

Fostering Bridges Across Generations

Deep Dive into the “Intergenerational Solidarity in Community-led Housing” Workshop Model



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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the workshop model "Intergenerational Solidarity in Cooperative Housing". Against a backdrop of demographic change and housing crises across Europe, the model serves as a participatory framework for exploring how community-led housing can actively cultivate meaningful intergenerational connections. Drawing on empirical mapping research from Greece, Germany and Denmark, the study employs Bengtson & Roberts' (1991) theory of intergenerational solidarity as its primary analytical lens. The comparative analysis reveals how varying welfare state regimes, institutional support, and social capital shape the development and manifestations of intergenerational solidarity in cooperative housing. The findings highlight recurring themes—such as shared spaces, collaborative governance, and knowledge exchange—while also underscoring context-specific challenges, from Greece's policy vacuum to Germany's diverse self-organized models and Denmark's state-supported, integrated communities. The paper demonstrates how these empirical insights are translated into the workshop's structure, grounding theoretical exploration in practical examples. It concludes with policy implications, advocating for multi-level interventions that support the development of legal frameworks, financial mechanisms, and knowledge-sharing networks to foster resilient, intergenerational communities across Europe.

Keywords: Intergenerational Solidarity, Cooperative Housing, Community-Led Housing, Workshop Model, Welfare State, Bengtson & Roberts, Comparative Analysis, Social Policy

Introduction

Community-led housing represents more than just shared roofs; it embodies the potential for profound social transformation. In an era marked by demographic aging, growth of social isolation, and housing affordability crises, the search for sustainable and socially resilient living models has gained renewed urgency.

The workshop developed within the Project "Intergenerational Solidarity and community-led Housing" serves as a structured exploration into how collaborative forms of Living can actively cultivate meaningful connections across generations. Moving beyond abstract ideals, this workshop provides a participatory framework not just for residents, but for community organizers,

educators and facilitators, as well as policy makers to examine the realities, challenges, and immense opportunities inherent in building resilient, intergenerational communities.

This paper delves into the workshop's theoretical foundations, practical application, and its grounding in empirical research conducted in three distinct European contexts:

Greece, Germany, and Denmark. By mapping the landscape of intergenerational initiatives in the field of collaborative housing across these countries, we can discern how macro-level factors – such as welfare state provisions and institutional support – interact with micro-level community practices to foster or hinder solidarity. The primary aim is to present a holistic academic text that integrates these mapping findings, links them to the workshop's pedagogical design, and derives robust conclusions and policy implications for fostering intergenerational bridges at both local and European levels.

Core Purpose: Beyond Coexistence to Solidarity

The workshop's primary purpose is not merely to acknowledge generational diversity but to deeply investigate and understand the multifaceted nature of intergenerational solidarity within the unique context of community-led housing. It recognizes that such solidarity is not automatic; it requires intentional design, continuous reflection, and a commitment to mutual support. The workshop grounds this exploration in participants' lived experiences – drawing from their involvement in various groups, communities, and the diverse social roles they inhabit daily. It seeks to:

- 1. Illuminate Unique Contributions:** Recognize and value the distinct strengths, perspectives, and resources that each generation brings to a cooperative housing community (e.g., life experience, technological fluency, energy, historical perspective).
- 2. Unlock Synergistic Potential:** Highlight the powerful possibilities that emerge specifically through intergenerational collaboration, moving beyond simple cohabitation to active partnership and shared purpose.
- 3. Bridge Divides:** Aim to overcome existing social distances and misunderstandings that can fragment communities, fostering genuine connection and mutual respect.
- 4. Co-Create Resilient Structures:** Provide a space to envision and design concrete practices and structures that support long-term inclusivity, adaptability, and collective well-being within cooperative housing projects.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Intergenerational Solidarity

The workshop grounds its work in established sociological frameworks, primarily drawing on Bengtson & Roberts' (1991) seminal model of the Six Dimensions of Intergenerational Solidarity. This model provides a comprehensive analytical lens to dissect the complex, multi-faceted relationships within communities:

1. Structural Solidarity: This refers to the opportunities for interaction, shaped by factors like shared physical spaces (communal kitchens, gardens), joint activities, and residential proximity.

2. Associational Solidarity: This dimension captures the frequency and nature of interactions between generations, such as daily chats, participation in working groups, or shared social events.

3. Affectional Solidarity: This encompasses the emotional bonds of closeness, trust, and positive regard that develop between individuals of different ages.

4. Consensual Solidarity: This relates to the degree of agreement on values, beliefs, and lifestyle choices within the community, which can either unite or divide generations.

5. Normative Solidarity: This involves the sense of obligation and commitment to family or, in this context, chosen community ties, motivating members to support one another.

6. Functional Solidarity: This is the tangible exchange of practical support, resources, and care, such as childcare, home repairs, technological assistance, or knowledge sharing.

The workshop emphasizes community-led housing as a catalyst for nurturing these dimensions. Unlike traditional nuclear family settings or anonymous rental markets, collaborative forms of housing inherently promotes collectivity, equity, and reciprocity (Bufe, Schmitt & Zillien, 2022). It extends intergenerational relationships beyond the biological family into communities built on mutual support, thereby enhancing social resilience. Furthermore, the workshop incorporates the critical concept of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). These loose social connections, often formed in shared common spaces, are vital for community functionality. They create a broad and flexible network of assistance for everyday needs, enhance a sense of security and the engagement of members, as they ensure that “there is always someone available when needed”. They link individuals to diverse information flows, preventing the redundancy that can occur in closed, strongly tied groups.

The value of weak ties shows that communities do not need to rely solely on strong family bonds; on the contrary, the presence of many loose connections enhances the resilience and vitality of collective life. “An essential difference between these weak and strong ties is the information and opportunities they provide:

weak ties are powerful because they link individuals to several other groups with different information flows, whereas closed and strong-tied communities come along with redundant information” (Granovetter, 1973).

The Workshop Model: From Concept to Practice

The "Intergenerational Solidarity and community-led Housing" workshop is designed as a highly interactive and participatory learning experience, mirroring the collaborative ethos of the communities it studies.

Core Purpose: Beyond Coexistence to Solidarity: Points for Consideration

The workshop's primary purpose is not merely to acknowledge generational diversity but to deeply investigate and understand the multifaceted nature of intergenerational solidarity. It recognizes that such solidarity is not automatic; it requires intentional design, continuous reflection, and a commitment to mutual support.

The workshop seeks to:

Illuminate Unique Contributions: Recognize the distinct strengths each generation brings (e.g., life experience, technological fluency).

Unlock Synergistic Potential: Highlight the possibilities that emerge through active intergenerational collaboration.

Bridge Divides: Overcome social distances and misunderstandings to foster genuine connection.

Co-Create Resilient Structures: Empower participants to design concrete practices that support long-term inclusivity and collective well-being.

Measure Impact: Explore how intergenerational solidarity within cooperative housing shapes residents' health, care exchanges, well-being, and sense of belonging.

Strengthen Communities: Examine how support networks evolve, participation deepens, and mutual aid practices grow—contrasting initiatives by residents with those implemented for them by public authorities.

Navigate Community Evolution: Understand why community spirit can fade over time and how new members can meaningfully connect with the founding vision.

Strengthen Onboarding: Build skills and structures that help communities welcome newcomers aligned with shared values and commitments.

Foster Inclusion: Develop practices that ensure the meaningful participation of vulnerable groups (e.g. LGBTQI+ individuals, refugees, Roma, single-parent families, people with mobility issues etc.), respecting diverse needs and capacities.

Address Conflict Constructively: Create restorative and preventive approaches that uphold safety, trust, and cohesion within everyday community life, also against low-level deviance (petty theft, substance use, harassment).

Workshop Structure: Learning Through Collaboration

The model unfolds in a structured, collaborative sequence:

- 1. Diverse Group Formation:** Participants divide into small groups (4-5 people), intentionally mixed across ages and backgrounds to mirror the intergenerational dynamic being studied.
- 2. Focused Exploration (30 mins):** Each group investigates core concepts and dimensions of intergenerational solidarity/support within the cooperative housing context. Key questions, theoretical frameworks (like Bengtson's dimensions), and practical challenges guide their discussion. Ideas are captured on flipcharts.
- 3. Group Presentations (5-10 mins per group):** Teams share insights and findings, fostering collective learning.
- 4. Plenary Synthesis & Deep Dive:** A facilitated whole-group discussion builds on the presentations, reflecting on uncovered facets of solidarity.
- 5. Provocation for Action:** The workshop culminates by challenging participants to translate insights into tangible actions within their own communities, framed by the question: "How can we contribute to creating structures that strengthen intergenerational solidarity?" This structure ensures that theoretical understanding is immediately linked to practical application and personal reflection.

6. Conclusion: An Epilogue or a Beginning?

The workshop explicitly positions itself not as a definitive endpoint, but as a catalyst. Its closing provocation – "Epilogue... or just a beginning?" – underscores that understanding intergenerational solidarity is an ongoing process. The true measure of success lies in how participants translate the workshop's insights, frameworks, and collective energy into concrete actions within their own cooperative housing communities. It aims to empower residents to become active architects of communities where generational diversity is not just present, but is harnessed as the very source of strength, resilience, and enduring human connection. The workshop provides the tools and the spark; the community builds the fire.

Mapping of Community-led Housing in Greece, Germany and Denmark

From the research conducted by the three partners in the Project, two key questions emerged, which defined our findings: What is the level of the welfare state in each of the three countries, and how does this determine people's needs regarding housing, specifically in relation to community-led housing?

In broad terms, we can say that the Danish state ranks at the top in terms of welfare state provisions, with Greece at the opposite end and Germany somewhere in between, though with a good level of provisions. However, this dynamic alone does not answer the question of the development (or lack thereof)

for citizens in terms of legislative, fiscal, and financial frameworks, which we will discuss in more detail below. Additionally, the expertise and culture of cohabitation that has been developed over time in these different societies, as well as the availability of social capital to organize such efforts, play a significant role.

1. Mapping Findings in Greece

The mapping in Greece, centered on Thessaloniki, reveals a context where discussions around community-led housing emerge from the retrenchment of the welfare state and a complete absence of a supportive institutional framework (Pierson, 1996; Esping-Andersen, 1990). As the state withdraws from key sectors like housing and healthcare, citizens are forced to cover the resulting gaps. In this policy vacuum, grassroots groups have emerged, seeking alternative solutions through mutual support under a shared roof.

These initiatives are diverse, ranging from research-oriented groups and elderly-focused mutual aid projects to politically motivated collectives aiming to de-commodify housing. However, significant barriers impede their development:

Socioeconomic Factors: High historical homeownership rates and the "antiparochi"¹ system have fostered a culture of individual ownership, hindering collective action.

Market Structure: Extreme fragmentation of property ownership makes it difficult to find large, suitable spaces.

Institutional Void: The lack of a clear legal, fiscal, and financial framework for community-led housing is the primary obstacle. There is no specialized cooperative law, depriving groups of legal recognition and access to formal funding.

Weak Social Capital: Widespread economic uncertainty, poverty, and political disillusionment weaken the social capital necessary to organize such complex efforts.

Consequently, while there is a vibrant and dynamic grassroots scene actively networking internationally, the development of community-led housing in Greece remains at a nascent, formative stage. The journey toward the first pilot project requires significant maturation and sustained advocacy for the necessary institutional framework.

¹ Antiparochi is a form of real-estate development which could be described as land-for-apartment exchange: A landowner gives his land to a real-estate developer, which in return builds a block of apartments or commercial spaces, which are shared between developer and previous landowner.

2. Mapping Findings in Germany

Germany presents a stark contrast, with a long and rich tradition of community-led housing, including nearly 2,000 housing cooperatives with over 2.2 million units. The mapping focused on ten diverse projects, highlighting a landscape of robust self-organization.

Key Characteristics:

Diverse Models: The projects surveyed, including cooperatives and initiatives within the Mietshäuser Syndikat network, vary in typology (urban, semi-urban, rural), size, and legal form.

Beyond Housing: A key finding is that these projects are almost always mixed-use structures, developing cultural, educational, and social activities that engage the wider community (e.g., repair workshops, kindergartens, cafes). This enriches community bonds and creates local synergy.

Sustainable Practices: A genuine commitment to sustainable living is evident, encompassing energy subsistence, circular economy models, and resource-sharing.

Manifestations of Intergenerational Solidarity:

The German case studies reveal highly developed, practical solutions for fostering solidarity:

Spatial Design: The intentional design of shared common spaces (kitchens, gardens, pathways) is considered crucial for facilitating the casual, regular contact that builds structural and associational solidarity. A strong focus on accessibility (ramps, ground-floor units) ensures the inclusion of all ages and abilities.

Collaborative Governance: Shared responsibilities in management and decision-making empower all members. This fosters knowledge sharing and mentoring across generations (e.g., elderly advising on community living, youth assisting with technology). A notable practice is shared financial responsibility, where wealthier members voluntarily subsidize others, ensuring long-term affordability and social mixture.

Social Welfare and Wellbeing: Communally organized child-care is common, ranging from informal parent support to professionally managed kindergartens. The topic of care for the elderly is increasingly addressed, with some projects developing shared care apartments. Social engagement through voluntary work (e.g., supporting refugees) further embeds these projects within their local social ecology.

In Germany, intergenerational solidarity is a dynamic, consciously pursued element of community life, supported by a culture of self-organization and a more supportive (though not perfect) institutional environment.

3. Mapping Findings in Denmark

Denmark, with its strong welfare state and tradition of "andelsboliger" (cooperative housing), represents a context where intergenerational solidarity is often integrated into the housing model from the outset. The mapping identified numerous examples where solidarity is a central, consciously designed tenet.

Key Features and Examples:

Danish cooperatives excel in creating structures that naturally foster intergenerational connection:

Inclusive Design and Shared Spaces: Projects like Fælledby (Copenhagen) and Skovgårdsparken (Vejle) are physically designed to encourage interaction, with centrally located communal kitchens, gardens, and living areas that serve as engines for structural solidarity.

Cooperative Governance and Mentorship: Governance models promote inclusivity, giving all residents a voice. This is evident in BoGruppe (Copenhagen), where older residents mentor younger ones, and in Vesterbro Housing Cooperative, where youth are actively involved in decision-making.

Structured Programmes for Exchange: Many cooperatives run formal programs. Samarbejdsbyen (Odense) hosts intergenerational cultural nights, while Solvang (Aarhus) organizes workshops for skill-sharing (e.g., cooking from elders, tech help from youth), directly facilitating *functional* and consensual solidarity.

Economic Solidarity: The shared financial model of "andelsboliger" often allows wealthier, often older, residents to subsidize housing costs for younger residents, a clear manifestation of functional solidarity that ensures community affordability.

Sustainability as a Shared Goal: Many projects, like Solvang, link intergenerational solidarity with environmental sustainability, collaborating on urban gardening projects that blend traditional knowledge with innovative techniques.

Challenges:

Despite the advanced state of practice, challenges persist, including generational divides in lifestyle and digital culture, affordability pressures in urban areas, and adapting to the needs of an aging population. However, the Danish model demonstrates a high capacity for reflexive adaptation to these challenges.

Comparative Analysis and Synthesis

A comparative analysis of the three countries reveals a spectrum of development for intergenerational solidarity in cooperative housing, deeply influenced by the interplay of the welfare state, institutional frameworks, and social capital.

- **Greece:** Functions in a context of welfare state retrenchment and a policy vacuum. Grassroots initiatives are driven by necessity, emerging as a response to systemic failures. The primary struggle is for basic recognition and the creation of a legal and financial enabling environment. Intergenerational solidarity is a nascent ideal within a movement focused on survival and foundational community-building.

- **Germany:** Represents a mature ecosystem of self-organization. While the welfare state provides a baseline, the driving force is civil society. The German model is characterized by its diversity, innovation, and strong emphasis on collaborative governance and economic solidarity. Solutions are bottom-up, pragmatic, and deeply embedded in a culture of self-help and political empowerment.

- **Denmark:** Exemplifies a state-supported and culturally integrated model. The strong welfare state provides a foundation, but it is complemented by supportive legislative and financial frameworks for cooperatives. Danish projects often display a more seamless integration of intergenerational principles from the design phase, with a strong focus on structured programming and architectural facilitation of social interaction.

Recurring Themes Across Contexts

Despite these differences, several core themes emerge, which directly inform the workshop model:

1. The Primacy of Shared Spaces: In all successful cases, the intentional design of common areas is fundamental for fostering structural and associational solidarity.

2. Collaborative Governance as a Catalyst: Participatory decision-making and shared responsibilities are critical for empowering all generations and facilitating knowledge exchange.

3. The Centrality of Knowledge and Resource Exchange: Functional solidarity—whether through mentorship, childcare, or tech support—is a tangible glue that binds communities.

4. The Role of "Weak Ties": The mapping confirms Granovetter's (1973) theory; the numerous casual interactions facilitated by cooperative living are crucial for community resilience and a broad-based sense of support.

Discussion: Linking Findings to the Workshop Model

The empirical findings from Greece, Germany, and Denmark are not merely illustrative; they are the lifeblood of the workshop model. They provide the concrete, real-world content that animates the theoretical framework.

Grounding Theory in Practice: The workshop uses Bengtson's six dimensions as a

lens, but it is the examples from Potsdam (e.g., financial solidarity models) and Denmark (e.g., intergenerational workshops) that give these dimensions tangible meaning. Participants do not just learn about functional solidarity; they discuss how it operates in a German eco-village or a Danish "andelsboliger".

Contextualizing Challenges: The workshop's exploration of "Navigating Community Evolution" and "Confronting Inclusion and Conflict" is enriched by the comparative context. Participants can contrast the challenge of selecting new members in a well-established German cooperative with the struggle to even establish a legal entity in Greece. This fosters a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the barriers to solidarity.

Inspiring Action through Proven Solutions: The "Provocation for Action" is fueled by the hundreds of solutions mapped across Germany and Denmark. When participants are asked to co-create resilient structures, they can draw inspiration from the governance model of Mietshäuser Syndikat, the spatial design of Fælledby, or the social programs of Samarbejdsbyen. The workshop becomes a platform for translating these European best practices into locally adaptable actions.

Validating the Framework: The recurring themes identified in the comparative analysis—shared spaces, collaborative governance, knowledge exchange—validate the focus of the workshop's exploratory questions and its theoretical underpinnings. They confirm that these are indeed the levers for fostering intergenerational bridges.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This paper has delineated the "Intergenerational Solidarity in Community-led Housing" workshop as a vital tool for understanding and activating the potential of community-led housing to bridge generational divides. Grounded in sociological theory and empirically informed by mapping in three European countries, the workshop model demonstrates that intergenerational solidarity is a dynamic, multi-dimensional process that can be intentionally designed and nurtured.

The comparative analysis underscores that there is no one-size-fits-all model. The manifestation of solidarity is path-dependent, shaped by national welfare regimes and local cultures. However, the core mechanisms—shared spaces, collaborative governance, and reciprocal exchange—remain universally relevant.

Policy Implications

To harness the potential of intergenerational cooperative housing, targeted policy support is essential at multiple levels:

At the Local & National Level:

Create Enabling Legal Frameworks: Especially in countries like Greece, governments must develop specific legal forms for community-led housing and cooperatives, simplifying processes and providing legal security.

Provide Financial Catalysts: Establish dedicated grant programs, revolving loans, and affordable land-trust models. Public funding should prioritize projects that demonstrably promote intergenerational mixing and social inclusion.

Offer Technical Support and Capacity Building: Municipalities can create "Community Housing Hubs" to provide groups with expertise in legal, financial, and architectural matters, lowering the barrier to entry.

Integrate with Housing and Care Policies: Actively link cooperative housing development with aging-in-place strategies and family support policies, recognizing these communities as partners in providing social infrastructure.

At the European Level:

Mainstream Community-Led Housing in EU Funding: Ensure that programs like the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) have clear, accessible streams for intergenerational cooperative housing projects.

Facilitate Knowledge Transfer: Support platforms and networks (like the Erasmus+ project itself) for the exchange of best practices, legal models, and successful case studies between member states, particularly from North to South and West to East.

Include in the European Pillar of Social Rights: Advocate for the recognition of access to community-led and intergenerational housing as a component of the right to affordable housing and social inclusion.

Fund Research and Pilot Projects: Commission further research on the socio-economic impact of intergenerational housing and fund transnational pilot projects to test and demonstrate innovative models.

In conclusion, the workshop model, informed by cross-national evidence, provides a robust pathway for communities to move from passive coexistence to active solidarity. The challenge for policymakers at all levels is to create the conditions that allow these grassroots bridges across generations to be built, sustained, and replicated, fostering a more cohesive, resilient, and inclusive European society.

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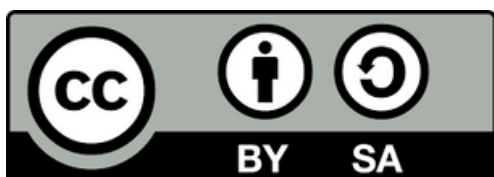
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