



# LUND UNIVERSITY

## What we share: covert commoning in Swedish coliving?

Grundström, Karin; Lazoroska, Daniela

*Published in:*  
Nordic Journal of Urban Studies

*DOI:*  
[10.18261/njus.3.1.3](https://doi.org/10.18261/njus.3.1.3)

2023

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Grundström, K., & Lazoroska, D. (2023). What we share: covert commoning in Swedish coliving? *Nordic Journal of Urban Studies*, 3(1), 44-59. Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.18261/njus.3.1.3>

*Total number of authors:*  
2

### General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:  
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00



# What we share: covert commoning in Swedish coliving?

Karin Grundström

*Dept of Urban Studies, Malmö University, Sweden*

[k.grundstrom@mau.se](mailto:k.grundstrom@mau.se)

[ORCID.org/0000-0002-5822-6868](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5822-6868)

Daniela Lazoroska

*IIIEE, Lund University, Sweden*

(Corresponding author)

[daniela.lazoroska@iiiee.lu.se](mailto:daniela.lazoroska@iiiee.lu.se)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2729-0557>

## Abstract

Sharing housing with non-family members has increasingly become a way to reduce costs while pursuing an autonomous yet communal living throughout the life course. During the past decade, a new form of shared housing has entered the Swedish real estate market: coliving. Like shared housing generally, some of the aims of coliving are to help address the housing shortage, decrease loneliness, increase the sustainability of housing and provide flexible housing for an increasingly mobile population. Based on the design of sixteen coliving hubs and interviews with thirteen coliving developers and operators as well as fourteen colivers, we show how the visions and experiences of developers and residents are mutually constitutive, but also at odds with each other. We argue first that even though coliving is set in a discourse of commoning as an alternative form of exchange, production and living, developers decrease the size of shared spaces and reduce options for residents to manage their homes and participate in choosing whom to live with. As a consequence, colivers feel the need to develop strategies to manage privacy and practice self-care, since having emotional balance becomes a prerequisite for an intensely shared life. Furthermore, the emotional labour of colivers revolves primarily around socializing with others similar to themselves while services, such as cleaning and maintenance, are provided by staff. In conclusion, we define commoning practices in coliving as a form of covert commoning built on contradictions between discourse and lived experience.

Keywords

Care, coliving, commoning, shared housing

## Introduction

Sharing housing with non-family members has increasingly become a way to reduce costs while pursuing autonomous yet communal living throughout the life course. Shared forms of housing aim to achieve everything from housing affordability to reducing loneliness and isolation, increasing integration among age and ethnic groups and promoting creative work styles among young professionals (Druta, Ronald & Heath, 2021). Shared housing is an established form of housing in Sweden, with the first developments in this area dating back to modernist interventions and co-housing [*kollektivhus*] efforts in the 1930s (Sandstedt & Westin, 2015; Törnqvist, 2019; Vestbro, 2000, 2010, 2014). During the past dec-

ade, interest in and development of shared housing forms has picked up pace, going hand in hand with demographic changes, escalating house prices and an increased awareness of the environmental impact of the housing sector (Casier, 2023; Ronald, Schijf & Donovan, 2023; Törnqvist, 2019). With these developments, a new form of shared housing has entered the real estate market: coliving. Like shared housing generally, some of the aims of coliving are to help address the housing shortage, decrease loneliness, increase the sustainability of housing development and provide a flexible housing form for increasingly mobile populations (Grundström, 2021a; von Zumbusch & Lalicic, 2020). In its Swedish version, as in other countries, coliving has also meant a reduction in both the private and the shared space offered to its residents, with cleaning and other services being part of the offer (Grundström, 2021b).

The best-known form of shared housing, co-housing (i.e. collaborative housing), has primarily been conceived as a form of housing based on togetherness and the sharing of reproductive work (Lang, Carriou & Czischke, 2020). Sharing labour – be it reproductive work, childcare or gardening – is the socio-political core of cohousing. Commoning, or the establishment of relationships and sharing of resources, is based on and expected to benefit from sharing daily chores to relieve the burden on each individual and support feminist forms of housing (Grundström, 2021b; Hayden, 1982; Kärnekull, 1992; Sandstedt & Westin, 2015; Vestbro, 2000). The most recent form of shared housing, coliving, is based on a discourse of sharing similar to that of cohousing, but compared to cohousing, coliving reduces living spaces and adds paid services. As a result, the practices of sharing have shifted towards financialization and marketization (Bergan, Gorman-Murray & Power 2021; Grundström, 2021b), with potentially detrimental consequences for commoning practices. If discourse remains similar while sharing housing practices are shifting, research needs to pay attention to how real-estate actors envision the socialities that can play out within this new housing form, and, importantly, how colivers experience sharing.

Thus, based on interviews with thirteen real-estate actors in Sweden and fourteen colivers, the aim of this article is to analyse how the reduction of shared and private space and the financialization of reproductive work is motivated by real-estate actors and experienced by residents, and, furthermore, what consequences this may have on residents' commoning practices. The perspectives of both residents and real-estate actors are important as they illustrate both the tendencies in the housing market and how the everyday lives of urbanites may be affected as numbers of singletons rise in parallel with increasing costs and deficits of housing. We ask: how are the ideal coliver and the ideal coliving community perceived and portrayed in marketing by developers and operators? What kind of sharing and commoning practices emerge among colivers? We argue that even though coliving is set in a discourse of commoning as an alternative form of exchange, production and living, in practice, developers decrease the size of shared spaces and reduce options for residents to manage their homes and choose whom to live with. As a consequence, colivers feel the need to develop strategies to manage privacy and practice self-care, since having emotional balance and knowledge of the self becomes a prerequisite for an intensely shared life. Furthermore, the emotional labour of colivers revolves primarily around socializing with others similar to themselves. We show how the visions and experiences of developers and residents are mutually constitutive, but also at odds with each other. In conclusion, we define commoning practices in coliving as a form of *covert commoning* built on contradictions between discourse and lived experience.

## Coliving: an emerging form of shared housing

One reason for the rise in coliving is the rise of singleton populations in the western world. While Klinenberg (2012) argues that the rise in ‘going solo’ is a choice and that it is ‘surprisingly appealing’, Bauman (2003) states that individualism leads to loosely affective relationships and increasingly frail human bonds. Sweden has one of the largest singleton populations worldwide: approximately 52% of Sweden’s households consist of one person (Eurostat, 2017). In 2017, the year that has been identified as the height of a recent building boom, 56% of housing approved in the Stockholm region was intended for one-person households (Runting, Sjøgrim & Matz, 2019). For singletons, coliving may provide relational and cohabitational alternatives to the dominant forms of either living alone or with family members. Secondly, the increase in singleton living, whether it is a choice or not, is paralleled by higher housing costs and a growing lack of housing in the metropolitan regions of the western world. This holds true for the Swedish metropolitan regions, which for the past three decades have experienced increases in social and geographical polarization and housing inequality (Grundström & Molina, 2016; Hedin, Clark, Lundholm & Malmberg, 2012;). Thirdly, the Swedish housing sector has been marketized, as government subsidies have ceased and new policies have required even municipal housing companies to be market-driven (Grundström & Molina, 2016).

As coliving is an emergent housing form, peer-reviewed research on the topic is relatively limited, both with Sweden as an empirical focus and internationally. Previous studies have analysed financialization, changes in markets, the role of real-estate actors, and consequences for colivers themselves. As of 2022, coliving had evolved into the third most promising sector for real-estate investment in Europe (Casier, 2023). Rental housing, and coliving within the rental sector, represents a profitable and new asset class (Ronald, Schijf & Donovan, 2023). The restructuring of the housing market after the global financial crisis of 2007–2009 has brought together real-estate actors and developers in new ways, leading to a proliferation of typologies of shared housing (Grundström, 2021b; Ronald, Schijf & Donovan, 2023). Along with new typologies, new forms of paid services have been introduced. Coliving is a form of housing that operates under increased managerialization and professionalization. In coliving, some of the sociality of a community of co-residents can be managed by an operator or community manager; residents may pay a premium for their sociality to be organized (Bergan, Gorman-Murray & Power 2021; Grundström, 2021b). Coliving has also been tied to the rise of the millennial commune of ‘digital nomads’, i.e. international knowledge economy workers. Coliving is framed as a solution for this mobile demographic, whose residential mobility comes with employment flexibility in the form of a ‘spatial manifestation of a precarious economy’ (Bergan, Gorman-Murray & Power 2021). There are tendencies in this stream of research to present mobility and flexibility of residence and employment as a choice or even a preference (Chevtaeva, 2021; von Zumbusch & Lalicic, 2020). Furthermore, coliving is targeted at specific groups and governed by defining the ideal type of coliver as single and childless (Grundström, 2021b). Colivers are supposed to share space with non-family members whom they often cannot choose. According to Bergan et al. (2021), coliving challenges privacy in significant ways by framing this re-imagined home as a space of social behaviour and professional networking.

In Sweden, coliving only emerged as an option in the housing market in the past decade, with the first so-called ‘hub’ established in 2011. Several more hubs were opened in 2018, and since then growth has been substantial. Nevertheless, coliving remains a minor option in the Swedish real-estate market. There are no statistics on the exact number of coliving units but based on our investigation – including interviews with real-estate developers and

operators – we estimate that at the start of 2022, approximately 500 people in Sweden lived in such units. Developers expressed plans to build more than 7,000 units in the coming five years. The scale, size and capacity of these units vary. In most cases, residents have their own private bedrooms, but rely on shared kitchens and bathrooms as well as additional shared spaces such as lounges, laundry rooms, yoga rooms and/or coworking areas. In terms of scale, coliving units can be single apartments in a housing block, multiple apartments on a single floor, or expand into multiple floors in a residential building. Some coliving hubs have been newly built, some are former apartment hotels and hotels, others are redesigned apartments, and still others are redesigned care homes. Coliving apartments vary in capacity. Some small apartments are designed for as few as four sharers, while larger apartments can accommodate up to 12 people. We found that companies with multiple floors available for coliving could house up to 100 residents. Prices for living in coliving varied, ranging from about €800/month for a space in a redesigned care home to about 1,700/month for a studio, including rent and services. Coliving does not necessitate doing shared work, as most developers tend to the utilities, property service and management. Maintenance and general cleaning services are outsourced to other companies. Digital solutions, such as communication platforms and apps, are increasingly incorporated into the management of coliving, as well as into the everyday lives of sharers.

### **Feminist commoning theory**

Feminist commons studies focus on alternative forms of exchange, production and living. Commons are often defined as collective ways of relating, in contrast to various forms of capitalist relations (Nightingale, 2019). The commoning perspective is focused on the practices and performances that foster new relations and subjectivities (Federici, 2012; Tummers & MacGregor, 2019). Coliving cannot be defined as a commons *per se*. Nevertheless, we employ commoning theory because it examines the everyday practices, social relations, and spaces of creativity and social reproduction where people come, share and act together (Federici 2012, Federici in Clement, Harcourt, Joshi & Sato, 2019).

The marketization of everyday life is familiar to commons scholars. According to Federici (2012: 7), housing and the daily lives that play out there are susceptible to marketization, as the reproduction of these lives is the most labour-intensive work there is. This work is generally irreducible to mechanization, particularly when it comes to caring for children and the ill and the psychological work required for attaining emotional balance (*ibid.*). With the advent of capitalism, the process of reproduction has been increasingly privatized. Tummers and MacGregor (2019) show that demographic changes, changes in employment and life-course patterns, and the neoliberal erosion of state-funded social services have spurred a growing need for care in western societies. Fulfilling this need, they argue, is relegated to households. Understanding care as practice, Fisher and Tronto (in (eds.) Abel & Nelson, 1990) have identified four elements of care: caring about, or noticing the need to care in the first place; taking care of, or assuming responsibility for care; care-giving, or the work that needs to be done; and care-receiving, or the response of that which is cared for. In extension, consumption choices and the market become the dominant routes for accessing care (Elmhirst, 2015). We are thus moving from ‘commoning reproduction’ (Federici, 2012) to commoning as a form of commodity. According to Fraser (2016) this leads to a ‘crisis of care’ linked to time poverty, lack of family-work balance and social depletion. Clearly, commoning as commodity is not equally available to all. Tummers and MacGregor (2019) draw on the work of Tronto (in (eds.) Abel & Nelson, 1990), who points out that men and elite

women use their social privileges to avoid responsibility for care work, calling it ‘privileged irresponsibility’ that does not question links between power differentials and care work. According to Tronto (2013), this begs the question of ‘why some should be exempt from cleaning up after themselves while others are responsible for such cleaning up?’. Similarly, Fraser (2016) argues that the capitalist economy relies on activities of care-giving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds, while treating such interactions as if they were free. Reproduction is framed as a backward residue and an obstacle to liberation. Furthermore, the services that replace commoning tend not to question gendered conflict or injustice (Tummers & MacGregor, 2019).

Feminist commoning theory considers how we live together and how everyday lives are shaped: both in terms of how everyday lives are envisioned by those with the power to give them material form, and in terms of how these materializations are experienced by those who live in shared housing. Thus, while Federici (2012) points out that the intensity of reproductive work has led to the creation of new forms of shared living, we are simultaneously witnessing the advent of an array of services that borrow the discursive frame of these forms and make them ‘easily’ available for those with purchasing power. We thus propose feminist commoning as an apt framework for critically unpacking real-estate actors’ arguments about what the spaces they design and run supposedly offer residents, and for analysing residents’ experiences of coliving.

## Method and data

This article is based on qualitative data: primarily interviews with developers and residents. We conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen real-estate actors in Sweden and fourteen colivers. We also assessed plans for the physical design and layout of floor plans for sixteen coliving hubs in the greater Malmö and Stockholm areas as of 2021.

We selected our real-estate actors using an information-rich selection process (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Selection was based firstly on their digital visibility as actors working with coliving and secondly on the snowball method. The largest actors we interviewed developed and ran coliving hubs in several Swedish cities, while the smallest developed or ran only a few coliving hubs. They included seven real-estate companies who build coliving hubs but outsource their management to operators, including three municipal housing companies and four private developers. In addition, we interviewed four operators and one concept developer whose primary goal was to initiate and manage coliving hubs, but who were not involved in construction. In all, the real-estate actors we interviewed had developed nine different coliving projects and three cohousing projects, the latter managed by municipal housing companies. We note that municipal housing companies who already offer rental cohousing have decided to also offer coliving as part of their housing stock. We also conducted one interview with representatives from Sweden’s National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (*Boverket*). The people we interviewed had leading positions in their companies or were project leaders for coliving innovations. The interviews were semi-structured (Bryman, 2008) and were organized around themes such as: the model of coliving developed by the subjects, how they perceived various social and physical aspects of sharing housing, and what challenges and opportunities they had encountered. We interviewed twelve women and three men. Although we sought a balance of women and men, we also selected interviewees who were directly involved in developing and running coliving. The interviews lasted forty to sixty minutes and were conducted in 2021. Due to restrictions in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online.

We interviewed fourteen coliving residents. The majority were current coliving residents at the time of the interviews; three had moved on to other forms of housing. As above, we used an information-rich selection process with snowballing (Flyvbjerg, 2016; Bryman, 2008). A few residents had online visibility based on sharing their housing experiences. We contacted them and asked them to share information about our research project with other residents that might be interested in speaking with us. We interviewed seven women and seven men ranging in age from their early twenties to their early forties. The majority were in their late twenties or early thirties. Their nationalities varied, but the majority were Swedish. We thus held interviews both in Swedish and in English. In this article, quotations from Swedish interviews have been translated into English. The interviews were semi-structured (Bryman, 2008) and organized around themes such as: reasons for choosing coliving, socializing inside and outside the coliving hub, what type of rules or guidelines for behaviour are set up by colivers, and what it is that colivers actually share. The interviews were conducted during 2021 and the beginning of 2022. Due to restrictions in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, most interviews were carried out online. We also had the opportunity, however, to visit two coliving units in Sweden: one in Stockholm and one in Lund. During our visit, we were able to have a guided tour and hold semi-structured interviews with residents.

In all, the residents we interviewed came from four different coliving hubs. These coliving hubs were included in the housing stock of the real-estate actors interviewed. There is thus a correspondence between the real-estate actors and the colivers we interviewed. Geographically, the four coliving hubs were located in the greater Malmö and greater Stockholm areas. These are areas with a young population and a large housing deficit. Stockholm is also Sweden's wealthiest metropolitan area, Malmö its poorest. The real-estate actors we interviewed identified the metropolitan areas as primary locations of interest for coliving, although smaller initiatives across the country also exist. All of the interviews were transcribed and all participants were anonymized. We provided interviewees with information on GDPR and obtained oral consent to participate in the interviews from all the interviewees. We performed a qualitative analysis of the interview material (Kvale, 1997). Both authors read the transcripts individually. After first manually identifying empirical themes and key words, we then compared findings as a team. We reduced the number of themes and key words in dialogue as well as in the process of writing. Our analysis uses the theoretical framework of feminist commoning.

## Findings

### Developing the coliver and curating 'ready-made' communities

Coliving plays into notions about who we live with and what and how we share. Coliving developers and operators set colivers and their communities in a discourse of commoning as an alternative form of exchange and living (Nightingale, 2019) through housing. Very much in line with ideas of feminist commoning, coliving is marketed as an entry point to a life shared with a diverse community where people share and act together (Federici 2012; 2019 in Clement Harcourt, Joshi & Sato 2019). In stark contrast to this discourse, however, developers decrease the size of shared spaces and reduce the options for managing coliving while simultaneously marketing coliving as getting 'more for less' and as a way to access a 'community of friends' and meet other young people 'with interesting CVs'.

The coliver is a recent phenomenon on the Swedish housing market. Nevertheless, coliving has a specific, explicitly defined age span limited to the ages between 20 and 35 years, and it has specific target groups. One target group consists of young adults moving out of

their parental homes for the first time; a second group is young adults interested in ecological and compact living; a third group is people working online in creative industries and tech development; and a fourth group is international expats in Sweden on temporary work contracts. As one operator put it:

We primarily focus on expats, especially those who are a little older, not those who have just graduated from high school. Those who have an education and have worked for a couple of years. They are a little older, they can pay for more, and a need to... They are more adult, so they need their own space to a greater extent. They have access to community but are not forced to partake in a community in order to fulfil their basic needs. They can take care of themselves.

The ideal coliver, from this operator's perspective, is an economically independent individual who is socially competent, knows how to network, and can electively participate in the coliving community.

The coliver is presumed to be part of a community. The developers and operators we interviewed aimed to ensure that people selected to live in their units would have a high capacity for sharing and cohabitation. As one operator put it: 'we want to create good life quality through housing'. Likewise, they wanted to make sure to avoid selection biases when evaluating prospective colivers, thus guaranteeing inclusivity and diversity. Coliving is envisioned as a break with established norms of living alone or with a nuclear family, and it stresses inclusion and diversity as guiding values. Nevertheless, residents display relative homogeneity of economic and ethnic background. According to qualitative estimates by informants, between one-third and one-half of colivers are internationals, which is one facet of diversity. At the same time, most colivers were also highly educated and skilled professionals, are employed, and are of a similar age.

Colivers undergo a relatively complex recruitment process. To support creating a community in which 'residents will thrive', a variety of recruitment processes have been developed. Usually, interested individuals sent an application letter or applied through digital platforms. Selected candidates were invited to a phone or group interview. A few operators held a second round of interviews. Questions addressed a variety of topics: for example, how 'introverted' or 'extroverted' applicants perceived themselves to be, hygiene standards, values and open-mindedness. One coliving operator said they were developing a platform that pair residents in apartments using AI to enable maximum inclusivity and diversity, as AI could choose without bias. Their digital platform was intended to contain 'everything' related to coliving, both in terms of the community as well as facility management. Residents would be able to sign and access their contract, manage their term of residency, work digital locks, and contact other residents via the platform. The operator reasoned that this would increase the level of service for residents without increasing human resource requirements for the operators themselves.

Colivers are supposed to be creative, active individuals on the move. Developers conceived of colivers as residents with little use for private space who preferred to spend their time in shared spaces, in the city or on excursions with friends and other colivers. Coliving costs were also supposed to be kept low, as coliving is especially geared to young adults with (primarily) less purchasing power. This imperative, in combination with developers' profits, formed an argument for reducing private space. In most of the cases we investigated, coliving units consisted of a bedroom, shared living room and kitchen, and shared bathrooms. In general, the bedrooms were designated for one inhabitant, but we also found examples of bedrooms shared between up to five colivers. Only two developers reported that they



offered fully functional studio apartments with additional shared space, making it possible for couples to live together. No coliving options are available for families, and we found only one developer that allowed pets, if all the residents agreed. The total amount of private and shared space in coliving is very limited. One operator argued that there is too much focus on the size of apartments, rather than on ‘function and good planning’, which allow units to be considerably smaller. For example, one developer provides only twenty square meters of residential floor space per resident; that includes both private and shared space.

In the Swedish cases we investigated, most colivers were young professionals; a limited number were students. Their ages and educational backgrounds tended to be similar, which, despite a diversity discourse among operators, obscures the role of social class as a selection criterion. We noted that offers to different target groups led to the evolution of specific typologies – a trend also noted, for example, in Amsterdam (Ronald, Schijf and Donovan, 2023) – which is a process that further establishes socio-economic hierarchies in coliving. Because operators organize the process of selecting residents, prospective colivers had little or no ability to choose their own community and whom they would share their everyday lives with. This likely speeds the selection process, but may also negatively influence how commoning through social bonds is produced and maintained (Fraser, 2016). Developers and operators also design and manage the coliving hubs. This significantly decreases or even eradicates the need for commoning to be based on shared management of a shared home (Federici, 2012). Thus, although it invokes notions of community and commoning, coliving comes with a curated and ‘ready-made’ community that is actually at odds with those notions. Coliving operators, through their target groups and selection processes, can be said to ‘develop’ not only coliving housing but also colivers themselves.

#### Colivers’ practices of supporting emotional balance: sharing through mitigation and distancing

Coliving is marketed as a chance to be part of a community. Operators realize the need to find ways to manage potential frictions and minimize the amount of interpersonal boundary negotiating between residents, but this does not relieve colivers of the psychological work required to attain emotional balance (Federici, 2012). Colivers need to actively consider their roles in social dynamics and individually strive for emotional balance by mitigating their own sounds and noise; mitigating confrontations; and moving between spaces to allow for moments of privacy.

Operators implemented multiple social strategies for mediating the social contact between residents. As one operator put it, they saw the need to create boundaries that protect the ‘integrity’ of residents. After colivers move in, some operators provided them with a community manager. The community manager could be recruited either externally or internally and their role could include both maintaining the property and aiding in conflict resolution. Some other operators tried to distribute this role to one or more residents. One operator also conducted a leadership course with multiple residents. The goal was to reduce expectations that the founder of the company would resolve problems and to empower residents with the language and communication tools for problem solving. Community manager duties included introducing new residents to the coliving concept, highlighting potential conflict areas such as differences in hygiene standards and personal boundaries, and community building. ‘Emily’, a coliver who had been a community manager in Swedish and international coliving initiatives, said:

And there's a lot of work around those questions, around the identity that you want your space to have, and the importance of communicating that throughout your online communication, but also when you welcome people in and the tools that you give the people. And then I think once that work is done and once that is communicated the right way, it's also the role of the operator or the community manager to let go and let the community feel empowered. To create their own community because people won't treat a place like their home if they're not given the power to do so, they'll treat it as a hotel room.

Emily recognizes that the commoning work that cohabitation can create is not necessarily something a regular resident would have the tools to do; hence, operators need to invest in commoning work. Somewhat paradoxically, developers recognize the value of care. But although they recognize the value of commoning, they also commodify it through social strategies and management, thus constituting a false recognition.

Colivers themselves developed various practices to manage the sharing of all the spaces of their daily lives with others. Colivers are more exposed to each other's bodies, noises, smells and daily rhythms and habits, since residents have less private space and need to share more facilities. Even though sharing is the essence of coliving – and a most enjoyable aspect for most colivers – at a certain point the reduction of private space becomes challenging or unbearable. 'Erik', a coliver whose private bedroom was transformed into an office during the day, said:

I lived in a room that was the office half the time and half the time it was my bedroom. /.../ The hardest thing is maybe, like, when you do want something, and the situation is like that [no access], when that happens to your room, to your private space, that's like, really, it's like you feel invaded in some sense.

One consequence of intense sharing with others may be an increased need for privacy. When colivers never have a physical, private room of their own, but share all spaces with others, little space is left for sharing feelings and experiences in private. Consequently, some colivers went outside the home for private space or private time to support emotional balance. 'Paul' went for walks when he needed privacy and time to himself. He explained that he needed to alternate between intense engagement in the coliving community and more time for himself. His awareness of needing more private time had developed over time:

There is more thought about the extent of one's own time. You need to consider certain questions you would not otherwise have to ask yourself. The importance of being self-aware, of what you need when you need it. /.../ I feel like after I've done some things, there can be moments of needing to put more focus on myself, and I think that it goes in cycles. And other moments I feel that now I have everything I need for myself, I can give back to the community.

'Claudine', who shared her bedroom with another young woman, explained that she was happy with her roommate and felt lucky to share a rather big bedroom and that things were 'going rather well'. Her strategy was to talk to her roommate and to take steps to mitigate her own and others' sounds. Claudine and her roommate helped each other out by talking and giving feedback about what was or was not OK. They worked different hours: her roommate went to bed early and left for work early, while Claudine worked late. Claudine thus slept with a sleep mask and earphones. During the day, Claudine worked from her laptop at the desk in their bedroom or in the shared living room that was used by day for coworking. The

coworking space was busy, with people walking around, going in and out, talking in various languages, and writing – which meant she wore earphones in that space, too.

Although most of the colivers we interviewed led a mobile, international life, being constantly mobile was not entirely easy. Paul mentioned that in his coliving hub, residents stayed an average of two years, or about 26 months. Approximately every three months, someone was moving in or out. On the one hand, newcomers were often positive and highly engaged in their new community, Paul explained, but after a time, sharing your daily life with a constantly changing set of people could be burdensome. Former community manager ‘Emily’ found that living in what she referred to as a ‘transient space’ could be ‘emotionally draining’:

It’s, it becomes emotionally draining eventually to create those wonderful, deep, really quick and deep connections with people and then to see them leave. Yeah, it’s. Yeah, we don’t realize it right away, but I think it really affects your well-being eventually. And so for me, towards the end, it was difficult to go towards the new people, to be as open and to be as welcoming as, I guess, as a protective, you know, like saying that they’re going to leave anyway or something like that. Or maybe because I knew I was about to leave as well. I don’t know about this. This idea that this is not going to be forever is a bit difficult because it’s so much, you gain a lot, but you also give a lot. And so finding the right balance between, like, taking and giving is a tricky one.

Alongside embodied practices of striving for emotional balance, colivers used digital platforms such as Slack or Discord for internal communication and as a forum for addressing friction in a somewhat non-confrontational manner. One resident explained that if someone forgot to clean up after themselves, for example, this could be addressed via the platform, and the person in question could assume responsibility there, which was greatly appreciated. Residents also used digital platforms for things like organizing social events, taking polls, announcing guests, and sharing images of guests so their faces would be familiar to residents. Overall, such platforms seem to enable more inclusive communication between sharers and aid in overcoming frustrations that arise in daily life, without requiring direct confrontation. Platforms were more often used in large coliving hubs with more than 20 residents.

In the coliving hubs we investigated, operators developed roles and strategies to support the formation of a community. The maintenance and management involved in sharing housing is marketized and thus reduced for colivers. According to Federici (2012), daily life is susceptible to marketization and most of this work is relegated to the household level (Tummers & MacGregor, 2019). In spite of some reduction in reproductive work, however, or possibly because of it, colivers expressed the need to practice self-care, since emotional balance and self-knowledge form prerequisites for an intensely shared life. This self-care included going for walks to have privacy; wearing earplugs at night and during the day in the coworking space; and moving to a room of one’s own when possible. Because of their housing conditions and the eradication of some of the commoning practices for producing and maintaining social bonds (Fraser, 2016), colivers use both digital and embodied practices of mitigation and at times distance themselves from their peers in order to find emotional balance.

### Colivers' practices of emotional labour: sharing through socializing and privileged irresponsibility

Coliving is marketed as a path to an easy life, interpreted as reducing or simply eradicating reproductive work and care, such as cleaning, cooking and child care. With the aim of facilitating life for colivers, operators and community managers commodify commoning, thus incorporating coliving into systems of privatization, marketization and neoliberal individualism (Elmhirst, 2015; Nightingale, 2019). Although colivers do not question service provision, they also acknowledge that coliving is limited as a permanent form of housing and that their emotional labour (Federici, 2012) is primarily focused on socializing with other residents.

Far from relegating reproduction and care work to the household, coliving includes paid services, such as maintenance of the units and the occasional arrangement of social activities. Across the operators we interviewed, the most offered service was cleaning. The extent of this service varied. Some operators ensured that shared spaces were cleaned; a few also included the private space of the individual room, for an extra service fee. One operator offered food on weekdays and was in the process of developing weekend options. According to one operator, reducing resident commitment to and responsibility for their housing gave them the opportunity to buy their way into 'easy' living. One public property developer who had experience of cohousing, and at the time of our interview worked with an operator to manage their coliving unit, explained the need to offer such services as follows:

When you target young people, it's not like in cohousing [kollektivhus], where there is a core of people who have lived there for 20–30 years and keep everything in order. When you think of young adults, they are very flexible in their living, they move around, work one year here, another year there. It's harder to get this core that you get in cohousing, with continuity, which ensures that everything works. Then we thought that it would be quite a lot of work if we would run it ourselves. We felt that we were happy to put it on someone who was an expert, both in matching residents and running the housing over time.

For colivers, the inclusion of services did not seem at all controversial. 'Paul', who had been a coliver for three years and was highly appreciative of coliving as a form of housing, explained that in contrast to previous generations, millennials were used to services and having everything just a click away:

Now, if we're going to look at the housing model I live in, or commercialized coliving. It is the model that's growing now, and then if you're trying to attract young people, millennials, who are in a mindset that they want what they want, when they want it, and it should be quick, like ordering in food, a click away. It is this sense of convenience. It's valued, that's the mentality.

Paul had a mother who lived in cohousing and had made him aware of the differences between practices of commoning in cohousing – through cooking and gardening – and coliving. Even so, he ascribed the difference to a generational shift and the fact that colivers valued time highly. Colivers argued that they were busy and needed to be able to make quick decisions, both at work and during their leisure time, since 'something [might] come up'. The notion of cleaning and other services as a right for colivers, or as not at all controversial, is part of the commodification of care work (Fraser, 2016). There is a contradiction in how colivers treat others similar to themselves whilst maintaining the right to exclude others, such as the people who clean and maintain their homes, from practices of commoning. Colivers themselves can be said to practice 'privileged irresponsibility' (Tronto, in

Tummers & MacGregor, 2019; Tronto, 2013) of class differences to separate themselves from daily chores.

In our interviews with colivers, we have heard multiple accounts of people choosing this form of housing because it works with their mobile career trajectories that take them from one country to another. Likewise, some colivers have employers in different countries and time zones. Colivers have praised coliving as a solution that allows them to work from home while still having access to peers and a network in the form of other residents with similar professions – generally in the tech industry and start-ups. But in spite of all the talk about international lifestyles and community, coliving has limitations. It makes starting a family or living with a partner challenging, if not impossible. Most developers offered a bedroom as the private space, excluding a diversity of familial relations and making visible a preference for residents who live alone. ‘Emma’ was a coliver who had alternated between coliving and apartment living and had recently moved back into a coliving hub. Although she enjoyed the spontaneous and easy social exchange with other colivers, she explained that she would still only remain for a limited time:

I think I will live here until I start a family. That’s the plan, at least, because it will be very inconvenient to live in this way with a baby in your [bed]room/.../ you don’t have anywhere to put your baby.

Other colivers mentioned the challenge of sharing a small bedroom with a partner, and the fact that some coliving units stipulate no more than one person per bedroom.

Which rooms colivers share and how they move within the coliving hub matter greatly. Multiple informants reported that the greatest anxieties among potential residents revolved around sharing bathrooms. The gender issues involved in who is willing to share bathrooms with whom raise challenges for residents’ privacy and integrity. There is a risk of developing housing that discriminates against potential residents based on gender: for example, for those who wish to share based on homosociality. When it comes to bedrooms, the turnover within coliving hubs can also be high. One coliving hub maintained a waiting list for the most desirable bedrooms. When a resident moved out, the other residents had first dibs on the vacant bedroom, before any newcomers. Two of our informants had previously lived in coliving hubs where moving bedrooms was mandatory every second year. This was the operators’ way of preventing colivers from gaining permanent tenure, which is compulsory after two years under Swedish law. When combined with high resident turnover and relatively small hubs of twelve colivers, supporting the development of a community or establishing commoning practices became very challenging. Challenges such as these caused informants to leave coliving, in spite of initially being very positive towards the concept of sharing.

Many colivers confirmed that they spent more time within the home after moving into coliving. One informant stated that when they lived in their own apartment, they used ‘the whole city as a living room’. But as a coliver, they transferred some city activities into the home. ‘Anna’ explained that in Sweden, social engagements tend to be planned well in advance. She complained that she might be invited to visit friends ‘a month in advance’ and that it made her feel bad to have such a commitment instead of being able to join spontaneous activities at home:

And the thing is, there are a lot of things that are happening spontaneously. And you can do all of this with no effort. Basically, you will get out of your room and you join whatever is happening. You check on Slack if there are events, if people are going somewhere, and then you decide what to do.

Easy access to spontaneous activities makes staying at home and socializing a main practice of commoning. In one coliving hub, residents practised what they referred to as ‘radical inclusion’, which meant that everyone was expected to be invited to join ongoing conversations. If a group was sharing a meal and another coliver or even a visitor entered the room, they were supposed to be invited into the conversation, to not feel excluded in any way.

Colivers are considered part of the young, mobile, so-called elite ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2002), for whom reproduction is framed as a backward residue and an obstacle to liberation (Fraser, 2016). For colivers, some reproductive tasks, such as cleaning, maintenance and food delivery, are commodified, while care work, such as caring for a baby, sharing a home with a partner or starting a family, are simply not possible. This leads on the one hand to ‘privileged irresponsibility’ (Tronto, 2013) towards the hired staff who provide care work, and on the other hand to a move from participatory sociality to a selective sociality wherein colivers choose the terms and extent of their participation and socialization with others. Commoning practices among colivers are reduced to socializing with like-minded individuals and groups, primarily through voluntary and leisure activities. This finding is in line with Bauman (2003), who argues that contemporary affective relationships are built loosely so that they can easily be untangled again. For colivers, the spontaneous and elective encounters that take place primarily inside the coliving community become the ideal type of socialization.

### **Conclusion: covert commoning in coliving?**

Sweden is witnessing a transformation of shared housing, where coliving is the most recent, and market-driven, form. While marketing coliving as a way of getting ‘more for less’ and a shortcut to a ‘community of friends’ and other young people in a ‘creative’ space, developers decrease the size of shared as well as private spaces, offer paid services, and reduce colivers’ options for managing their community. This contradictory strategy significantly decreases the potential for commoning reproduction practices (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Tronto, 2013; Tummers & MacGregor, 2019) to evolve and sustain the group over time. Although the discourse of developers and operators, as well as strong engagement by many colivers, aims to support community built on commoning practices, what is emerging is what we define as a *covert commoning*. Commoning practices in coliving are presented in a guise that draws on feminist notions of commoning, but they are lived in a contrasting way. Operators and colivers alike participate in contradictory practices. In coliving, instead of commoning and care being practised among residents, they are dispersed and distributed between operators, service workers, digital platforms and colivers themselves, and thus become covert in the sense of being veiled or hidden from sight.

First, commoning practices in coliving are covert since, although commoning in coliving is based on a discourse of diversity and community, in practice, most colivers are young, middle class, well-educated, and lead an international lifestyle. In addition, the combination of cramped or non-existent private and reduced shared space leads to a lack of privacy, or puts privacy under pressure. Short terms of residency can lead to emotional stress and make it even more difficult to adopt reproduction and care work into daily commoning practices. The result is to affirm the ‘ideal type’ of resident as a single, childless person who is capable of living with relative strangers. Secondly, commoning practices are covert since commoning is built on confidence and trust among residents, which takes time to build. But due to high turnover rates and decisions made by developers and operators, the selection of new residents and the management of their home is decided by operators alone. As a consequence,

colivers exchange long-term trust and care for self-care as a strategy to sustain a mobile and emotionally intense form of sharing housing. Colivers leave their home to practise self-care during walks, or they use earplugs so as not to be disturbed or disturb others. To reduce friction between residents, operators have introduced the role of a community manager. This role can, however, not fully compensate for the individual's need to find space and time to conduct psychological work to support their emotional balance. Third, commoning practices are covert since part of the reproductive labour – cleaning, cooking and maintenance – is taken out of the equation. These are the most time-consuming forms of labour and also the ones where conflicts may occur. In the past, sharing reproductive labour has constituted the essence of shared housing. When cohousing residents pitch in to help with daily chores, reproductive labour receives a higher value and gender equality is supported. In coliving, the same labour is outsourced to a precariat and bought as a service, while colivers themselves practice privileged irresponsibility and concentrate on socializing with like-minded individuals and groups.

In this article, we have shown how coliving is moving away from a shared housing ideal based on 'commoning reproduction' (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Tronto, 2013; Tummers & MacGregor, 2019). Coliving has entered the Swedish housing market in a period when there has been a deficit of affordable housing. Coliving makes it possible for developers to offer housing at lower rents, since the surface per person is well below the minimum standard for apartments. Lower floor space costs frees up resources to add services, such as cleaning and coffee, which are outsourced and provided by a precariat of low-income workers. This move renders community a highly individualized project available to those with greater purchasing power. This is not to say that all forms of coliving are challenging and difficult forms of housing. But developers and operators need to be aware of the potential emotional stress that limited residential tenures, high turnover, reduced ability to choose new residents, and pressures on privacy can put on colivers. For most of the colivers we interviewed, coliving was an active choice, but some said they were forced into it by high prices and a shortage of housing. Politicians and planners need to be careful about the number and quality of coliving developments, since while coliving can be a solution for a few years in a young person's life, the way of living it provides, in its current form, means it cannot be considered a permanent form of housing.

### Acknowledgements

*This research was supported by the Swedish research council Formas (Grant No. 2019–00522).*

*We would like to thank all of the colivers, developers and operators that took part in the research.*

### References

- Bauman, Z. (2003). *Liquid Love: on the frailty of human bonds*. Polity press: Cambridge
- Bergan, T.L., Gorman-Murray, A. and Power, E.R. (2021) Coliving housing: home cultures of precarity for the new creative class, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 22:9, 1204–1222, DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2020.1734230
- Bryman, A. (2008). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press
- Casier, C. (2023): The coliving market as an emergent financialized niche real estate sector: a view from Brussels, *Housing Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2023.2176833
- Chevtavaeva, E. (2021). Coworking and Coliving: The Attraction for Digital Nomad Tourists. In: Wörndl, W., Koo, C. and Stienmetz, J.L. (eds) *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism*. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65785-7\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65785-7_17)

- Clement, F., Harcourt, J.W., Joshi, D. & Sato, C. (2019). Feminist political ecologies of the commons and commoning. *International Journal of the Commons*. Vol. 13, no 1 2019, pp. 1–15. DOI: 10.18352/ijc.972
- Druta, O., Ronald, R., Heath, S. (2021). Editorial: Urban singles and shared housing. *Social and Cultural Geography*, Vol 22, No 9, pp. 1195-1203.
- Elmhirst, R. (2015). Feminist Political Ecology. In *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*, (eds.) T. Perreault, G. Bridge and J. McCarthy, 519–530. Routledge.
- Eurostat (2017). Over half of Sweden's households made up of one person. Accessed at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20170905-1>
- Fisher, B., Tronto, J. (1990). Toward a feminist theory of caring, in (eds). Abel, E. and Nelson, M. (1990). *Circles of Care. Work and identity in women's lives*. State university of New York Press.
- Florida, R. (2002). *The rise of the creative class*. Basic Books.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006) Five misunderstandings about case-study research, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12, pp. 219–245.
- Fraser, N. (2016). Contradictions of capital and care. *New Left Review*. Issue 100, July/August 2016.
- Federici, S. (2012). Feminism and the Politics of the Commons. In *The Wealth of the Commons*, (eds.) D. Bollier and S. Helfrich. The Commons Strategies Group. Accessed at: <http://wealthofthecommons.org/essay/feminism-and-politics-commons>
- Grundström, K. and Molina, I. (2016). From Folkhem to lifestyle housing in Sweden: Segregation and urban form, 1930s–2010s. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 16(3), 316–336.
- Grundström, K. (2021a). Dwelling on-the-move together in Sweden: Sharing exclusive housing in times of marketization. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 22(9), 1241–1255.
- Grundström, K. (2021b). Sharing is caring? Kollektivhus, residential hotels and co-living in the context of housing inequality in Sweden. *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, 2021(3), 35–60.
- Hayden, D. (1981). *The grand domestic revolution: A history of feminist design for American homes, neighbourhoods and cities*. The MIT Press.
- Hedin, K., Clark, E., Lundholm, E. and Malmberg, G. (2012). Neoliberalization of housing in Sweden: Gentrification, filtering, and social polarization. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102(2), 443–463.
- Klinenberg, E. (2012). “Going solo”. *The extraordinary rise and surprising appeal of living alone*. Penguin Books.
- Kvale, S. (1997). *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun* [The qualitative research interview]. Studentlitteratur.
- Kärnekull, K (1991). Kvinnoperspektiv på den byggda miljön [Womens' perspectives on the built environment] in (eds.) Lundahl, Gunilla. *Kvinnorum-porträtt av arkitekter* [Womenspace – portraits of architects]. Arkitekturmuseet.
- Lang, R., Carriou, C. and Czischke, D. (2020). Collaborative housing research (1990–2017): A systematic review and thematic analysis of the field. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 37(1), 10–39.
- Nightingale, A.J. (2019). Commoning for inclusion? Political communities, commons, exclusion, property and socio-natural becomings. *International Journal of the Commons* Vol. 13, no 1 2019, pp. 16–35. DOI: 10.18352/ijc.927
- Ronald, R., Schijf, P. and Donovan K. (2023): The institutionalization of shared rental housing and commercial co-living, *Housing Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2023.2176830
- Runting, H.R., Sjøgrim, R. and Matz, K. (2019). Survey of the Swedish Apartment: A Report on All Multi-Res Housing Approved in the Stockholm Region in the Record Year of 2017. *Research report 1 / 2019-11-05*. Accessed at: [http://www.secretary.international/files/191111\\_SurveyoftheSwedishApartment\\_Secretary.pdf](http://www.secretary.international/files/191111_SurveyoftheSwedishApartment_Secretary.pdf)



- Sandstedt, E. and Westin, S. (2015). Beyond gemeinschaft and gesellschaft: Cohousing life in contemporary Sweden. *Housing, Theory and Society* 32(2): 131–150.
- Tronto, J. C., & Fisher, B. (1990). Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring. In E. Abel, & M. Nelson (eds.), *Circles of Care*, p. 36-54). SUNY Press.
- Tronto, J., C. (2013). *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York University Press.
- Tummers, L. and S. MacGregor. (2019). Beyond Wishful Thinking: A Feminist Political Ecology Perspective on Commoning, Care and the Promise of Co-Housing. *International Journal of the Commons* 13(1):62–83.
- Törnqvist, M. (2019). Living Alone Together: Individualized Collectivism in Swedish Communal Housing. *Sociology*, 53(5), 900–915. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519834871>
- Vestbro, D.U. (2000). From collective housing to cohousing – A summary of research. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Theme Issue: Cohousing, pp. 164–178.
- Vestbro, D. U. ed. (2010). *Living together* Proceedings from the International Collaborative Housing Conference in Stockholm 5–9 May. KTH & Kollektivhus NU.
- Vestbro, D.U. (2014). *Cohousing in Sweden, history and present situation*. Accessed at: <http://www.kollektivhus.nu/pdf/SwedishCohousing14.pdf>
- von Zumbusch, J.S.H. and Lalicic, L. (2020). The role of co-living spaces in digital nomads' well-being. *Inf Technol Tourism* 22, 439–453. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-020-00182-2>