

10 examples of new Danish

Realdania

# Cohousing Communities for Seniors







# Introduction

In 1987, Denmark's first senior cohousing community was established in Copenhagen. Since then, a strong culture and tradition for senior cohousing communities have evolved, and several hundred communities have materialised all over the country.

What perhaps distinguishes the Danish senior cohousing tradition is that it is deeply rooted in the social housing sector. To this day, many of the Danish senior housing communities reside in social housing accessible to tenants from all walks of life.

However, we also see a different variety of senior cohousing communities initiated by smaller, self-organised groups of seniors with shared values and interests who build or adapt privately owned housing to their ideas of community. And lately we have seen the emergence of a relatively novel approach in a Danish context; projects driven by commercial interests from developers or pension funds to build community housing tailored to the 50+ segment.

In this publication we share our experiences from the development of 10 senior cohousing projects in which Realdania takes part. Some of the projects have already been realised, others are in progress at the time of writing. Some are formed in partnerships with social housing associations, others in partnerships with pension funds or developers. All 10 projects express Realdania's ongoing endeavour to increase quality of life in the built environment. Our efforts are inspired by research that shows that residents of senior cohousing communities experience a higher quality of life and are less lonely – and that the demand for senior cohousing by far exceeds the supply.

Although the ten projects vary in scale and concept, they build on the same core principles:

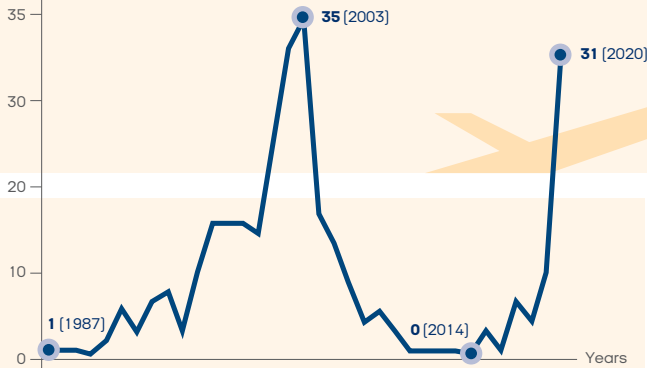
- We aim to make senior cohousing more accessible by ensuring that at least part of the dwellings is accessible to seniors who rely on state pension exclusively.
- We build on concepts and design that cater to a younger segment of seniors from 50 or 55 and up in order to promote a more diverse and active community.
- Because our overall ambition is to fight loneliness and improve quality of life, we encourage architects to rethink the relation between private dwellings and shared spaces so that the physical environment supports different forms of social encounters and create an everyday community.

This publication is aimed primarily at professionals who want to establish new senior cohousing communities, but everyone can read along. We hope that our work will inspire new perspectives on future senior cohousing communities.

**Stig Hessellund**  
Project Manager, Realdania

## More than **100.000** elderly people experience loneliness

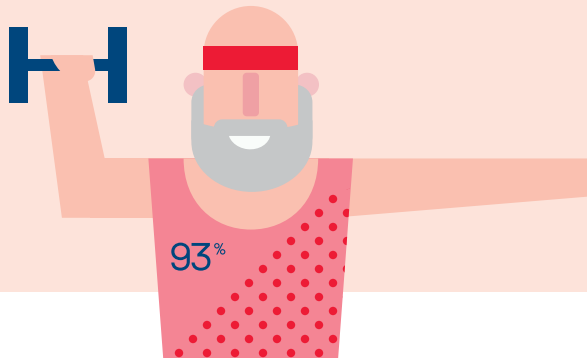
Number of new cohousing communities



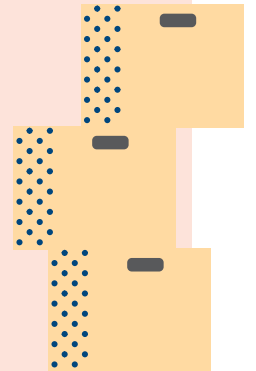
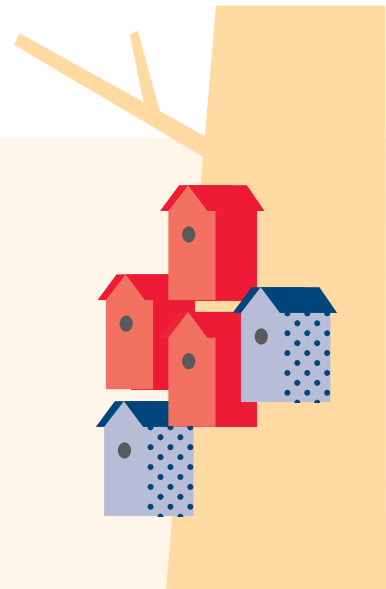
During the last few years, the number of new senior cohousing communities have grown from 0 new senior cohousing communities in 2014 to an **expected 31 new communities in 2020**

## 80.000

people consider moving to a senior cohousing community within the next five years. **Currently, there are 6.900 dwellings**

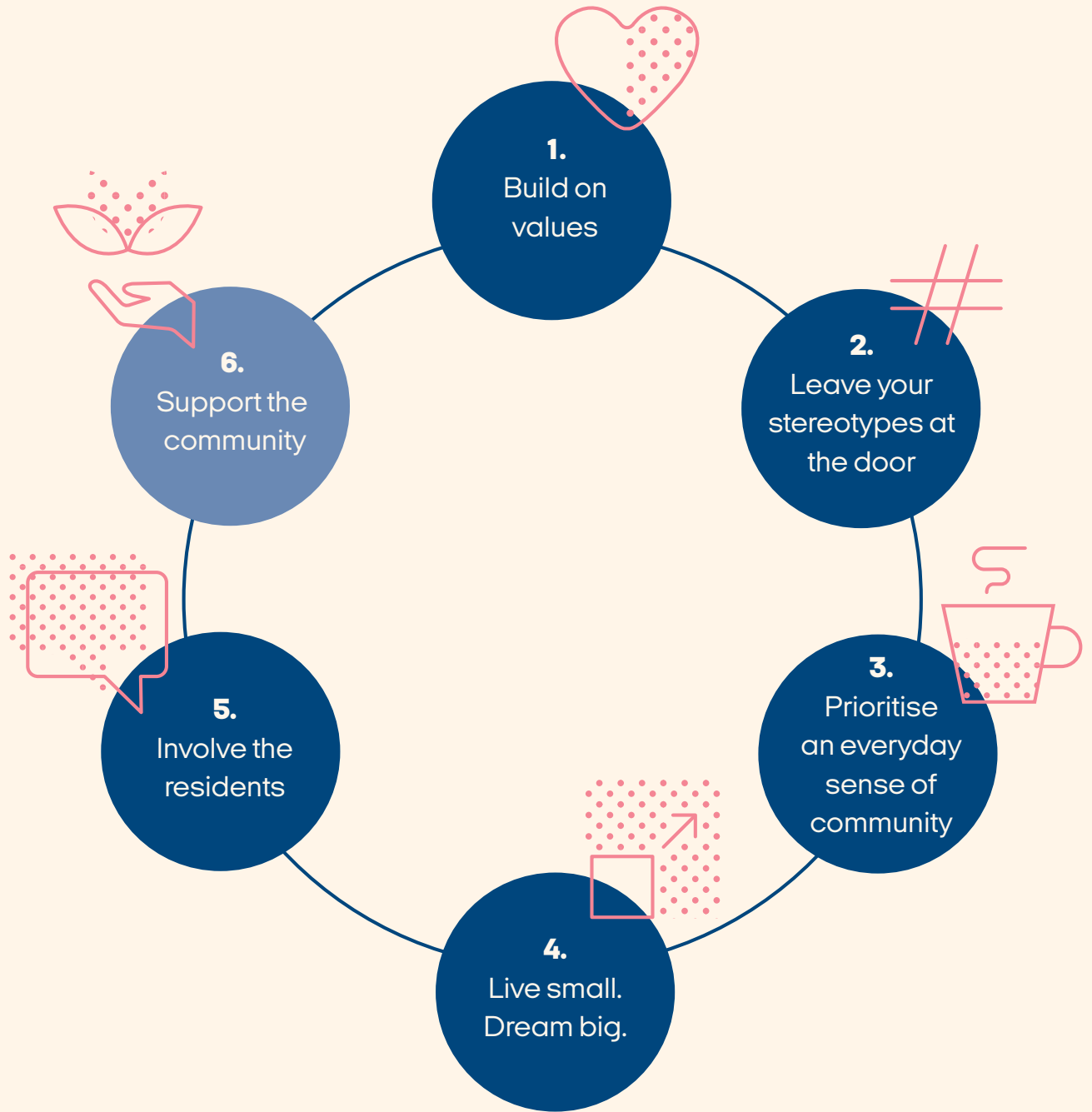


**93%** of residents in senior cohousing communities experience increased **quality of life**



# Six keys to a thriving senior cohousing community

**The work to create 10 new senior cohousing communities has generated a lot of knowledge and experience and has also raised a lot of questions about the way that we think about community, housing, and construction in Denmark. We have not identified one unique recipe for creating a thriving senior cohousing community. On the contrary, it has been a goal to test many different approaches. Nonetheless, we want to point out five general keys to a good senior cohousing community, which our building projects and partnerships are based on. Along the way, we have become aware of a sixth key that has proved more important than expected, and which we are curious to gain more knowledge about.**





# 1. Build on values

There is more to a good cohousing community than good physical environment. You have to want to spend time together. You have to have something to unite around. You have to balance the mix of privacy and community.

These requirements call for an architectural approach guided by a strong vision of community. In all ten projects we have decided to draw up a so-called value programme in order to conceptualise how community and everyday life will unfold before we even begin to think about what the building should look like.

A value programme can take on many different forms but will typically answer questions such as:

- Who do we build for, and what are their needs and desires?
- How do we develop good neighbourliness and room both to be by yourself and to be with others?
- Do we target people with a particular interest or particular life values?
- What should be the community's special set of values and profile?
- What shared rooms and facilities are needed, and how will they be integrated into everyday life to make sure that they are actually used?

In order to ensure that the value programme reflects the needs of the future residents, you can develop the programme in an open process, drawing on new knowledge about the target group and involving potential or future residents. A resident process like this can also help to match expectations between future residents, which can give the community better conditions for getting off to a good start.

The resident process can be organised in many different ways:

## **An open and explorative process**

You can choose an open and explorative process, as the pension fund PensionDanmark did in Ry, where a number of open citizen meetings and workshops helped to give direction to the value programme.

## **A resident-driven process**

You can choose a resident-driven process and create the value programme in collaboration with the residents who are going to move in. This is what the social housing organisation fsb did in Sundbo in Amager.

## **A problem-oriented process**

You can focus your user involvement on a particular problem, as the non-profit housing organisations AKB and KAB did in Albertslund, where male residents in existing cohousing communities were interviewed to discover why men are generally underrepresented in senior cohousing.



The members of the senior cohousing association Sundbo developing a value programme.

Photos: futu.dk







## 2. Leave your stereotypes at the door

A good place to start the development of a senior cohousing community is to leave behind stereotyped ideas about “the silver economy” and “the burden of the elderly.” The concept of “the Third Age” does not tell the whole story either. Because as we grow older as a population, more of us will experience both a “third” and a “fourth” age that can be very different. Internationally, we talk about “the new old” to capture the fact that getting older today means many different things. Instead of looking at age as a common denominator that binds people together, you can focus on the values, interests, and activities that bring people together in a community. In addition, you can consider the particular life situation in which you find yourself: for instance, when the children have moved out, when you retire, or when you find a new way to continue your working life.

### Senior life is working life and outdoor life and ...

Seniors’ lives are as different as any other lives. In the Himmerland Housing Association’s senior cohousing community in Aalborg East, the common denominators are work and entrepreneurship. The underlying analysis is that senior life is also increasingly working life, which means that new and more flexible ways of mixing work life and housing are needed.

In PensionDanmark’s cohousing community “Broen” in Køge Kyst, the common denominators are outdoor life and good food, because the community is located on the edge of the sea and right by the beautiful salt meadow.

### Senior life is the age of both surplus and deficit

In the value programme for Kameliahus at Grønttorvet in Valby by the pension fund PKA and the developer FB Gruppen, the age of 55+ is described as both a “surplus age” and a “deficit age.” It is a time of life with surplus time and resources to develop new interests and to invest in new communities. But it is also a time of life in which a lot of people experience loneliness and physical vulnerability and deficits. This is why it is important to think ahead and prepare for old age. The two concepts are not comprehensive on their own, but in combination, they describe the new life situation that needs to be considered when designing senior cohousing communities.



#### Top photo

In Aalborg East, offices and workspaces are an integrated part of the shared facilities.

Illustration: LINK arkitektur

#### Bottom photo

In Køge Kyst, the common room has an overview of the salt meadow. There is both a shared kitchen and room for socialising as well as a workshop area for repairing outdoor gear.

Illustration: Vandkunsten



### 3. Prioritise an everyday sense of community

Many existing senior cohousing communities consist of individual dwellings which are placed around a central common house.

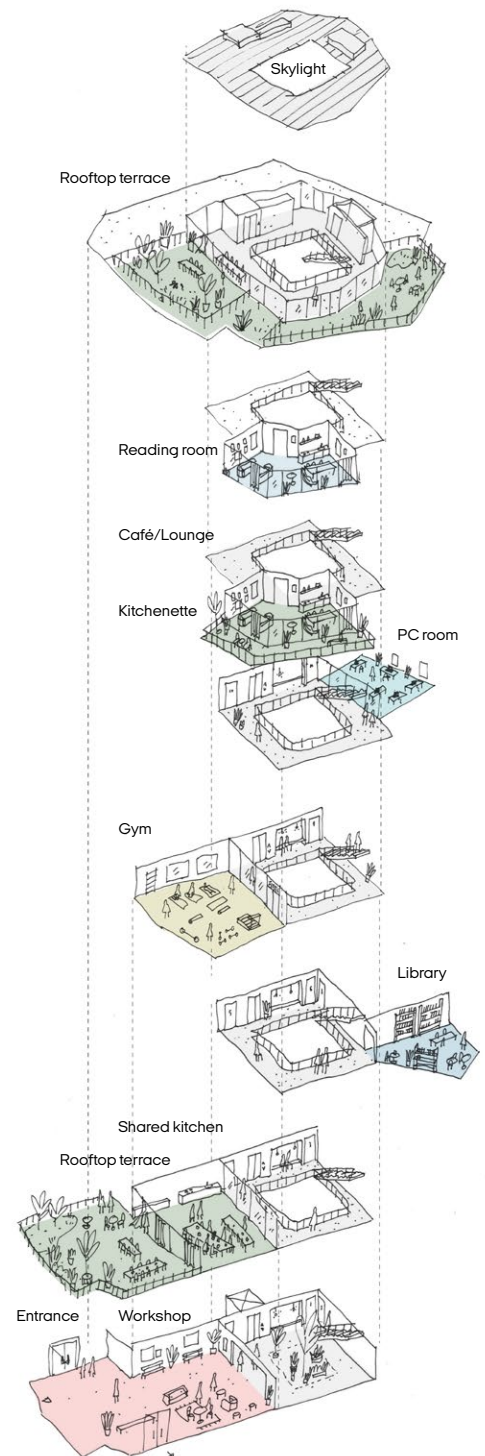
This layout can work well, but there may also be cases in which you do not fully make use of the many shared square metres in a common house. Perhaps because the common house is placed too far away from the dwellings, so that residents have to actively choose to go there. Or because the common house is designed for parties and communal dining rather than for informal socialising and for the activities that residents are devoted to in their everyday lives. Often, it is through the informal and unplanned meetings that the community unfolds. When people greet each other on the way – in the hallway, on the staircase, by the washing machine, in the garden, or in the greenhouse.

#### From common rooms to everyday community

When you create a new senior cohousing community, you have the opportunity to freely rethink the mix of private housing and shared areas. You can create an everyday community by making the common areas a natural extension of the home and not just a place that people pass through once in a while. You can work with the arrival area, the stairwell, and the everyday activities such as picking up mail and taking out the garbage. All of this can provide small opportunities for community.

You can encourage everyday community by, for example:

- placing common rooms near the arrival area of the cohousing community, so that it becomes natural to drop by on the way in or out.
- combining practical functions such as receiving mail and goods, doing laundry, parking bicycles, etc., with opportunities to sit around and relax or socialise.
- designing common rooms to be used for many different things.
- creating room for informal meetings between neighbours, with small sitting niches by the front door, for example, or neighbouring balconies with room for a table.
- creating visibility between the different spaces and activities to make you feel as part of a community, even when you are not actively spending time with anyone.



In PFA's senior cohousing community in Horsens, the shared facilities are placed on each floor as an extension of the stairwell. A concrete example of how to draw for everyday community.

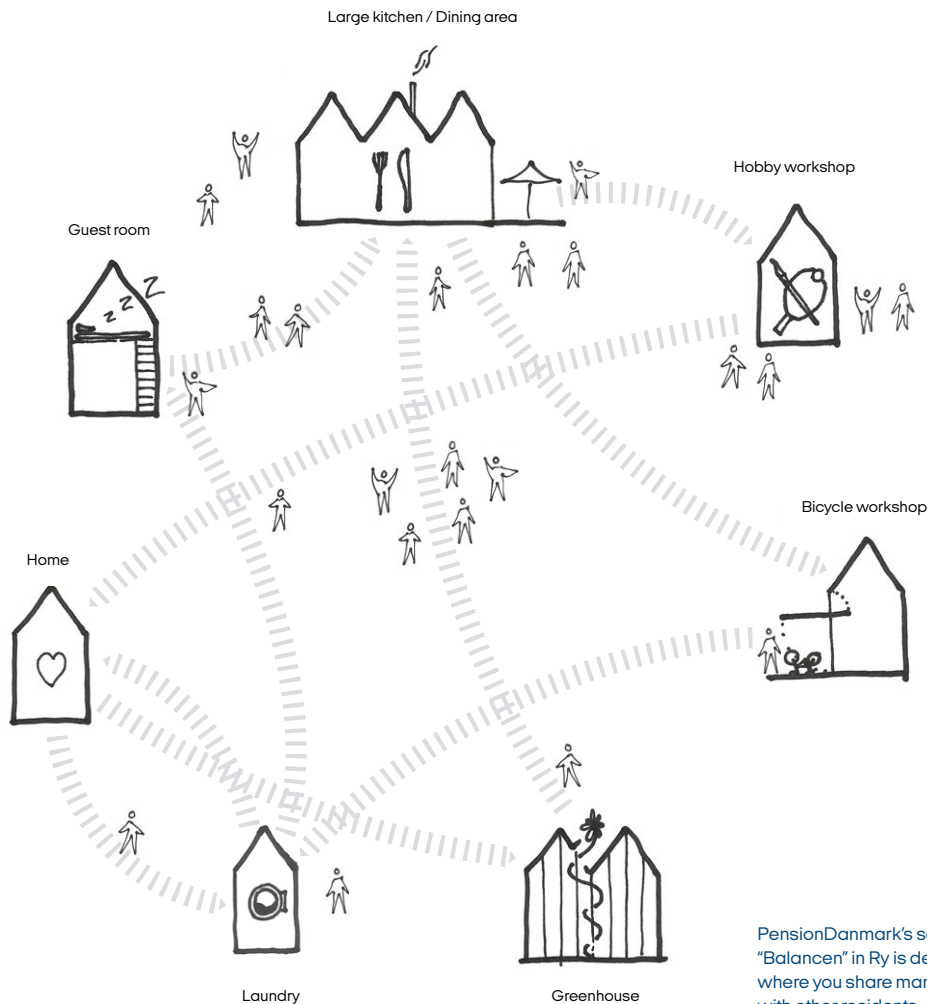
Illustration from the value programme: Praksis Arkitekter



## 4. Live small. Dream big.

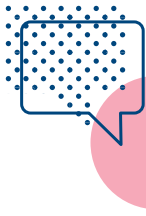
When asked why they are considering moving, 40 % of seniors answer: "to get a smaller home." Too much space is too much bother and too many maintenance costs. In this perspective, a senior cohousing community is a smart choice, because you get a smaller and a larger home all at once. A smaller home, because you get fewer private square metres. A larger home, because you can share rooms such as a large kitchen-dining area, a workshop, an office, and guest rooms, which can provide you with more space and more options put together than you had in your old home.

In that sense, a senior cohousing community provides the opportunity to live small and big at the same time. This is especially true if the common rooms and facilities are designed in a way, so that they replace the functions that were available in your previous, private home. This also means that the common areas should not only be seen as places where you actively spend time with other people in the community but also as places that you naturally use for your own everyday activities.



PensionDanmark's senior cohousing community "Balancen" in Ry is designed as a small village where you share many of the functions of a home with other residents.

Illustration from value programme: Vandkunsten



## 5. Involve the residents

Moving from a single-family house or a traditional flat to a senior cohousing community is a big change. It takes time to come together as a group and to create the rules and codes of conduct for a good everyday life together.

In order to ensure that the community reflects the wishes of the residents and gets off to a good start, it is a good idea to involve the residents well in advance of their moving in. By involving the residents in finalising the design of the shared areas and facilities, you can ensure that they match the needs and the atmosphere that the residents want. At the same time, it gives residents the opportunity to get to know each other and to begin to create a common culture.

The involvement processes can be of varying scope but require professional facilitation. Bofællesskabet Sundbo originated on the initiative of a group of people who wanted to create a cohousing community, so in that case, the residents were involved from the beginning. PKA's cohousing community at Grønttorvet and PensionDanmark's cohousing communities in Køge and Ry worked with a model in which future residents entered into a resident process after having entered into a lease – but well in advance of moving in. During the process, residents met to discuss the desired values and everyday life of the community and to help to design the common areas. The whole process was supported by professional facilitation to ensure that the community got off to a good start.

The future residents of PensionDanmark's cohousing community in Køge discuss the design of their common areas with the architect Frederikke Aagaard.





## 6. Support the community

The 10 projects that are now under development and construction are very different in their location, profile, processes, and partnerships. However, across these differences, some common questions have emerged:

- How do you help the community get started after residents move in?
- How do you ensure that the values and the culture described in the value programme come to life in practice?
- How do you organise maintenance in a community where residents want to do more things themselves?
- Do you need a social host rather than a janitor – or perhaps a new mix: a social janitor?

Community is fun, but also difficult. In our experience, there is a great need to support the community after the residents have moved in – either with professional facilitation or by rethinking maintenance and considering the possibility of establishing some form of social janitor function. How to support the community in different ways is one of the areas in which we want to seek out new knowledge, new approaches, and inspiring examples from Denmark and abroad.



Communal eating in the cohousing community Sundbo.

Photo: futu.dk

# **10 senior cohousing communities.**

# **10 partnerships.**

**Realdania is currently involved in the development of 10 senior cohousing communities in Denmark. The 10 communities are being developed in partnership with social housing associations, pension funds, and other private developers. The partnerships have also involved relevant municipalities with the aim of creating synergy for local planning and municipal strategies within different policy areas such as senior citizens, housing and residential patterns, business development, and culture. Realdania has contributed to the construction development phase, while the actual buildings are being financed and constructed by the respective developers. In addition, Realdania has contributed to the design of the shared areas in some of the projects together with the pension funds.**

**You can read more about the projects on the following pages.**

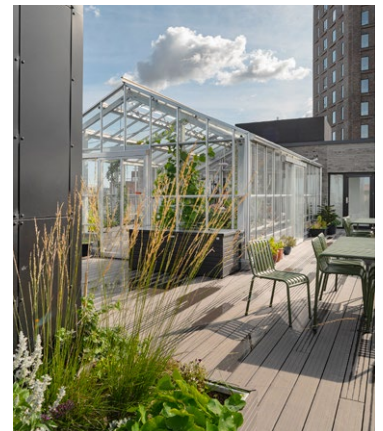


# Co-housing in a new green district

The old vegetable market Grønttorvet in Valby is being transformed into a new, mixed district that carries on the green history of the area. The new buildings have shared greenhouses on the roof, and the city park in the middle is going to become an edible garden with fruit trees and a common house. The senior cohousing community Kameliahus, like the rest of Grønttorvet, caters to people who want to be in the heart of the bustling city with direct access to green areas.

The common areas in Kameliahus are placed and designed in a way to make them encourage small encounters and communities within the larger community. The balcony access

block contains small neighbouring balconies between the flats, where you can pull out a table and a few chairs. On each floor, smaller common areas are located, such as a library, a study room, and an art room where you can engage in your hobbies. The large common room on the ground floor and the greenhouse on the roof are designed to be used by everyone – not least for communal eating, which is one of the cornerstones of the community. The idea is that the community should always be present as a resource that one can choose to make use of to varying degrees and in many different ways.



#### Top photo

The shared greenhouse on the roof terrace.

Photo: Jens Lindhe

#### Bottom photo

The small common areas on each floor encourage close communities within the larger community.

Illustration: Mangor & Nagel



**Developer:** PKA and FB Gruppen

**Type:** Private rental housing

**Location:** Grønttorvet, Valby

**Number of dwellings:** 49

**Occupancy date:** March 2019

**Value programme:** Andel and  
Mangor & Nagel

**Architects:** Mangor & Nagel



# The good life on the coast



The lifestyle homes in the residential community Broen are being built on the edge of the protected salt meadow in Køge, so you have the sea in front of you and the city behind you. Broen caters to couples and singles over the age of 50 who are interested in nature, outdoor life, and good food. The 33 dwellings share a large common room with a terrace facing the salt meadow and a roof terrace with room for growing plants. Along the stairwell and the balcony access block, small niches help to create the setting for an everyday community with plenty of opportunities to bump into in each other.

The residents of Broen take part themselves in creating the setting for their community. Prior to moving in, they work with an interior architect to design the shared rooms and the roof terrace. The resident process includes community work days and shorter working meetings, where residents choose to work with the things that are of particular interest to them. A resident association is also established with the assistance of a lawyer in order to support the community once people move in.

Common room in Broen.

Illustrations from value programme: Vandkunsten

**Developer:** PensionDanmark  
**Type:** Private rental housing  
**Location:** Køge Kyst  
**Number of dwellings:** 33 lifestyle homes  
**Occupancy date:** April 2020  
**Value programme:** Vandkunsten and COWI  
**Architects:** Vandkunsten

# Senior life is work life



The penthouse community and the business district.

Illustration: LINK arkitektur

The gap between working life and senior life is dissolving. More and more people work longer or start working in new ways. Many seniors start their own businesses. The penthouse community on Fyrkildevej is located in a new business district in Aalborg East. It will be the first senior cohousing community in Denmark that caters specifically to seniors who want to integrate work life and housing.

In 2015, 124,000 out of just over a million Danes over the age of 65 remained in the labour market, and the number is increasing.

Denmark is heading towards becoming the country in the EU with the highest retirement age. Many people work longer, and many want to work in new and more flexible ways. The penthouse community on Fyrkildevej consists of social housing that is integrated with a commercial building. The housing community is organised in a way that combines social and commercial qualities. There is access both to common areas that encourage informal social interaction and to office spaces and meeting rooms used by residents of the community and other entrepreneurs.

**Developer:** Himmerland Boligforening

**Type:** Social housing

**Location:** Aalborg East

**Number of dwellings:** 20

**Occupancy date:** 2020

**Value programme:** carlberg/christensen and LINK arkitektur

**Architects:** LINK arkitektur

# More men in cohousing communities

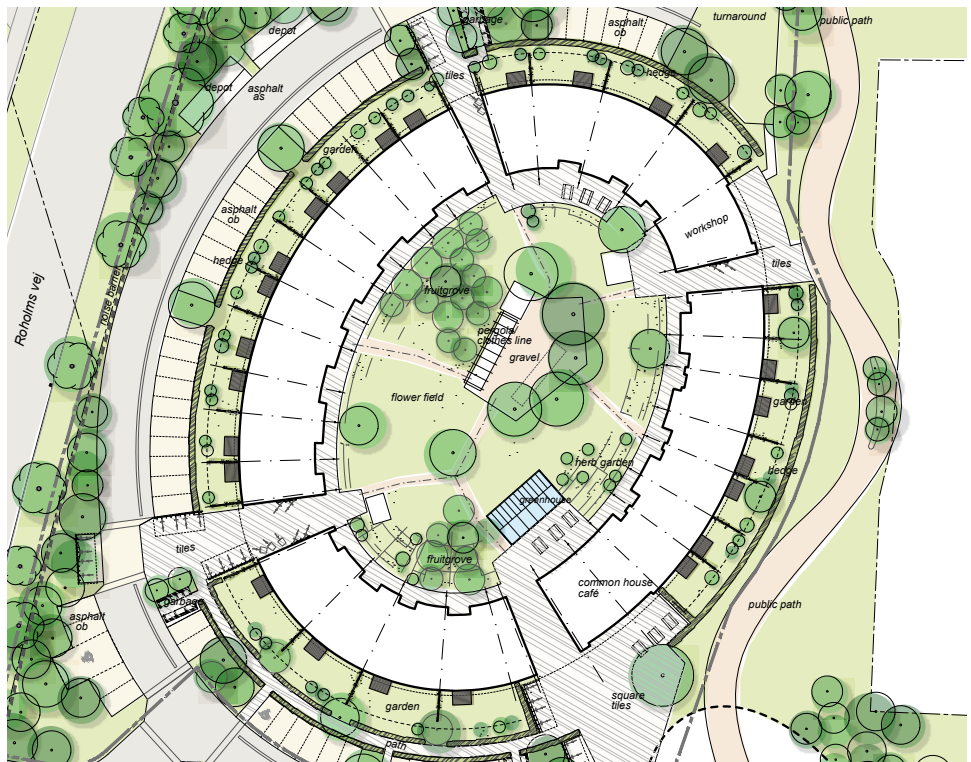
Many senior cohousing communities have a majority of female residents. When the housing company AKB developed a value programme for a new senior cohousing community in Albertslund, they decided to think extra carefully about how to create a community that is as attractive to men as it is to women.

Interviews with male residents in various senior cohousing communities indicated a need to think of specific activities as a basis for the community. The result was the set of values "Smart hands", "Green fingers", and "Open arms", meaning that practical, green, and creative activities provide the starting point for the community. The individual dwellings are placed in an oval that surrounds a green heart. Common rooms for working with hard and soft materials are placed in the oval next to a café with room for communal dining and informal get-togethers.



In the oval building, everyone has equal access to the community. Shared facilities such as a community house with a café and a workshop are placed at the entrances to the building.

Illustrations: Vandkunsten



**Developer:** Boligselskabet AKB, Albertslund  
**Type:** Social housing  
**Location:** Albertslund  
**Number of dwellings:** 51  
**Occupancy date:** 2023  
**Value programme:** Andel and Vandkunsten  
**Architects:** Vandkunsten

# In balance with nature

'Balancen' is a community of lifestyle homes for couples and singles aged 50+ who love nature and who want to live sustainably. Balancen is constructed with wood, and the landscape between the houses is developed in collaboration with the association Vild Med Vilje ("Wild on Purpose") as a diverse habitat for local plant and insect species. The community takes the shape of a small village, where the common facilities such as a kitchen-dining room, a workshop, a studio, an office, and guesthouses are located along the central street.

Balancen is based on the basic idea that many Danes want to live more sustainably. In Balancen, sustainability is a matter of emitting less CO<sub>2</sub> by using wood and recycled materials in the construction. But sustainability is also about the increased quality of life created by living with natural materials, lots of daylight, and wild nature right outside the windows. And, finally, sustainability is about community. About sharing things and spaces in a smart way and taking care of each other and of nature.

The community takes the form of a small village where the common facilities are located along the central street.

Illustration: Vandkunsten



**Developer:** PensionDanmark

**Type:** Private rental housing

**Location:** Kildebjerg, Ry

**Number of dwellings:** 33

**Occupancy date:** Summer, 2021

**Value programme:** Andel and Vandkunsten

**Architects:** Vandkunsten

# Community under the open sky



The buildings are placed, so that the space between them becomes a natural shared outdoor space for the residents.

Illustrations from the value programme:  
AART architects

In Naturbydelen Ringkøbing K, nature comes before housing. The first step in the establishment of the new city district has been the development of a rich natural landscape with meadows, berry gardens, lakes, forests, and pathway systems. In the middle of all of this, Realdania By & Byg is building a senior cohousing community where nature constitutes the largest common area, and the community revolves around activities under the open sky.

The senior cohousing community consists of 14 rental apartments of between 50 and 120 square metres, located in three buildings of one or two stories. Contrary to the traditional

low-rise, high-density cohousing community with a common house in the middle, the focal point here is an open square that is directly connected to the landscape. The common facilities such as a shared kitchen, a library, guest rooms, and a workshop are distributed in the three buildings, so that there is a visual connection to all of them from the green heart. The 2,700 square metre site contains, among other things, a herb garden and a greenhouse, but also a washing place for mountain bikes and a gear shed with room for kayaks, kitesurfing gear, and other tools for an active outdoor life.

**Developer:** Realdania By & Byg  
**Type:** Private rental housing  
**Location:** Naturbydelen, Ringkøbing K  
**Number of dwellings:** 14  
**Occupancy date:** 2021  
**Value programme:** Gemeinschaft  
**Architects:** AART architects

# An extended family of urbanites

Sundbo cohousing community was founded on the initiative of an association of 25 dedicated individuals who had worked for several years to establish a senior cohousing community in Copenhagen. The housing company fsb seized the opportunity and offered a possible building site at Lergravsparken in Amager. The residents have created the value programme themselves with professional facilitation. The result is a concept for an “urban senior residence hall” where residents share a home that gives them room to be outgoing and individualistic urbanites.

During a number of workshops and communal dinners, the residents have settled on a set of values built upon “everyday community”, “food” and “sustainability”. The idea of an everyday community means that the common areas are closely integrated with the individual dwellings to become a natural extension of the home. Sustainability is defined both socially and environmentally, resulting, for instance, in the choice of wood as a building material. Cooking and eating together is the essential everyday activity that will bind the coming extended family of urbanites together.

The central common room in Sundbo, to which the residents have direct access from their homes.

Illustration: Sangberg Arkitekter



**Developer:** fsb

**Type:** Social housing

**Location:** Copenhagen, Amager

**Number of dwellings:** 22

**Occupancy date:** Expected 2022

**Value programme:** FUTU and senior cohousing association Sundbo

**Architects:** Sangberg Arkitekter

# The open cohousing community



“The open cohousing community” is a development project that explores how living in a cohousing community can be a driving force for social inclusion. The community will contain three small cohousing communities for students, seniors, and families. The design of the physical surroundings is based on the “universal design” philosophy, which means that everything on the site is equally accessible to everyone, whether you have a disability or not.

The senior cohousing in the open cohousing community has its own common room as well as access to facilities that are shared by everyone. The shared facilities are based on the values “movement” and “contemplation”, which were chosen, because they unite people across generations and physical conditions. The open cohousing community is being built by Lejerbo in collaboration with the Bevica Foundation and the Elsass Foundation financing the student cohousing community.

Movement and contemplation are two of the overall values that unite the residents of the open cohousing community.

Illustration from value programme: Andel

**Developer:** Lejerbo, the Bevica Foundation, the Elsass Foundation

**Type:** Social housing

**Location:** Kolding

**Number of dwellings:** Approx. 100-105 in total. Of these, 25 are for senior cohousing.

**Occupancy date:** Undetermined

**Value programme:** Andel, Cubo, Force4

**Architects:** Undetermined

# Multi-storey everyday community

“The Dynamic Community” is the headline for the community approach that characterises PFA’s senior cohousing community in Horsens. Instead of creating one large common room, all the shared facilities are located on each floor of the seven-storey building like pearls on a string. The traditional staircase of the apartment building is transformed into the backbone of the cohousing community, providing many opportunities to create an informal everyday community.

The cohousing community houses four to five dwellings on each floor, located next to the central stairwell, which contains niches for relaxing and for spontaneous meetings on each floor. The stairwell is designed to feel homely and is directly connected on each floor to shared facilities such as a fireplace, a laundry room, and a guest apartment. The large living room with the communal kitchen is located on the ground floor, while the roof contains a terrace, kitchen gardens, and hobby rooms.



In “the Dynamic Cohousing Community,” the common areas are placed like pearls on a string on each floor.

Illustrations: Praxis Arkitekter



**Developer:** PFA

**Type:** Private rental housing

**Location:** Horsens

**Number of dwellings:** 30

**Occupancy date:** Undetermined

**Value programme:** Urban Goods

**Architects:** Praxis Arkitekter



# What's up, Vordingborg?

Domea Vordingborg and Domea.dk have initiated the development of two new cohousing communities for seniors and families. The first step was to invite citizens to a workshop about how they would like to live in a community with multiple generations. The workshop took place in the neighbourhood in Sydhavnen where the new cohousing communities are located. 120 citizens showed up and shared their thoughts on life in a community.

The workshop was the basis for the preparation of the value programme for the two cohousing communities, which will be fine-tuned in a continued dialogue with the potential residents who wish to participate in the open development process. The final outcome remains unknown at the time of writing. However, the values discussed seem to revolve around everyday nature and co-creation and a way of living that allows you to take part in a senior cohousing community and also have plenty of opportunities for social interaction across generations.

Citizens' meeting in Vordingborg. The participants discuss what they would want to share with each other if they were to move into the new cohousing communities that are under development.



**Developer:** Domea Vordingborg and Domea.dk  
**Type:** Social housing  
**Location:** Vordingborg  
**Number of dwellings:** Approx. 20 homes in a senior cohousing community. Approx. 20 homes in a cohousing community for families.  
**Occupancy date:** Undetermined  
**Value programme:** Andel and JJW  
**Architects:** JJW and Friis Andersen



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Text and design: Andel

Dystan & Rosenberg



Photo: Leif Tuxen

Front page  
Senior cohousing community Kamelichus in Valby.

Photo: Thomas Søndergaard

Since 2016, Realdania has been focusing on how living in a senior cohousing community can counteract loneliness and enhance the quality of life. In this publication, we present the preliminary experiences from the initiative and the ten senior cohousing communities that are being developed around Denmark.

Read more at [realdania.dk](https://realdania.dk) [in Danish]