

25

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Can 70: a community ageing project

Designed collectively by Can 70 (seed group of Sostre Cívic)¹

At Can 70, our life experiences have led us to believe that, from a certain age, loneliness is the worst affliction, that necessary care need not be provided by family and that cooperative experiences make it easier to live in harmony together. And we know that we want to continue to be a part of our city. That is why we have decided to spend the last stage of our lives as a community, in cooperative cohousing based on a right-of-use model, with communal guidelines discussed and set by all of us, with mutual assistance and, when necessary, with professional collaboration from cooperatives. In late 2015, we presented our project to the municipal administration to request space and support and, since then, we have developed our values, vision, governance procedures, architectural design and community care plans. We have come across both opportunities and obstacles when looking for an available space, but we are convinced that ours is a valid, replicable model.

Introduction

The ageing population is one of the most significant social transformations of the twenty-first century. In just a few years, towns and cities will have to face new challenges, such as how to guarantee the social inclusion and active participation of older people: a group that is growing and becoming more diverse day by day, with a huge variety of tastes, priorities and needs. The current model of facilities and services for older people must adapt to these needs and to the demand for varied, personalised care. We must face this reality from an inclusive, dynamic and flexible perspective and, above all, encourage skills acquisition and prevention. All too often, despite current regulations and existing services, care ends up being a gruelling duty for family members, especially daughters. We do not want to be a burden to our families; we want to live the last years of our lives with dignity, as part of a community. These are the foundations of our project.

1. Who we are

Can 70 is a group of older people who are working to create an alternative to the current ageing model. For us, this alternative is a right-of-use model of collaborative, supportive cohousing that provides care so that we can age actively, autonomously and healthily in an environment that encourages personal and collective growth. The aim of our project is to share life in our old age and value personal emotions and differences to overcome difficulties. Commitment and participation will be required to reach consensus and achieve the dream future: coliving with mutual support and the necessary care, so that we can enjoy the start, middle and end of this life stage. Our motto is: 'share, experience and enjoy old age together'. Currently, in late 2019, there are 23 of us, in 19 coliving units, with around 75% women, aged between 55 and 70. We would like to reach between 25 and 30 coliving units for the project to be viable. We mainly live in various

1. Written up by the external communication work group (https://sostrecivic.coop/grups_llavors/can-70/).

neighbourhoods of Barcelona, we belong to cooperatives and we do voluntary work for various associations in the city.

2. What we want

We want to be active and empowered in our old age and to transform the prevailing social model based on public subsidies and family taking on responsibility for the care and services required in the last stages of life. Our community is based on a 'right-of-use cooperative model',² because this system aims to focus on the use of housing, rather than turning it into a consumer product, in order to create a generalisable alternative for access to housing.

We want to create social, human and community links in the local area (basically, the neighbourhood) and contribute towards the transformation of the city, in stark contrast to the global context of liberal-capitalist individualism. We want to diversify models of coliving by establishing mutual support networks and shared spaces that encourage emotional balance on a personal and relationship level and prevent isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, we intend to cooperatively self-manage the services needed by the community (maintenance, cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc.), including aspects relating to care and the employment of staff and resources needed in administrative, care, medical and other areas. We want to live in our own home, in housing with spaces for private and communal use for group activities, in an ecologically sustainable, healthy, welcoming environment with communal services. Finally, we aim to create a replicable, multiplicable model for future generations.

3. How we see ourselves

Cooperation, commitment and consensus are the pillars of any cohousing project. Ours respects each person's individuality in their own private space. Residents are jointly responsible for the management and use of communal spaces, which will be controlled by the community. The housing and its spaces are designed to facilitate relationships within the community and mutual help.

All management is carried out by the residents themselves, who can delegate services or responsibilities to other people or entities, if they so wish. The social structure is therefore not a hierarchy; decisions are made democratically in the corresponding decision-making space (assembly, work groups) and, if possible, by consensus. Meanwhile, finances are kept separate, meaning that each resident retains their economic independence while contributing towards communal expenses agreed upon by the cooperative and towards the solidarity fund. At Can 70, our philosophy is based on eight values: knowledge, communication, trust, cooperation, commitment, consensus, conflict and celebration. Each of these values has been defined and accepted by the group.

As for the surroundings, we are certain that the space where we want to share our lives cannot encourage or represent 'isolation', but rather the opposite. We want to experience our new reality 'in the neighbourhood' and, above all, we want to 'experience the neighbourhood', making ourselves a part of it and making it part of our everyday lives. We want to make ourselves seen and offer help to promote peaceful, fruitful coexistence, whether on a service, social or experience level, both individually and as a group. As a collaborative living project, it is important for Can 70 to have communal spaces and activities open to residents of the neighbourhood.

2. We see collective ownership as ownership that is neither private nor public. The cooperative is the owner of the housing for an indefinite period. It is therefore not possible to transform this model to obtain privately owned housing. Collective ownership prevents speculation, as it is impossible to profit through sale or lease. In the 'right of use' model – meaning neither renting nor buying – housing is considered an asset to be used by members of the cooperative indefinitely or for a very long period (to be determined in the transfer of use agreement). It is a much more stable model than renting and more affordable than buying. The initial investment and monthly payments are derived from acquisition, maintenance and cooperative operations costs, not market prices.

4. How we organise and govern ourselves

Although we have no internal regulations, the group has established some guidelines to follow.

4.1 How we make decisions

We work to achieve a thorough democracy through the project's horizontality, the opportunity to create work groups, and transparency. As founders, it is right that we see consensus as the best way of making decisions for the future of the project.

4.2 How we get on

The size of the group is closely linked to opportunities for communication. In a group of around 30–40 people, we will need to achieve fluidity in terms of both direct communication and communication through new technology, and establish general, specific and one-off information and exchanges we will define as meetings, assemblies or work groups in a later section. Basically, we want communication to flow from each member of the community. We need to establish clear mechanisms for debate and create various channels, in the form of new technology and a noticeboard, as well as informal, everyday channels, which we also consider highly important. Everyone must have the chance to be heard and to find any information they need. Therefore, everyone must take part in setting the rules and they must be shared. The meaning of these rules must be shared in advance, either through readings that can be discussed in an informal setting or through meetings where this meaning can be shared.

4.3 How we build the group

As for the welcome process, anyone who wants to meet us will receive some documents and can come for a relaxed meeting with some members of Can 70, who will act as their 'buddies'. They can then request to be part of the project if they so wish. The group then decides whether to accept the person or not and informs them of their decision. For six months, a mutual 'getting to know you' period takes place, during which time the newcomer participates in all activities and decision-making processes, while their 'buddies' take care of any queries they may have. After this time, if the process has been satisfactory, the person will become a fully fledged member of Can 70 and can enjoy all the corresponding rights. New members of Can 70 must be aged between 50 and 70. We strive to integrate new members while always maintaining our common values. They say you can see how a community works by observing how newcomers are treated, so this is an important issue for us. We know we need to strike a balance between diversity and proximity in terms of age, social class, political and cultural values, etc., in order to ensure cohesion, but we cannot let similarities turn us into a closed community.

Voluntary exits from the group or deaths within the group require financial decisions, which will be covered in the internal regulations, and a process of loss or grief, which will be discussed. Non-voluntary exits – meaning exclusions from the group – will be defined in the internal regulations and will only take place after a cooperation period to try to resolve any problems from a personal and collective point of view.

4.4 The official standards we will follow

We will set the internal regulations with the aforementioned aspects in mind and in accordance with the generic elements referring to this model detailed in the statutes of our cooperative, which is currently Sostre Cívic.

4.5 Where we meet and make decisions

We are trying not to be too rigid in this area, so as to allow for different communication possibilities and levels of decision-making. Firstly, there will be informal meetings where the group can chat, exchange and share their time and opinions on any generic issue, with no specific aim. Secondly, voluntary or non-voluntary work group meetings will be a place to coordinate and develop projects of a social or leisure-oriented nature. Thirdly and finally, assemblies will make sure the whole collective's voices are heard and may be intended for information or decision-making purposes, or a combination of the two. We may also consider a kind of council or board in the form of a

voluntary core group that makes decisions on everyday issues, taking care not to make any voluntary activities obligatory. Our group culture requires maintenance activities in the form of community rituals (meals and celebrations), which can be added to the more formal spaces, such as general assemblies and work group meetings. Finally, we must mention a different kind of meeting we plan to hold: the emotional assembly. As we believe that ‘the group is more important than the building’, it is essential to maintain the group both formally and emotionally.

4.6 Who decides what

Firstly, there is the general assembly, which involves an agenda and participation from all members and has decision-making powers on any matter. Secondly, the core group can resolve everyday issues, both of a material (maintenance, purchases, management, etc.) and of a personal nature (assistance, collaboration or sanctions). There will also be work groups that focus on specific issues or areas. We would like to establish an informal voice that encourages residents to participate in groups, while not expressly making them mandatory. Rather than one leader, we need a whole collective where anyone can lead. Finally, there is the umbrella group, where volunteers are essential, as this is the entity that sets up emotional assemblies. When there is an unspoken issue hanging in the air or making noise within the group, it is essential that we organise a meeting to talk about it and start to resolve it. This is the group where conflict resolution can be provided, as it will have external mediation and facilitation support.

4.7 How we help each other

Mutual support is an integral concept within our purpose. Now we must establish how much we can take on, what we do and do not want to do or to have done for us, where our limits are, etc. We don't want to be a burden to our family or our friends. We know that the clearer our wishes, the fewer problems we will have with care management, and that any purpose-driven space must be designed through consensus to inspire trust. Our project is based on four axes of care: a) care in a shared home, b) care as support to tackle dependence, c) end-of-life care, and d) care relating to financial implications and needs.

4.8 How we want to age

We want it to be a shared process: we have already started to describe our hopes for the future and to talk about the end of our lives. Some of our community's values are rooted in active ageing and mutual support in old age. We aim to empower older people, without becoming a retirement home, with activities in the wider community linked to the neighbourhood. We need an infrastructure in the form of a network between equals, while recognising our diversity. This can be achieved by talking openly about what the end of our lives represents. From proposals like the right to a dignified death, with possible legalised euthanasia in the future, to personalised end-of-life support options. All perspectives must be respected.

5. How we can satisfy people's invisible needs

It is important to propose elements to be taken into account in order to ensure psychological well-being and create positive relationships and lasting affection, which are as essential in life as food.

5.1 Emotions, empathy, roles and status

We have to learn to seek perspective, to look inside ourselves, to accept what we do not like about ourselves, to see what we can change and what we cannot, to accept that nobody is perfect, to listen, to stop worrying about things we cannot solve, and to love ourselves more. We need to do this as soon as possible in order to build a solid group, a human building. We must work on empathy, which we define as putting yourself in another's shoes, suspending all judgements, attending to the other person's emotions, connecting with their needs, etc. The solution is never giving advice or consolation, playing down their feelings or telling a similar story of ours. In any group, a range of roles start to appear, and they are mobile; they are not attached to a particular person. Therefore, distancing a person with a specific role (critical, conflictive, etc.) does not get rid of the role; it makes another appear. So, our task is to learn to separate the role and the person. We must realise that, in all groups, even if they have a horizontal structure, power always exists:

not power over others, but the power to do. This is why we need to differentiate between role, status and person.

5.2 Conflict

We must deal with conflict at the preventive phase via the umbrella group, which will detect signals, listen, help to inhibit the spread of rumours and provide support to anyone who needs it. It will be useful for us to have tools to manage conflict in the initial phases, through sofa meetings, lunches and dinners to talk and shed light on different points of view. In the second phase, conflict is open and, if left unresolved, may lead to crisis or even violence. To deal with it, we must reflect on the power of the group, where it is, how we communicate, what we talk about and what we do not talk about, which values have not been shared, what is happening, what it says about each person and about the group, etc. In any event, conflict is human nature: it is an inevitable part of life and living together. We are therefore considering talking about conflict with external experts, even before the coliving project officially begins.

5.3 Participation, dedication and commitment

Participation is not just about being there or attending. It means taking part in a common mission, getting involved and committing, contributing towards results, taking ownership of the project. We are talking about attitudes and feelings, as well as work to be done. Any rejection of what is agreed may be down to a perception of authoritarianism. We must therefore work to link it to care and cohesion within the group. So, we have to remember that any mandatory work is to be done for the benefit of the group, not just through obedience. We do not want to be 'carers'; we want everyone to take on responsibility.

5.4 Leadership

We know that leadership is linked to power, but we see power as ability or possibility: not power 'over', but rather power 'to', which also involves privilege. We must be able to identify who has more or less power, whether or not we have power, and in what area. Leadership in Can 70 must be positive and, above all, linked to the care of people within the group. This way, no one takes the lead; the group must grant leadership.

5.5 Personalities and attitudes, red lines

As this is a project involving older people, we know that there may be unexpected attitudes or unforeseen situations that may hurt individuals or the group. Should these circumstances occur, initially, we will submit the issue to the emotional assembly, where the conflict will be dealt with (with external help, if required). If necessary, we will then take it to the general assembly to make the necessary decision as a group.

6. How to fulfil visible needs

We want to cooperatively self-manage the services needed by the community (maintenance, cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc.), as well as aspects relating to care and the employment of staff and resources needed in administrative, care, medical and other areas.

6.1 General basic services and care

We know what we want and what we can do. This means we need to plan what we need others to do for us. We intend basic outsourced services to be managed by organisations in the cooperative world in each area. We also foresee voluntary collaboration from members who wish to participate. The domestic services required will be administration; centre and staff management; reception; cleaning of communal spaces, the building in general and private spaces (optionally); building maintenance (structure, light, water, gas, internet, etc.); and shopping. Healthy eating is also important to us, as looking after our second brain is essential; eating is one of the most important activities of the day and must be enjoyed with company in the community dining room at least once a day, initially. We have also looked at laundry, ironing and sewing: depending on our situation, we may leave this in the hands of others or not, but there will certainly be communal appliances and other tools. Then there are more personalised services, including physical and mental health, with staff leading physical exercise sessions (physiotherapists and trainers), physiotherapy workshops

and psychological care, podiatry, hairdressing and barber services. We can enjoy these services if we do not use the ones in the neighbourhood or when it is too difficult to get around.

6.2 Healthcare services

We will have use of the CAP (Primary Care Centre) and the services offered by the Catalan Health Service. Alongside this, we can add healthcare staff, including specialist doctors, nursing professionals and care assistants specialising in the elderly, if needed. We are considering both official and alternative medicine, which we can share. The purchase and distribution of pharmacy products (both traditional and natural) can be outsourced when required.

6.3 Leisure

Leisure is health for the soul and for the emotions. We will need staff to organise activities; reading, cinema, theatre, cooking, singing and dancing workshops; parties and festivals (seasonal or personal); outings; exchanges with other centres; and trips.

7. Ideas for the architectural design and building maintenance

The development of coliving projects, especially when groups and cooperatives are involved, requires specific organisation and design processes, which differ from those usually found with other kinds of work and clientele. There are many intermediate steps needed to make community decisions among the future users. As well as the usual services, the architectural design must include all the elements needed for the coliving process to begin: a suitable plot, a programme of uses for a specific group of people, technical support from work groups to assess and certify the building's energy performance, etc.

Any conventional architectural design is usually carried out in four phases: the preliminary design, the basic design, execution plans and construction documents. But which is the best model to use? Whichever corresponds to the lifestyle and type of social and environmental relations we have decided to have. We want to create new housing that offers a different kind of care and improves the relationship between the residents and their immediate and not-so-immediate environment. We are not going to be an alternative care home. We want to create collaborative, self-promoted housing, with spaces where activities relating to caring for people can be shared and reciprocal, mutual support initiatives can be carried out. In a project of this kind, we will define the hard infrastructure as the building and its spaces (private, shared, interior, exterior) and the spatial relationship between these spaces; and the soft infrastructure as the social systems, meanings, practices and relationships connected to these spaces. When defining the hard infrastructure, it is essential that we consider the soft infrastructure, as the latter must facilitate the former.

As for surroundings, the building must be in a flat neighbourhood with plenty of services, shops and public transport. Externally, the shape and design must blend in with the surroundings. We envisage a building with a useful surface area of around 2,000 m², which would provide space for between 30 and 40 residents. We want flexible, versatile spaces to create shared housing that can be used for socialising. The building must function as a whole, fully functioning space: when you step in the main entrance, you will find a spacious foyer area, which will act as the start of the route through the different spaces and as a pleasant entrance area to the home. The ground floor might be the most suitable place for the general kitchen, connected to the community dining room (for lunches). There should be a small, quiet, multi-purpose room with space for reading; a multimedia space in a quiet, well-lit area; a living room connected to the dining room, to provide extra space if necessary; and a multi-purpose leisure room for workshops, other activities or general or group meetings. To join this level to the upper floors, an architectural solution must be found that guarantees easy accessibility for all, whatever the level of mobility.

On the upper floors, there will be private spaces or coliving units, which will measure approximately 40 and 60 m² and will be equipped with a kitchen, an adapted bathroom accessible for wheelchairs, and an open-plan space for the sleeping, living and working area, organised and furnished according to each user's needs. There will also be other communal spaces, such as the laundry room and sewing space, the general maintenance workshop (which can also be used for

users' occasional DIY tasks), storage areas (general and individual, on different floors to be close by for different uses), guest rooms, a first aid area, etc. We must also think carefully about the transition spaces between the private and the communal, so that social contact in these areas can be adjusted in terms of interaction and intensity. They will work like internal streets within the building, where users can meet others, if they so wish, and interact, and will create different spaces where each person can find their personal way of communicating and their own space for interaction according to their personality.

The building must have some basic general characteristics. First, it must be sustainable in terms of energy, with materials that insulate rather than heating or cooling, open spaces and flexible distribution (moveable walls/wardrobes), and industrial-style modules to reduce time, energy and waste during construction. The structure in contact with the ground must be concrete, then there will be a cross-laminated timber structure for the housing and community spaces and a metal structure for the light elements of horizontal and vertical circulation spaces. In terms of water supply, we plan to use recycled greywater. There will also be a focus on reducing and recycling waste. At the same time, we want to ensure this is a healthy place to live, so a geobiological study will need to be carried out to avoid illness. We need to use biocompatible, natural, non-toxic materials; achieve hygrothermal comfort through breathable, insulating materials; and opt for a star electrical installation, which will prevent electromagnetic alterations. Finally, it must be an accessible building, with easy access to upper floors, hydraulic lift(s), baths, the floor; bathroom fixtures, plug sockets, blinds, windows and wardrobes at accessible heights, as well as adapted door and corridor widths. Everything must be adapted.

As regards services, facilities and maintenance: we will need to find out how to efficiently create elements like a garden, a solarium, a gym, therapeutic baths, etc.

Another factor to consider will be the technology to be included: lifts, phones, internet, Wi-Fi, cable television, fire system, regulation compliance, compartmentalisation (automatic doors), etc. Preventive maintenance of the building is wise, and it may be necessary to hire an external social organisation for this purpose. This maintenance consists of planned action to be carried out to infrastructures to minimise the impact of breakdowns and guarantee maximum availability. Generally, services will be provided by cooperatives or business linked to the social economy.

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