

Renate Narten
Sylvia Tischer

**Design concepts for communal living projects for the independent elderly.
The evidence from projects in the Netherlands.**

Summary

1 Aims and Methods

Our study's point of departure was how far German communal living groups could benefit from experience gained by the far more numerous existing Dutch groups, with regards to the planning and design of living space. The objective was to identify the optimal relationship between private and common areas, both in terms of residents' perceptions and in terms of realistic building costs and projected rents.

The research was carried out in 2 phases. In the first phase, an inventory of existing housing projects in the Netherlands was carried out. Of the projects that came to light, 80 could be documented further, with plans and summary descriptions. Based on this documentation, 5 projects were selected in the second phase to undergo a detailed analysis of the use of space.

2 Conclusions

The most important conclusion of our study has been that an identifiable building standard for communal housing has emerged in the Netherlands over the years. This standard has, of course, evolved and been refined in the course of time, but has remained fundamentally unaltered. Within a few years from the inception of communal living in the Netherlands, all the projects consist of fully equipped individual flats with a suite of common rooms. Thus, communal living projects in the Netherlands are organised almost exclusively along the lines of a house share, rather than a flat share.

In consequence, over the years, private space has gained in importance relative to communal space. Currently, the standard may be defined as a 3 room flat complemented by a communal meeting hall. Such a hall incorporates the ground plan of a flat as far as possible, in order to facilitate an eventual change of use. This solution has contributed greatly to the willingness of housing companies to build communal housing, as this type of structure eliminates the risk of losing potential rental income should the communal group dissolve.

As a result, many housing companies have become less sceptical about communal housing projects and aware of the advantages these can offer. Not only do the residents take over many of the building's administrative chores and thus reduce costs; they also find tenants for any vacancies, ensuring a continuity of rental income. As a result, the initially higher costs to the companies, resulting from involving residents in the planning process for the building, are clawed back by the residents themselves.

Support for this type of housing by municipalities and welfare foundations is an important factor in the successful implementation of communal housing for the elderly in the Netherlands. Municipalities in particular, were quick to recognise the benefits to the public purse of communal, independently organised living for the elderly, as this model makes fewer demands on the social security system than other models.

The evolution of the increase in importance of private space relative to communal space is in no way an index of a decline in communal life, but simply a response to the realities of living in a group. Thus, groups with higher communal aspirations who had therefore opted for more communal space, were not able to sustain these in the long run and wished, in retrospect, to have opted for more individual space. The converse is also true: many groups established with the aim of ensuring privacy and sufficient space to withdraw from the group, have found that a spontaneous and diverse communal life has evolved.

2.1 Social structure

The first communal housing groups for the elderly were established in the Netherlands as well as in Germany in the 80's. However, they took off much more rapidly in the Netherlands. The number of groups organised in the LVGO (National Association of Communal Housing for the Elderly) rose from 20 in 1984, 94 in 1989, to 192 in 1997. It is interesting to note that 1/3 of the projects we documented were in rural areas or small cities, so that communal living for the elderly is not an exclusively big city phenomenon in the Netherlands.

In contrast to Germany, projects in the Netherlands overwhelmingly comprise homogeneous age groups. Groups are mainly established by the so-called 'young elderly' (55+). One reason, amongst others, for the successful spread of the idea of communal living in the Netherlands is that, thanks to generous early retirement regulations, there are many early retirees with sufficient energy to plan for their later years.

The first communal living groups were very much set on the idea of an active growing older in the context of the collective. Concerns about the possibility of needing nursing care or assistance were often excluded. Despite the bias towards the 'young elderly', the average age of new recruits into these groups has risen over the years (1985: 58% under 65, 1994: 28%). Concerns about a need for nursing care or assistance are being taken on board nowadays much more than in the past.

In contrast to German groups, where single women predominate, the ratio of single women in Dutch groups is only 58%. Couples account for 30%, and single men 12%. Over the years, the proportion of couples has increased steadily (1985:14%, 1995: 40%), while that of single men has remained constant.

At the start of their development, groups were relatively small. Out of the projects in our study, 90% of those been established prior to 1987 comprised fewer than 20 residential units. In subsequent years, the ratio of such 'small' groups showed a steady decline. However, really large groups, comprising in excess of 50 units, continued to remain the exception. In the intervening years, the majority of newly established groups have varied between 20-30 residential units. The

reason for this has been the realisation that larger groups offer more opportunities for finding friends and organising leisure activities. In very large groups the ease of socialising can quickly turn into anonymity, and small groups can mean living in one another's pockets and making too many demands on others.

2.2 Structural features and ground plans

77% of the projects in our study were in newly erected buildings. Equally, 77% were financed through the social housing programme. Half of the buildings in our study were from a ribbon development, a third had a central courtyard or central hall design around which the units were grouped (32%), a fifth (19%) had a cube design, e.g. as in a town villa.

The cube design is particularly interesting for German communal living groups, as it is particularly suitable for 'small' groups. Each of the examples of this model in our study comprised 14 residential units. The advantage of this model is the possibility of developing designs for rooms with less depth, thus allowing for a large window front. A disadvantage would be the necessity of orienting at least one of the rooms (usually the kitchen) to the stairwell. This room cannot have normal window glass given fire regulations. Natural ventilation is therefore not possible. As long as the window to the stairwell does not mean a loss of privacy, residents appreciate the open view to the heart of the house because it promotes a sense of community.

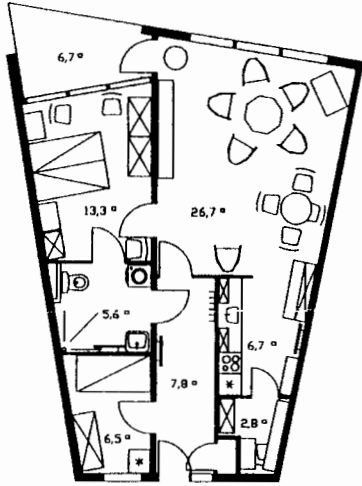
Central courtyard or central hall designs are very popular, because they offer sheltered areas to linger in at the well-frequented traffic areas of the house. This is true for covered as well as open courtyards. A big disadvantage of this type of structure, is the absence of natural ventilation for the rooms facing the courtyard if it is covered. For this reason, an open courtyard design is preferable.

In the central hall variant of this design, round or rounded forms are often favoured, thus giving a trapeze shape to the ground plan. It has become apparent that such a design has a negative impact on the usability of living space. The rooms on the outside of the building may be spacious and light, but the ones on the inside have significant disadvantages due to their narrowing.

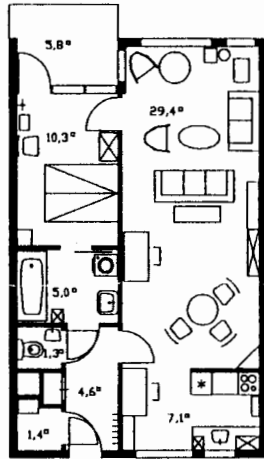
The most commonly chosen design is the ribbon development model. Due to cost factors it encourages the rows of added units to be as narrow as possible. If the most frequently chosen standard room divisions (examples A and B) are applied, then there are clear limits to minimising the width of rooms and maximising their depth. In very narrow ground plans, rooms are dark, very difficult to furnish, and their traffic areas take up an above average amount of space.

Even in ribbon developments with narrow units, with a little bit of imagination, highly usable designs can be produced, which even though they create unexpected room divisions are rated very positively by residents, who value the generous living room and bedroom and the practical location of the kitchen, bathroom and balcony.

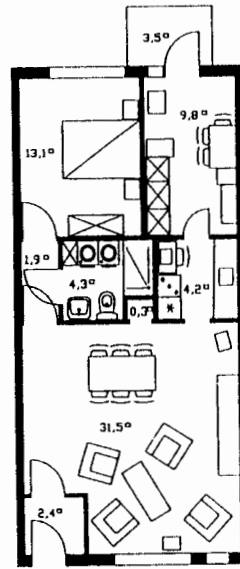
Ground plan solutions with varying degrees of usability (1:200)



Example A
Disadvantageous
trapeze shaped design



Example B
Disadvantageous room divisions
in narrow ribbon development units



Example C
Advantageous room divisions
in narrow ribbon development units