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The Social Capital of Cohousing Communities

Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the possibility that cohousing communities might combine both civil engagement and governance systems in order to simultaneously generate three forms of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking social capitals. Cohousing communities intend to create a “self-sufficient micro-cosmos”, but struggle against the relationships of “anonymous” neighbourhood. Cohousers build their bonding social capital through the creation of a supportive (formal and informal) network within the community; while at the same time they develop bridging social capital when they try to integrate with the wider context, by organizing activities and making available spaces towards the outside. Finally, when cohousers try to collaborate with external partners (e.g., non-profit organizations and public institutions) they build linking social capital in relation to the ideas, information and advantages obtained through the collaboration with these institutions.

Cohousing communities, friendly neighbourhood, intentional communities

Introduction

This paper focuses on cohousing, which is an emerging housing schemes in particular, in Northern Europe and North America. Referring to Putnam’s definition of social capital, which is strongly related to the civil society as one of the main components for economic growth and democratic government (DeFilippis, 2001), this paper intends to discuss the possibility that cohousing communities might combine both civil engagement and governance systems in order to generate three forms of social capital: bonding, bridging (Putnam, 1995), and linking social capital (Leonardi, 1995).

Literature about cohousing mainly focuses on the physical layout, common facilities, legal structures, decision-making processes (Fromm, 1991; McCamant and Durrett, 1998, 2011; Bamford, 2001; Field, 2004; Scotthanson C. and Scotthanson K., 2005; Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2005ab;

Lietaert, 2007; Brenton, 2008; Sargisson, 2010), private and public character (Fenster, 1999; Chiodelli, 2009, 2010; Ruiu, 2013, 2014a; Chiodelli and Baglione, 2014), internal social dynamics (Blank, 2001; Field, 2004; Bouma and Voorbij, 2009; Williams, 2005a, 2008; Sargisson, 2010; Jarvis, 2011; Chatterton, 2013), and “intentionality” of the groups (Bamford, 2001; Kirby, 2003; Sargisson, 2010). Few authors refer to the relations between cohousing and the environment (Bamford, 2001; Brown, 2004; Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2008; Sargisson, 2010; Chatterton, 2013) and some others apply the social capital concept to cohousing (see Poley, 2007; Poley and Stephenson, 2007; Brenton, 2008; Bouma and Voorbij, 2009; Sargisson, 2010; Williams, 2005a, 2008; Bramanti, 2012). Finally, Lietaert (2010) argues that cohousing may be an expression of “economic degrowth”, and scholars rarely consider simultaneous relations between “environmental, economic and social sustainability”.

In order to discuss possible outcomes of the cohousing scheme in terms of social capital, this paper analyses how cohousing communities work and their constitutive features; afterward, the possibility that they may produce outcomes in terms of social capital will be considered. Finally, from this, some conclusions will be drawn.

Methodology

This paper refers to existing literature produced by sociologists, geographers, and architects and on a 3-year-long qualitative fieldwork research (from 2011 to 2013) on cohousing in England and Italy. Residents of The Community Project (Laughton, East Sussex), Threshold Centre (Ghillingham, Dorset), Springhill Community (Stroud, Gloucestershire), and Lilac Community (Leeds) were interviewed in England. Cohousers from Villaggio Barona (Milan, Italy), Itaca Community (Modena, Emilia Romagna), Irughegia (Modena, Emilia Romagna), Villaggio Solidale (Mirano, Veneto), Rio Selva Farm (Preganziol, Veneto), and Ecosol (Fidenza, Emilia Romagna) were involved in Italy (see table 1). These communities are both more or less long-established groups (The Community Project, The Threshold Centre, Springhill Community, Villaggio Barona, Itaca, Rio Selva Farm, Villaggio Solidale) and forming/establishing groups (Lilac Community, Irughegia, Ecosol).

The research scheme based on qualitative semi-structured interviews (see Ruiu, 2014b), which aimed to record the capability of cohousers to build three forms of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking social capital, specifically referring to their cohousing development scheme, physical design and decision-making processes, self-management system, internal and external relationships, and civic engagement. Moreover, the participation in cohousers' everyday life and collective activities, such as common dinners and work, allows a deep consciousness of how cohousing communities work in both contexts to be established. The involvement of groups at different levels

of development, which belong to different countries (England and Italy) and have different management structures (resident-led communities and co-management with housing associations or foundations), aimed to investigate how cohousing communities work under the lens of diverse contextual factors.

Cohousing Scheme

Cohousing Communities combine private homes and shared facilities (provided in relation to the needs of inhabitants and their economic resources). The cohousing idea was introduced in Denmark in the 1960s by an architect: in 1967 Jan Gudmand Høyer tried to create a *boefælleskaber* (a cohousing community which consisted of 12 detached houses around a common area) in the suburbs of Copenhagen (Hareskov). Although this project was not completed, the first two communities arose in 1970 and 1973 (Saettedammen and Skraplanet) near Copenhagen, and a third (Nonbo Hede) in 1976 near Viborg. In Sweden and the Netherlands, cohousing started in the 1970s (*kollektivhuser* and *centraal wonen*) and is often state-financed. In Great Britain, about 15 established communities and 40 developing projects exist: they are mainly resident-financed, without any public funds (more recently there has been an attempt to cooperate with Housing Associations). In Italy a few cohousing projects exist so far: Ecovillages (see <http://www.mappaecovillaggi.it>), communes and "Condomini Solidali" (see Rottini, 2008) are more widespread than cohousing communities (Lietaert, 2007).

A second wave of cohousing communities was introduced in North America in 1988 by architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett (see Williams, 2008; Sargisson, 2010) due to the publication of a book "Cohousing. A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves". Here, cohousing quickly develops and the biggest difference between this model and the European one (Sweden, Denmark, Netherland) is a near total absence of communities for rent or state-financed (see Fromm, 1991, 2000; Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2008; Sargisson, 2010; McCamant and Durrett, 2011).

Finally, a third wave (Williams, 2005a) spread in Australia, New Zealand and Japan (see Meltzer, 2005) and this is characterized by a hybrid character between the above mentioned schemes.

Different from an "ordinary" condominium, cohousing residents usually take part in each aspect of the community's development: they participate in the physical design process, collectively manage their sites, share common facilities (e.g., laundry, cooking, eating, meeting facilities) and spaces. At the same time, cohousing combines both private and public dimensions: cohousers have private homes and they do not share finances (usually they share a financial fund only in relation to the common facilities).

In order to understand the functioning of a cohousing community in relation to the potential bonding, bridging, and linking social capital produced by itself, it is important to refer at least to some

constitutive features: the physical design process, decision-making process, self-management system, relations with the "external" context and civil engagement.

A Definition of Social Capital in Cohousing Communities

Social activities, participation in both designing and decision-making processes, and the creation of supportive networks within (and between) groups and in the local community are supposed to generate social capital (Williams, 2005a). Social capital has been defined in many different ways as the product of "the strength of weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973); "nontransferable advantages of birth" (Loury, 1977, 1989); a distinct form of capital in comparison with economic, cultural, symbolic capital, built by present and potential resources resulting from relationships (Bourdieu, 1980, 1986); the product of relationships, different from physical and human capitals (Coleman, 1990); the result of belonging to a network in which "structural holes" produce advantages (Burt, 1992, 2002); a multidimensional capital, which consists of values, trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement (Putnam, 1993, 2000, 2001).

On these bases scholars define social capital in many different ways, but key elements could be identified with the role of relationships regulated by a system of rules (see Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Paldam and Svendsen, 2000; Sabatini, 2004).

A wide range of definitions of social capital exists applicable in different contexts: according to Portes (1998) they can be classified as "a source of social control", as "a source of family support", as "a source of benefits through extra-familial networks". Furthermore, as Adler and Kwon (2002) argue it is possible to summarize the variety of definitions in terms of both the "bridging" (external ties) and "bonding social capital" (internal ties) concepts.

Social capital, as defined by Putnam (1993, 1995, 1996, 2000), has become a very important concern for the research and practice of community development (DeFilippis, 2001). In fact, the social capital concept has been applied in social housing developments in order to create wealth and prosperity in neighbourhoods (Wilson, 1977); to increase the probability of success of housing planning (Spence, 1993); to promote a sense of community in neighbourhoods (Vidal, 1995); to solve poverty, inequality and violence issues (Stegman and Turner, 1996); to promote a sense of belonging and residential stability (Temkin and Rohe, 1998); and to promote cooperative forms inside and outside neighbourhoods (Purdue, 2001).

The benefits produced by social capital can be summarized as: access to information and knowledge (see Granovetter, 1973; Lin and Dumin, 1986; Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 1987, 1992, 1997; Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Adler and Kwon, 2002), social control (see Coleman, 1988; Burt, 1997; Portes, 1998; De Filippis, 2001; Adler and Kwon, 2002), solidarity

and mutual support (see Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993; Paldam and Svendsen, 2000; Adler and Kwon, 2002), and engagement and civic sense (see Putnam, 1993; Knack, 2002). The same advantages are outlined by some literature produced on cohousing (see Poley, 2007; Poley and Stephenson, 2007; Brenton, 2008; Bouma and Voorbij, 2009; Sargisson, 2010; Williams, 2005, 2008; Bramanti, 2012). The social capital concept may be applied to cohousing, underlining the importance of the social structure and physical layout in promoting mutual support systems, and a collaborative way of life (Williams, 2005, 2008). Social capital produced within cohousing may be defined as "peculiar", neither completely corresponding to primary social capital (family ties), nor to secondary social capital (associations), because communities satisfy both individual and collective needs (Bramanti, 2012).

Bonding Social Capital of Cohousing Communities

Cohousers produce a bonding social capital by creating supportive (formal and informal) networks within their community. Literature produced about cohousing highlights the participation in the physical design, decision-making processes, and in self-managing as being important in promoting social interaction within groups (Fromm, 1991; McCammant and Durrett, 1994; Brenton, 1998), even though cohousing might produce conflicts as well in relation to a number of potential conflicts which can arise during these phases (Williams, 2005; Sargisson, 2010).

The physical design process is considered by both scholars and cohousers interviewed as one of the main steps of the cohousing "forming group phase": cohousers take part in designing the physical layout of their communities in both resident-led communities and partnerships, by collaborating together with architects and professionals.

The decision-making process, mainly based on a "consensus decision-making system" (see Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006), may be considered as the heart of the governance system in cohousing communities even though this requires time, patience, and the willingness to solve eventual internal conflicts (Sargisson, 2010).

Building Bonding Social Capital throughout the physical design process

As Williams (2005) points out, cohousing design tries to promote social interaction through higher density and good visibility, clustering houses in groups, creating defensible spaces, locating the car parking at the periphery. Some literature (also produced on cohousing) outlines the physical design as a key element in producing a sense of community (Zaff and Devlin, 1998; Devlin *et al.*, 2008). Since Clarence Perry's (1929) definition of the "neighbourhood unit" many scholars have focused on

the neighbourhood as a spatially circumscribed unit in which the physical layout promotes the development of a sense of community (Rofe, 1995; Plas and Lewes, 1996). In particular, physical proximity is considered very important in promoting social interactions (Kenen, 1982; Kuper, 1953; Gehl, 1987; Lang, 1987; Rofe, 1995; Williams, 2005a). At the same time, physical proximity may represent only a first step in creating neighbourhood social dynamics (Bulmer, 1986; Mutti, 1992) and, then, bonding social capital. However, residents of communities involved in the research strongly believe that their participation in the designing process promoted more intimate relationships among members and increased their social capital in comparison with their previous situation. This led cohousers to know each other and solve conflicts that arose during the process due to their diverse points of view and needs. In particular, in some cases (e.g., Ecosol, Irughegia, Itaca) members physically built some part of their communities. Here members stated that this represented a very important experience for them to find a way to get along. In fact, spending a long period of time working together contributed to creating their community in both material and immaterial terms.

There are a number of factors that may inhibit social interaction: proximity and physical layout are also connected with other elements such as leisure time, social and cultural status (Abu-Gazeh, 1999). Some scholars point out that the physical layout cannot be the only push factor in promoting socializing processes within cohousing communities (Williams, 2005; Jarvis, 2011). However, even though the physical layout cannot be considered the only push factor for developing a sense of belonging, in the cohousing communities analysed, the participation in this phase positively affected the cohesiveness of the groups. Physically designing a community also means that cohousers have to start to behave as a group trying to find the best solutions for all members. Even in communities, which are co-managed together with external bodies (Threshold Centre, Villaggio Barona, Villaggio Solidale), those who became members through housing associations or foundations, feel that their way to live within the neighbourhood is drastically changed. They feel a part of a community due to the active participation, not only in designing the community, but also in common activities and work. Those who became members following the establishment of the cohousing believe that some aspects of the physical layout of their community encourage meetings with neighbours. For example, in all communities the car parking area is located at the periphery: cohousers stated that they have to walk through the community to reach their cars, passing in front of neighbours' houses. In addition to this, the frequent presence of big windows allows cohousers inside and outside their homes to see each other.

Finally, cohousers establish physical boundaries between public and private spaces: in cohousing communities the physical proximity is always considered as a key factor in promoting social interaction, provided it respects the cohousers' privacy (McCamant and Durrett, 1998, 2011;

Field, 2004; Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2008; Bouma and Voorbij, 2009). In fact, in cohousing communities the boundary between the private and public spaces seems to be a very thin line (Ruiu, 2013) and cohousers have to be able to negotiate the meaning of both private and public dimensions from the very beginning (also through a clear physical layout). During interviews, cohousers strongly defended their private spaces, which correspond to their homes, but they are not always able to define external spaces, such as for example front or back yards. These spaces may be defined as "semi-public" spaces, which are public in theory, but private in practice. Moreover, in the majority of cases, cohousers leave their doors open and this may make it difficult to distinguish private and public zones. In fact, in some cases inhabitants complained about a lack of privacy due to frequent visits by neighbours (for example in the Villaggio Solidale). However, during interviews, cohousers recognized the fundamental role of the physical layout and the participation in the designing process. At the same time, they were aware that a number of factors, such as participation in organizing their daily life, common activities and work, contributed to reinforcing their bonding social capital. This establishes a clear boundary between the community, which is a cohesive group, and the outside.

Building Bonding Social Capital through the decision-making process

Communities utilize a "consensus decision-making system" which is described by cohousers interviewed as the most democratic decision-making system, but being very "exhaustive" due to the length of the process that takes a longer time than majority voting. This is the reason why the groups studied are divided into subgroups (in addition to a main meeting) that manage some specific tasks (finances, maintenance, gardening, cooking, etc.), and each group decides how many times they need to meet up to discuss internal issues. Finally, during a main meeting each group makes some proposals to other members. Some groups, for example the Springhill cohousing, try to simplify the process by starting discussions by email, and using alternative systems, such as "coloured cards" to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the issues discussed (see also Fenster, 1999). In any cases the process takes a very long time in order to achieve a shared decision: the length of the decision-making process is also connected with the number of inhabitants: this is crucial for creating a "community life", even though some members are absent and they do not take part in the common activities. At the same time, when the number of members is too large (The Community Project, Springhill Cohousing, Villaggio Barona), this makes harder reaching the "unanimity". On the one hand, the "consensus system" pushes cohousers to dialogue in order to find shared solutions, which satisfy the entire group; on the other it might compromise the internal cohesiveness if cohousers are not able to find the way to get along. In fact, in the second instance (in relation to the impossibility to reach a decision), almost

all communities can utilize the majority voting, in order to stop discussions and take a final decision (even though this is not universally shared). As a cohouser from The Community Project highlighted they operate by consensus, but if they absolutely cannot agree, then, they have a voting mechanism. However, they have never used that.

Together with the physical layout, the consensus is considered by cohousers as one of the cornerstones on which the community's bonding social capital is based. While the participation in physically designing the community represents a first step during the forming phase, which allows cohousers to become a group, the consensus concerns the "performing phase" during which cohousers strengthen their relationships making sure that the community works.

Building Bonding Social Capital through the Self-management system

The self-management regards many aspects of the cohousing daily life, including informal mutual help between cohousers (Jarvis, 2011; Williams, 2005a). In fact, cohousing projects are "supportive" communities where many types of formal and informal care arise. Informal help is defined by Hoch and Hemmens (1987, 433) in relation to "the qualities of the social relationships within which helping occurs [...]". Formal and informal helps appear more parallel than complementary in that both provide help for virtually the same kinds of problems". This happens within cohousing communities in which the informal mutual-help may depend on a number of variables: degree of heterogeneity, residential stability, age of the community, and personal factors (Williams, 2005a). Within the communities analysed the nature of the commitment varies from group to group and sometimes communities specify a minimum time commitment per month.

Usually, when people become cohousers, they have to accept the cohousing "infrastructure of daily life" (Jarvis, 2011), which provides a wide range of collective activities and work within the community. For example, in Springhill Cohousing, members are committed to 20 hours per year of working activities. This community has a formalized structure that involves each aspect of the community life. In fact, new members receive a detailed document that concerns the internal regulation. Moreover, in the common houses there are registers which report all activities, group tasks, names of the people who belong to each group. The group has a dinner together four times a week: on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday the cooking group in the office prepare the dinner for the community; on Saturday they do a pot luck (buffet).

The participation in all phases and aspects, such as the development process, self-management, and formal and informal care systems, may be seen as key elements in producing a sense of belonging and social capital. Everyone is supposed to feel part of the community and operate in order to satisfy personal and collective needs. In fact, if cohousers are able to discuss all decisions

together, which concern the common spaces and activities (e.g., they are supposed to consult other members before any modifications to the garden in front of their houses are undertaken), they necessarily share a strong sense of belonging. Otherwise, no one would be interested in discussing these issues.

Bridging Social Capital of Cohousing Communities

Cohousers develop bridging social capital when they encourage integration within the wider context, by organizing activities and making available spaces towards the outside (Williams, 2005a). Moreover, when cohousers try to collaborate with external partners (e.g., Housing Associations) they build linking social capital in relation to the ideas, information and advantages obtained thanks to the collaboration with external institutions. Moreover, supporting the hypothesis that cohousing communities build social capital, the results of Poley's (2007) study indicate higher levels of civic engagement among cohousers compared to both the general population and people with similar education, income and racial characteristics. This higher degree of civic engagement is connected with indicators, such as the self-management, participation in the development process, and decision-making process (based on unanimity), which allow cohousers to develop democratic capacities.

External relationships and civic engagement

In order to assess if cohousing might produce a higher degree of residents' civic engagement, there is a need to consider the relationship between communities and the local context where they arise. The aim of the communities studied is to develop both cohesiveness within themselves, and relationships with the outside trying to "break down the barriers (physical and 'psychological') between the 'inside' and 'outside'" (Ruiu, 2014a). According to Galster, Andersson and Musterd (2010), some attempts have been made to try to tackle social-spatial segregation through social heterogeneity; planning and management of social housing (in particular in France, Ireland, and the Netherlands) (see Murie and Musterd, 2004; Berube, 2005; Briggs, 2005; Musterd and Andersson, 2005; Norris, 2006).

Neighbourhood means both satisfying residents' needs and ensuring a particular reputation towards the outside (Galster *et al.*, 2010): these elements affect residents' behaviours in terms of moving to another neighbourhood, for instance. In fact, the neighbourhood may also become a "social-economic" status symbol (see White, 1987; Kearns *et al.*, 2000; Lee, Oropesa and Kanan, 1994; Taylor, 1998; Wacquant, 1993; 2007; Permentier *et al.*, 2011). In the cohousing context, residents' satisfaction and perception of reputation might be evaluated in relation to the difficulties they have to deal with when they try to build a community. In almost all cases analysed (in particular in England), cohousers had to face the initial opposition exercised by local authorities, and the suspicion of local

communities. Cohousing communities have to be accepted by local authorities and local communities. In all English experiences analysed, at the beginning the surroundings were hostile towards cohousing communities, which were classified as hippie communities or "communes" (Ruiu, 2014a). Only after a very long process of communication did cohousers start to be accepted and then appreciated for their engagement in improving the wider neighbourhood "social life".

Cohousing communities can be located in rural (Threshold Centre, Rio Selva), suburban (The Community Project, Itaca) and urban (Lilac, Springhill Cohousing, Villaggio Barona, Villaggio Solidale, Ecosol, Irughegia) contexts in relation to a number of factors: economic reasons, willingness to renovate existing sites, the cohousers' goals and needs. It is suggested that when they arise in urban contexts, it is easier that they relate more with the wider context, in particular using its services and facilities. At the same time they might have more opportunities to develop ties with the wider neighbourhood, due to the physical proximity. By contrast, rural communities might be more isolated and disconnected with the outside world. On the one hand, following Meijering et al. (2007), cohousers try to create "a common, alternative way of life outside mainstream society"; on the other, as Sargisson (2010) points out, the cohousing *raison d'être* is to escape from "alienating" contexts. This means that cohousing communities intend to create a "self-sufficient micro-cosmos", but struggling against "anonymous" neighbourhood's relationships, and promoting both forms of bonding and bridging social capital.

Findings obtained by Poley and Stephenson's (2007) work on 56 cohousing sites in North America highlights that cohousers improve their relationships also outside in the wider neighbourhood. Communal spaces of cohousing communities might be defined as "semi-public" spaces because they are often accessible from the outside (Ruiu, 2013, 2014a; Jarvis, 2011; Sargisson, 2010). In cohousing communities analysed, these spaces are public within the community and theoretically private for "outsiders" (because they belong to the group). Cohousers promote activities (sport, entertainment, cultural, leisure, social events) which involve people from outside, seeking to build external ties and making people aware about their goals. This suggests that cohousers increase their civil engagement in relation to these activities and making facilities available for the wider context (Ruiu, 2014a). At the same time they are involved in activities outside the community, working outside, doing shopping, attending school, using local services (Ruiu, 2014b).

As Williams (2005b) points out, when communities become more established, they also become more involved with the wider community. As underlined before, this involvement is also connected with the frequent hostility towards communities exercised by the local communities. On the one hand, this could lead communities to become close, on the other, it might push groups

towards dialogue with people from outside when trying to overcome potential conflicts. For this reason, cohousers organize many activities and invite "outsiders", in order to make them aware about the group's goals.

Linking Social Capital of Cohousing Communities

Referring back to Putnam (1995), social capital is produced by networks, rules and trust: these elements allow people to reach common goals. In general, communities are outcomes of both, members' characteristics and a complex system of "power-led relationships" (internally and externally) between members and the context where they operate (DeFilippis, 2001). This is the reason why there is a need to study cohousing communities not only in relation to the concepts of bonding and bridging social capital, but also considering their linking social capital, which is connected to the ability of groups to obtain information, ideas and advantages from institutions (Leonardi, 2005). In fact, if bonding and bridging social capital measure both internal cohesion and the degree of connection with the outside; the linking social capital is related, for example, with the ability to create partnerships with external actors (e.g., non-profit organizations), which may help groups to reduce the length of the development process and promote a higher degree of heterogeneity within communities (in terms of economic, cultural and social capital).

In resident-led communities studied the social capital seems to be also connected with higher levels of economic capital (because members support all financial costs of the projects). In fact, it is suggested that the presence of several facilities may increase the costs of the projects, thereby restricting access to a medium-high class of inhabitants. At the same time, there is a need to consider that this feature can increase the costs in the short run, but provide savings over time. The higher costs may represent invisible barriers that avoid the access of disadvantaged people (Ruiu, 2014a). In this vein, partnerships between private and public sectors might promote more affordable, heterogeneous, and eco-friendly housing projects. In fact, against the elitism that characterizes this kind of project, partnerships with external institutions or organizations (Housing Associations, for example) might produce more heterogeneity, also allowing disadvantaged people to become members. While in the majority of resident-led communities analysed residents have mainly higher income levels, the co-managed communities (with Housing Associations or Foundations), such as the Threshold Centre, the Villaggio Barona and the Villaggio Solidale, are characterized by economic heterogeneity.

At the same time, the engagement of external developers (through a top-down logic) may produce a loss of the sense of community and "intentionality" among inhabitants. In fact, as already underlined, residents of cohousing developments are supposed to develop a strong sense of belonging in relation to the participation in both decision-making and design processes (Dioguardi, 2001;

Brenton, 2008). Participation is strongly connected with cohousers' "intentionality" to develop intimate relationships between neighbours (Fromm, 1991; Bamford, 2001; Kirby, 2003; Sargisson, 2010; Jarvis, 2011). In this sense, the Threshold Centre represents a very interesting Co-management model in which "social housing residents" also participate in all aspects of the cohousing life. They adopted the consensus decision-making system, hence all residents (including renters and co-owners) have to agree on decisions. In fact, the Housing Association allows residents to vote if the decisions do not regard economic issues.

Using Karn's (2004) words, in order to define cohousing communities' social capital we might refer to the "community capacity" to provide by itself a safe, democratic and "healthy" environment through a mutual support system, which simultaneously promotes all forms of social capital (bridging, bonding and linking).

Conclusions

It is very difficult to prove if and how much cohousers' social capital increases: the amount of their initial social capital should be established in order to consider if this is increased or decreased in relation to living in cohousing communities. Moreover, it would be useful to evaluate if cohousers' social capital increases more quickly than the social capital of people who do not live in a cohousing community. However, considering the potential cohousers' social capital and its effects inside and outside the community this work has referred to the degree of trust, reciprocity, participation and governance, complexity, internal and external social ties, and partnerships with institutions. Trust and reciprocity were analysed in relation to the activities, nature of the relationships developed within communities and the degree of trust among members; the participation and complexity in relation to the involvement in decision-making, the internal organization and involvement in external activities; the size of social networks, referring to relations with the outside world.

The social capital of cohousing groups promote a sense of community and belonging, mutual support networks inside and outside the communities, a sense of safety exercised by a social control (in relation to the constant presence of people on the site), and a higher civic engagement. Differently from an "ordinary" condominium, in cohousing communities the bonding social capital is guaranteed by internal cohesion, trust among members, shared goals, internal rules; the bridging social capital depends on the willingness to be open to the outside, and on creating friendly relationships with the wider neighbourhood; the linking social capital is built in relation to cohousers' ability to create partnerships with external actors (institutions or external organizations), which may help groups to reduce the length of the development process and

promote a higher degree of heterogeneity within communities (in terms of economic, cultural and social capital).

Evidences from the empirical research on some cohousing communities in England and Italy show how residents first built a robust social capital within the communities through participation in each aspect of the community development (material and immaterial). Their bonding social capital represents the starting point to build external and institutional social ties. In fact, they have to behave as a group in order to achieve credibility in front of political authorities. Moreover, they define a structured daily social life, providing activities and facilities that are also available for people from outside. They are very active in the wider neighbourhood both trying to involve external people in common activities within communities, and participating in neighbourhood social life.

Cohousing's "community capacity" provides a safe, democratic and "healthy" environment through a mutual support system, which simultaneously promotes bridging, bonding and linking social capital. In addition to identifying the potential social capital of cohousing communities, it is important to understand how to support the birth and the growth of these communities, at the same time trying to promote the development of the three forms of social capital. In fact, it is important to underline that often cohousing communities are "private groups" (resident-led communities), thereby they define their own structure and organization. This means that cohousing developments might generate social capital in different degrees. A deeper empirical research about the actual and potential role of the public actor and the partnerships between the private and public sectors might be helpful in order to "regulate" and promote the development of social capital in cohousing communities. This preliminary reflection aims to provide a first definition of the potentialities of this "new" kind of housing scheme.

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Tables

Community	Type	Year of establishment	Units	Residents
The Community Project Laughton, East Sussex, England	Resident-led	2004	21	74
Springhill Stroud, Gloucestershire, England	Resident-led	2005	35	79
Threshold Centre Ghillingham, Dorset, England	50% resident-led – 50% managed by an Housing Association	2008	14	18
Lilac Leeds, England	Resident-led	2013	20	46
Villaggio Barona Milano, Lombardia, Italy	Managed by a Foundation	2003	82	250
Villaggio Solidale Mirano, Veneto, Emilia Romagna	50% resident-led – 50% by a Foundation	2011	25	40
Itaca Modena, Emilia Romagna, Italy	Resident-led	1999	12	21
Rio Selva Preganziol, Veneto, Italy	Resident-led	2011	4	9
Ecosol Fidenza, Emilia Romagna, Italy	Resident-led	In progress	13	35
Irughegia Modena, Emilia Romagna, Italy	Resident-led	Forming phases	15	13

Table 1. The table illustrates the main characteristics of Cohousing Communities included in the research

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