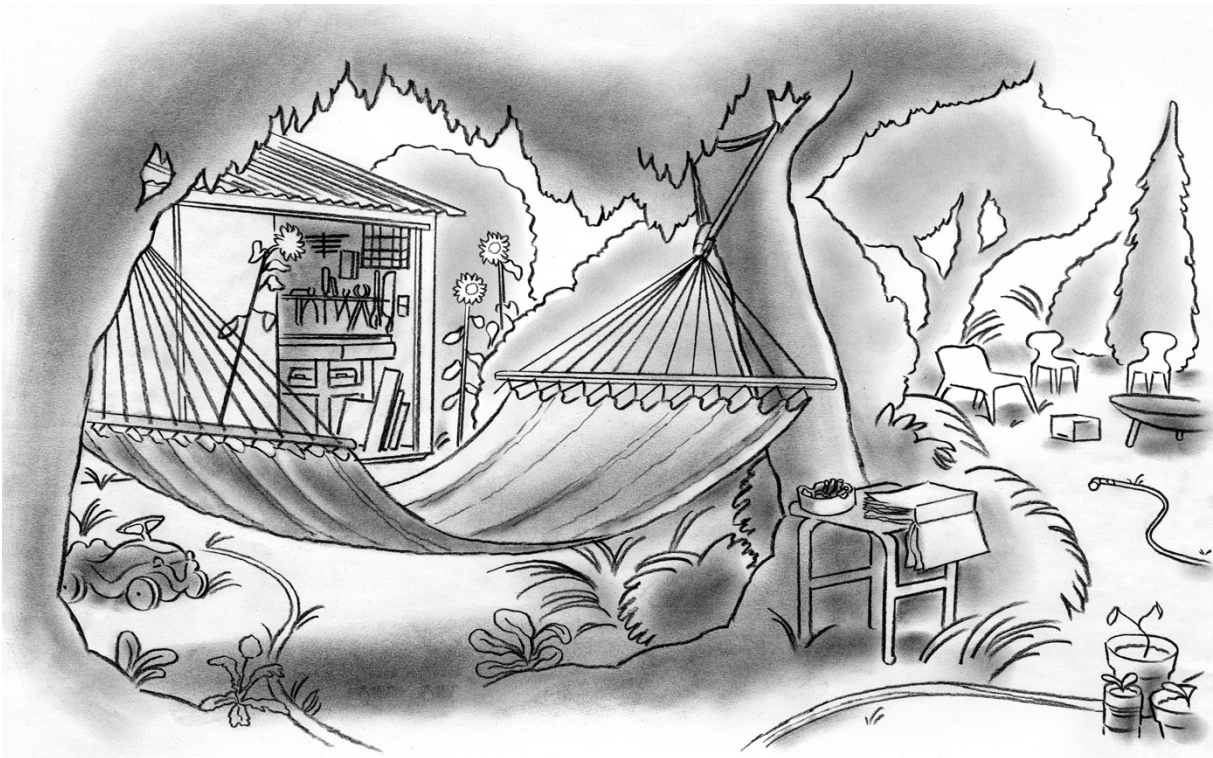
Interviews were arranged with three couples and three individuals. The three couples interviewed had each lived in single-family homes for several decades, two of them in their own home for over 40 years. The three individuals interviewed live with their partner and/or family in the shared housing project, but had previously been looking for their own home.

Two of the interviewees live in projects that are organized as a homeowners' association, which means that they have private residential property. Only one person also cited the ownership as a key motive for their housing decision. Four of the households surveyed live in cooperatively organized housing projects. They clearly emphasize that, as members of the cooperative, they own everything and are therefore jointly responsible for their home and everything that goes with it. The responsibility that comes from shared ownership seems more important to the residents than the financial investment or the inheritable shares.

*"But in principle, I think I just want to decide for myself. So if I move in with a landlord who has made me the apartment as it is now and I'm not supposed to paint the walls, for example, then... um... I think I feel restricted."* (Narrative Interview No. 6, 09/2023)

In the smaller housing projects in particular, the interviewees had the opportunity to make both fundamental and detailed decisions about the design of their own living space during the planning phase. They took advantage of this opportunity, partly due to their professional backgrounds.

Where available, residents rate ground-level access to the garden as a special quality of living. All interviewees enjoy using the gardens in their housing projects, but also attach great importance to the private, quieter retreats within the otherwise communal gardens. For the families interviewed in housing projects, the garden, enlivened by many other children and play equipment, is a particularly important part of the living environment.



*A garden (of your own)? Illustration (Marijpol)*

All interviewees have modern, open kitchenettes in the living area and large wooden dining tables, although this commonality could be partly due to the fact that four of the households surveyed live in the same housing project.



*Kitchen-living room. Illustration (Marijpol)*

Particularly noteworthy are the housing decisions made by couples who had lived in a single-family home for many years before moving into the shared project. Two of these couples were specifically looking for a mixed-age housing project for their age.

For all three couples, it was important to downsize their household in a self-determined way, to be well connected to cultural and social infrastructure in old age and not to have to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining and caring for a house alone.

*"And then we saw the apartment here with just under 66 square meters and then we thought about it: Is that feasible for us, uh, or not? Yes, that was a really big consideration. And then at some point we said, we can manage that and we don't need so many square meters. We don't need so many square meters. We don't have to keep rooms free for when children or friends or something, there are other options. It would be enough just for us to live in." (Narrative Interview No. 1, 09/2023)*

Sorting out the possessions that had previously been stored in a detached house was not easy for the three couples. However, reducing their personal belongings proved to be liberating for the residents afterwards and is no longer perceived as a loss in community projects, where a lot is borrowed and exchanged between neighbors.



*Multifunctional room. Illustration (Marijpol)*

Not only the reduction of their own possessions, but also the available living space was discussed in four of the interviews. The residents who have "downsized" have developed different strategies to deal with this downsizing. One couple was able to rent commercial space

within the housing project for their professional activities, which previously took up space in the much larger house. One couple makes intensive use of digital (streaming) services to avoid taking up space for media in the apartment and uses the bedroom differently and to its full potential depending on the time of day thanks to a fold-out desk and a roll-out mattress. Another couple has already made particularly far-sighted preparations for the next potential downsizing and currently live in two small apartments right next to each other, one of which is to be given up when one of them passes away.

The motives for the interviewees' housing decisions can be roughly grouped together: The majority of interviewees have made previous housing decisions pragmatically, i.e. depending on what is available, their financial means and their most pressing housing needs. One interviewee said that her family would probably have opted for a detached house if the desire for home ownership in this form of housing had been financially affordable. Another person says that she and her partner particularly enjoy 'living as a project', i.e. building, converting and extending, personal appropriation by designing their own home, and can also imagine looking for a new project at some point. For half of the households surveyed, living in a community, in which they are now actively and enthusiastically involved, played a particularly important role in their decision to opt for the shared project.

Criticism of life in the shared project was very limited and was confined to the sometimes stressful agreements between neighbors, flatmates who do not actively participate in communal tasks and sometimes children who are too loud. Nevertheless, all interviewees are very satisfied with their current living situation.

The guided tours of the apartments and communal areas in particular showed that living in a communal project offers many qualities of living that are usually attributed to single-family homes. Although the garden, fireplace room and sauna are also used by others, these communal areas are also jointly financed, the residents are not solely responsible for them and the rooms are fully utilized throughout the day. The interviewees in particular, who have lived in their own home with a garden for many years, emphasize how much cost and effort this form of living causes and enjoy the shared responsibility in the housing project.

*"And then we also had a relatively large plot of land, 811 square meters, with a real garden. And then we knew that at some point the whole thing would be too much for us."*  
(Narrative Interview No. 3, 09/2023)

All interviewees own their homes to varying degrees and have a high level of housing security; this aspect is also comparable to living in your own home.

Several interviewees also emphasized the excellent living conditions in the community project for the elderly. In addition to the shared responsibility and the favorable location and connections of the housing project, the caring interaction in the neighborhood and a higher level of security against burglary felt by the nearby neighbors were also mentioned.

In summary, it can be seen that in many respects, shared housing projects can meet similar housing needs in terms of housing quality, ownership and housing security as single-family homes do. Moving into a shared housing project can be a sensible and enriching alternative, especially for people who dream of owning their own home but are unable to finance it or are looking for a more sustainable housing alternative, as well as for people who no longer want to live alone in their own home in old age.

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