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# *Organized Cohabitation and Domestic Hyper-proximity in Social Policies*

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## **Abstract**

This article focuses on a specific ingredient of social and care policies with a housing dimension, namely, organized cohabitation among unrelated users. The topic is little explored, both by the social sciences, by those involved in the analysis of public policies, and by those disciplines that look more closely at the dimensions of space. Hyper-proximity in domestic spaces is an issue that concerns many social groups and social needs. In fact, there are several social services and projects that target coexistence “under the same roof and behind the same door” (Costa, 2015a; 2020) as a fundamental pillar of their action. Sharing domestic spaces in welfare interventions allows to reduce costs, to better organize professional work and to implement individualized programs that possibly make day by day *sharing* - of experiences, of ways of doing and being, of facing problems - a strength.

I propose some key dimensions for analyzing this specific form of life which concerns people who, for different reasons, find themselves facing complex and intersectional problems. The article presents some findings of a research devoted to study different cohabitation projects and services around Italy, developed through 42 interviews to key informants, such as policy makers, services managers, services coordinators, professionals, to understand if and how these cohabitation solutions succeed in coping with the intersectional problems of the users.

Keywords: organized cohabitation, intersectionality, social policies.

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## 1. Introduction

In this article I will explore some aspects of organized cohabitation among strangers - namely, individuals who are not connected among themselves by family bonds- which is more and more used as an ingredient of social and care policies. Indeed, there are several services and programs that make cohabitation “under the same roof and behind the same door” (Costa, 2015a; 2020) a key constituent of their activity, both in public policies and in private initiatives run by non-profit entities such as associations, cooperatives, and foundations. As a matter of fact, most of the welfare services involving residential help require people to live together in shared apartments or other residential facilities, frequently with the support of social workers or group managers. This kind of cohabitation is also more and more used in projects that bring together unproblematic groups that share domestic spaces under the supervision of organizations whose mission is, for example, to provide affordable housing and social support or at least some level of sociability.

Although at some point of life, living together with other people who are not family members is an increasingly frequent experience (Clark et al., 2018; Heath, Davies, Gemma, 2019), I wish to point out that here I am referring to projects or services in which cohabitation is arranged by organizations and is not a spontaneous choice. The focus is therefore not on all kinds of cohabitation - for example those that are formed on the market, among friends, fellow students, or workmates- but only on cohabitation as a social work design. The purpose is to understand what kind of ingredient cohabitation can be and to which kind of objective it serves, precisely because it is used massively in social policies, and it begins to produce innovative projects that attempt to satisfy complex needs.

Cohabitation is analyzed here as housing for people in “normal” apartments, not in institutional settings such as big residential structures. In these dwellings for daily life, users or guests have a room for themselves or even just a bed, and all the other spaces of domesticity are shared. Domestic hyper-proximity, at least theoretically, is supposed to support relationships even if it is not free from conflicting aspects. Living in an ordinary context can more easily (compared to institutional settings) promote the process of “homemaking” and “homing”, the transformation, at least to some extent, of a house into a home in the perception and in the behaviors of the dwellers (Boccagni, Miranda Nieto 2022). In this sense, “home has to do with a significant relational engagement, or with people’s need and desire to attach a sense of security, familiarity and control to some portion of their life circumstances” (Boccagni, Kusenbach 2020: 597).

Cohabitation occurs in different housing settings and involves people with very different socioeconomic profiles. Here I will focus on cohabitations that involve people with social problems that live in “third-party organized” houses, normally managed (with different tenures) by the organizations that run specific projects. However, there are other, interesting, forms of cohabitation based on mutual aid and solidarity. The most important one is home-sharing, third-party arranged schemes (Bodkin, Saxena, 2017), that organize an exchange of services, where “a host offers accommodation to a guest in exchange for an agreed-upon level of aid” (Kreickemeier, Martinez, 2001: 69). Homesharing is a simple idea where two or more people share a home to their mutual benefit” ... “A person offers a private bedroom and shared common areas in exchange for rent, help around the house, or a combination of the two. Every homesharing arrangement is unique; it depends on the needs, time, interests, and abilities of the people involved” (National Shared Housing Resource Center, 2018: 1). Homeshare programs match people based on their needs and characteristics, both as home holders and home sharers, outside a rationale of mere profit or functional maximization (Costa, 2020). These schemes are spreading around the world mainly (but not exclusively) involving elderly and young people, valorizing intergenerational bonds (Ibidem).

In the next section, I will describe how cohabitation is used in existing policies. Section 3 describes how organized cohabitation (as defined here) has been very little - discussed in the literature, with a focus on the Italian scene. Section 4 illustrates my fieldwork. Section 5 specifically deals with cohabitation among disadvantaged people in an intersectional perspective. The last section highlights the communalities and the convergences in the functioning of the studied cases and presents some conclusions.

## **2. Cohabitation in existing policies**

Domestic hyper-proximity is used by many social services. The Italian welfare infrastructure is innervated with “houses/apartments” where different kinds of users live together mostly temporarily, often with the aid of social workers. Some residents are very vulnerable due to disruptive events and to circumstances such as illness, disability, psychiatric disorders, strong and persistent economic deprivation, extreme rarefaction of informal networks, physical and psychological violence, incarceration, family breakups, addictions, unsuccessful migration paths and many other situations. Most of these “houses” are part of the codified network of services so that they are - at least to some extent-financed by public funds even if in many cases they cannot rely on continuative financing. They are usually organized and managed by Third

Sector operators that are financed project by project. on behalf of the government but in many cases. Housing projects with high social content (Tosi, 2017) involving the cohabitation of beneficiaries/users/inhabitants and their targets are increasing: mothers and children in social and housing distress, separated parents, disabled adults, elderly people, people in housing emergency, ex-prisoners, young care leavers, homeless people, refugees and asylum seekers, women victims of violence, people with psychiatric disorders or drug addictions, and many other problematic social groups.

Housing-led programs of cohabitation allow people to find a shelter, where they can live and reorganize their lives, find refuge and protection, relaunch projects for the future, conquer or regain at least the basic dimensions of autonomy. These projects are quite varied and diverse, they are often unique in their kind and are neither mapped nor known outside their welfare ecosystem. That is the rationale of my interest in this specific topic: organized cohabitation can mean very different things, depending on its' context. For this reason, it is important to trace models that are quite traditional in their premises, but also many others that are highly innovative in their approach and fundamentals, using intergenerationality or interculturality as an asset to support or care for people.

There are at least two main reasons why cohabitation is frequently used in housing-oriented social policies: one is based on economic aspects and the other regards the type of interventions with the people involved. Certainly, grouping people who share the same problems or who express needs that are congruent with each other and offering them housing opportunities contributes to rationalize resources, spaces, professional work, and social support interventions. Cohabitation is, indeed an economically viable form of offering housing services that would otherwise be impossible to sustain, especially in a context - the Italian case is a good example of this - of critically underfunded housing policies -particularly for the most deprived (Tosi, 2017) - characterized by unaffordable local real estate markets (Baldini, 2010; Tosi, 2017). Living with others sometimes is the only available alternative for people to access a housing solution. A good example can be some housing first projects that in Italy are in 42% of the cases organized in cohabitation, in contrast to the original model developed by Tsemberis in the United States (Padgett et al., 2016) that provides for every individual to have a house to live in alone.

The second reason is that domestic hyper-proximity and sharing can represent a specific way of interpreting the underlying logic of the educational, therapeutic, or social projects on which they are based: living together can become an advancement opportunity when it allows sharing strengths and resources. Peer to peer logics as well as mutual-aid or solidarity mechanisms can be enacted in this housing setting, but it is not an automatic outcome.

The practice of cohabitation is never trivial. Both for those who live through it personally as for those who implement, organize, and manage cohabitation, this is an experience that hinges on forms of multiple levels of “social mediation in action” (Volturo, 2020). Cohabitation involves producing new resources by incorporating forms of “betting” on how to combine autonomy, independence, quality of life, quality of relationships, innovation and covering needs that are often, by their nature, intersectional. Furthermore, sharing daily life living spaces is not easy (Heath et al., 2019). It requires acting and continually re-actualizing capacities for openness, tolerance, and adaptation. Not everyone is able to handle and respect the minimum rules of coexistence in domestic spaces, and not all forms of coexistence are simple to handle.

Since cohabitation represents an important dimension of social policies and of housing policies with a high social content (Tosi, 2017) as well as of new housing projects, I believe that this issue should be analyzed from a conceptual point of view, focusing on its different problematic aspects. Despite of its being an extensive practice, there is yet a lack of a systematic reflection on the meaning of cohabitation and its significance in social work and social policies. My research aims not only at filling this gap, but also at opening a field of research, raising a discussion about cohabitation in the myriad of social projects in Italy (and abroad, in the future), and possibly contribute to enhancing policy making.

### **3. Exploring cohabitation in the literature**

When looking for “cohabitation” in the main databases, most of the literature concerns kinship-bound adults living in the same housing unit and the phenomena relating to this housing arrangement. Cohabiting with family members is a condition that repeats throughout our lives: with our parents when we are children, as a couple or when we become parents. Many studies have focused on how family “re-cohabitation” can become a resource in difficult times and part of family strategies, especially in contexts -like the Italian one- of “familism by default” (Saraceno, Keck, 2010) in which individual well-being is more dependent on the ability of families to socialize risks than on the welfare system. This is the case, for example, of adults who return to live with their parents following the loss of a job or the break-up of marriage or couple ties, the so-called “boomerang kinds” (Mitchell, 2017). Another example is the case of elderly people who go to live with a child because he or she is now frail and no longer self-sufficient (Costa, Bianchi, 2020).

Cohabitation is also present in literature discussing how it can be an asset for people who are not connected by family ties to live together (Heath et al.,

2019)<sup>1</sup>: out of necessity, when one must share housing costs, when sharing is the *conditio sine qua non* for having a shelter; by choice, when, for example, one decides to welcome someone into one's own home for the pleasure of having company, or one decides to live together with another person in the conviction that doing so can lead to a better daily life (like in homesharing schemes, Costa, 2015c, 2020); that is, for a mixture of motivations, partly out of necessity and partly out of choice. As a matter of fact, cohabitation is extensively used in social policies both in situations where users can choose this solution and in those in which agency is quite limited. The sharing of living spaces therefore acts as a pivot for a plurality of situations in daily life and a plurality of groups, including both temporary solutions, destined to last a relatively short time, and long-term solutions; it also includes people who are in some way vulnerable and have limited possibilities of choice, but also individuals and families who decide to share. It is also at the center of therapeutic interventions of support to certain categories of people and needs, or it is the result of socio-housing projects in which individuals express a very specific sense of home.

To date, organized cohabitation between unrelated adults in welfare policies and, more generally, in social planning suffers from an evident terminological confusion (Costa, Bianchi, 2020). In fact, thanks to the use of terms borrowed from English and a widespread rhetoric on “shared living” and its different declinations, the terms “housing sharing”, “communal housing”, “cohousing”, “co-residence”, “cohabitation” and even “co-living” are often used indiscriminately as if they were perfectly interchangeable, both in academic texts and in popular ones (Costa, Bianchi, 2020). Cohabitation refers to the condition in which one shares domestic spaces and lives not only at the same address of another person but also “behind the same door” (Costa, 2015a) in a single housing unit. The other terms concern housing formulas in which individuals or families live at the same address (using the same image as before) but maintain private domestic spaces (their own housing unit) and have common services.

Even if the domestic hyper-proximity caused by cohabitation concerns a plethora of social groups, needs and policy fields (Costa, Bianchi, 2020), it was and it continues to be very little explored by the social sciences, by policy analysts, and by those disciplines that look more closely at the dimensions of space. Looking at the Italian case, it is important to highlight that there is not much literature about organized cohabitation<sup>2</sup>. Since the late 1970s', following

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<sup>1</sup> Little has yet been studied also about spontaneous forms of cohabitation among peers, friends, and acquaintances, even though these are increasingly common experiences (Schwanitz, Mulder, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> But the same holds for the European context.



the general and lengthy process of deinstitutionalization that determined the closure or downsizing of large residential facilities (asylums, residences for the elderly and disabled adults) in favor of community welfare solutions that were gradually built around fragile subjects, that were smaller and more “normalizing”, scholars have studied the evolution of policies in this direction. In Italy, it was Franco Basaglia who was the first to theorize (and implement) the importance of offering people with mental disorders the possibility to live together in small housing facilities, in small nucleus (Babini, 2011). His teachings gave rise to pioneering initiatives of cohabitation and were followed by a wide reflection (including academic) on the effect that these arrangements could have on people's lives. Since then, research has weakly accompanied the birth and development of services based on cohabitation that have gradually developed, without investigating the specificity of what means and implies to live together with people who share the same problems, or even living with mixed problems, sharing domestic spaces. It is only in recent years that attention to this issue has been given by sociologists and social studies scholars. Few research papers have been published in Italy concerning domestic cohabitation projects: related to women with disabilities (Persico, Ottaviano, 2018), to elderly people with dementia (Fiorani, 2018), to vulnerable LGBT+ youth (Costa, Magino, 2021)<sup>3</sup>, to people with intellectual impairments (Bocci, Guerini 2017; Guerini, 2020, 2021), to unaccompanied foreign minors and young Italian students and workers (Bosis, 2020), to refugees and young Italians (Guerrini, 2020)<sup>4</sup>, to people with psychiatric disorders (Casodi et al. 2021; Chiola, 2019, Mezzina, Ridente 2015; Starace et al. 2015), to people and families in housing emergency (Boni, Nava, 2018), to alcoholics (Ciarfeo Purich et al., 2017), to ex-prisoners (Arzuffi, 2020) . Other scholars have investigated the specifics of family-based projects for refugees and asylum seekers (for a review of these see Bassoli, Luccioni, 2020; Marchetti, 2018). Very heterogeneous contributions have appeared (including non-academic reports, such as Michelucci Foundation, 2018) on experiences involving elderly people and students (traced in Costa, 2020), peer groups, students, and young workers (Costa, 2015b; Ponzo, 2015). On the Internet, there is a myriad of newspaper articles on cohabitation experiences that describe the genesis and main characteristics of these projects, the actors involved, often including some storytelling about

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<sup>3</sup> In recent research (Costa, Magino, 2021), I realized that there is very little literature about LGBT+ homeless cohabitations even if there are very interesting projects around Europe, the United States and Canada.

<sup>4</sup> In Europe the only discussion found about these kinds of cohabitations that I could find is from Mahieu and Van Caudenberg (2020) who present a case of intercultural communal living between young Belgians and young unaccompanied refugees.

them<sup>5</sup>. In general, however, there is little reflection on the sense and meaning of living together, beyond brief comments on the dimension of solidarity and social inclusion of cohabitation. What is missing in the scholarly landscape, however, is a more organic reflection on the role and use of cohabitation and domestic hyper-proximity in housing responses to complex and intersectional conditions and needs of vulnerable people.

#### **4. Fieldwork, methods, and research questions**

Here I present some findings from my fieldwork (still in progress), carried out between April 2020 and February 2022, in which 42 key informants were interviewed, including coordinators or project managers of organized cohabitation projects, social policy scholars and policy makers. Almost all the interviews were conducted on platforms such as Zoom, Teams, Webex, or Skype. Interviews were transcribed in full since they were also audio and video recorded and then coded using Atlas.Ti.

The interview campaign gave birth to 32 case studies<sup>6</sup> and was preceded by an extensive -but not systematic- search for projects based on the cohabitation of beneficiaries and users through keywords navigation and a process of snowballing from site to site and from key informant to key informant. This search identified over 80 projects in different policy areas, with different targets (Figure 1), and in several parts of the country. Whenever possible, the following data were collected for the 80 cases: name of the projects or “houses,” managing entity, goals, target, social project, characteristics of the accommodation(s) in which cohabitation takes place (number and location of apartments, number of beds, shared services/spaces), admission criteria, cost and form of co-payment, length of stay. In addition, the search reviewed cohabitation projects financed by the major banking foundations in the Country, entities that in recent years

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Nicoli L. (2017, October 19), *Chiavi di casa ai pazienti psichiatrici*, Il Giornale di Vicenza, <https://www.ilgiornaledivicenza.it/territori/arzignano/chiavi-di-casa-ai-pazienti-psichiatrici-1.6037547> or Valeri.V (2022, February 22) *Casa Nunzio, il cohousing innovativo che accoglie il disagio psichico e "insegna" l'autonomia*, Roma Today, <https://www.romatoday.it/attualita/casa-nunzio-cohousing-per-disagio-psichico.html>; De Carli, S. (2017, January 20), *“Amici per casa”, un progetto modello*, Superando.it, <https://www.superando.it/2017/01/20/amici-per-casa-un-progetto-modello/>.

<sup>6</sup> I interviewed one key informant per each of the 32 cases. The other interviewees are scholars and policy makers.

have supported the birth and development of experimental programs around the country (Ricciuti, Turrini, 2018), including housing programs<sup>7</sup>.

The richness and variety of experiences that emerged only strengthened my initial thesis, namely that the use of cohabitation in local welfare policies is not only already widespread and is spreading rapidly, but that it is a potentially multidisciplinary, multiscaling and useful field of research for possible policy implications. It is, however, a very complex field of inquiry for at least two kinds of reasons. First, because it requires the researcher to “enter” into diverse social worlds, and policy technicalities (the field, norms, regulation, etc.) to understand the objects of the research, the use of cohabitation as an organizing principle of social and housing design. In this sense, it is the research approach itself to be intersectional since, “intersectionality is concerned with understanding the effects between and across various levels in society, including macro (global and national-level institutions and policies), meso or intermediate (provincial and regional-level institutions and policies) and micro levels (community-level, grassroots institutions, and policies as well as the individual or ‘self’)” (Hankivsky et al., 2012b).

The second reason is methodological and concerns the fact that while some experiences of cohabitation are codified and institutionalized services, many others are the result of small experiments in which very different actors try to give contextual answers to very different needs and whose work is neither valued nor easily traceable. It is not possible, for example, to delineate a geography of cohabitation from directories, lists or registers established by public or private organizations. It is rather a matter of *composing a puzzle with many pieces without having a final reference figure*.

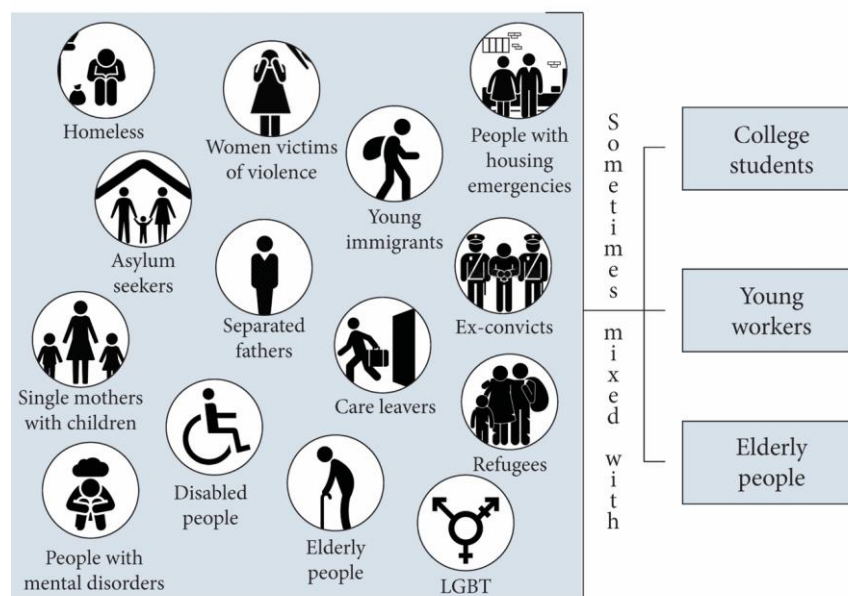
The research carried out by means of the interviews aimed at investigating the genesis of the projects and their evolution over time, the actors involved, their target, their functioning (how people to be included are recruited, how they are matched, what characteristics and requirements they must have, the rules and devices used to regulate cohabitation), their material dimension (what kind of housing they are housed in, the spaces made available), the educational, therapeutical or social project on which they are based, the involvement of qualified staff and volunteers, their place in the local welfare system, and the services that are made available to cohabitants. Some of the interlocutors were very helpful in orienting and partly redirecting my initial research questions, for which I am grateful to them.

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<sup>7</sup> Some of these projects will be studied in the following of my research even if meanwhile I identified others interesting experiences that which is worth studying in light of my research interests.

The choice of cases to be investigated through the interviews has been guided so far by my need to explore whether, how and to what extent cohabitation is used as an organizational form of social and housing intervention for social inclusion in different policy fields, without any claim to map all the projects and experiences of a certain area or part of the country and without any claim to exhaustiveness. As a matter of fact, case studies are spread all over Italy. However, many policy fields remain unexplored, and probably a big bulk of cases are to be investigated considering my research questions, some of which have already been outlined.

FIGURE 1. Target groups of cohabitation projects included in the fieldwork.



In this article, I will discuss selected aspects that relate to the micro dimensions of cohabitations. I focus my initial reflections with respect to the following questions: if and under what conditions cohabitation and the hyper-proximity given by the sharing of domestic spaces constitutes a specific *atout* to respond to intersectional needs, inequalities, and discrimination? Although I know I cannot make any counterfactual reasoning - since I have not studied other alternative ways of organizing housing responses and services for different targets nor the impact on cohabitants lives - I try to lay the foundations

for a greater critical understanding of the use of cohabitation in social policies that also have a housing component.

Although such an element is not present in my work, I am aware that to fully understand the nexus between cohabitation (in the sense delimited here) and the intersectional approach, it would be necessary to also listen to the voices of dwellers - especially the most vulnerable ones - to capture how the power relations (within a Foucauldian perspective), central to the intersectionality paradigm (Hankivsky et al., 2012b; Zufferey, 2017), play out.

### **5. Cohabitation among disadvantaged people, an intersectional perspective**

What are the aspects that make cohabitation, as it is defined here, an interesting topic to investigate, with its problems and answers, from an intersectionality perspective? They refer, on the one hand, to the cohabitants, and, on the other hand, to the social intervention approach. First, it is the users of these housing services with high social content (Tosi, 2017) who often present disadvantages that combine to create forms of marginality and exclusion that are difficult to treat. Mostly, these are people who do not have the possibility to access to housing by their own means (neither in the private nor in the public market), who are in a very weak socioeconomic situation and who have very weak informal networks. Most of them have a difficult life history, marked by processes of victimization, economic and cultural poverty, trauma, and discrimination. To these are added, from time to time, unresolved health problems (drug addiction, gambling, alcoholism), forms of disability, and loss of autonomy. The experience of migration can also constitute forms of further disadvantage. For reasons of space, it is not possible here to describe all the possible combinations of inequalities that characterize the conditions and identities of people (Anthias, 2013) intercepted in my research, which suggests an intersectional approach. This diversity becomes evident when the provision of housing opportunities allows to recognize and address “multiple intersecting inequalities” (Anthias, 2013: 4) and it is not always possible to treat and deal with them and in their complexity. This difficulty, however, is characteristic of social intervention in general, especially as it deals with subjects who have behind them “moral careers” (Goffman, 1961) punctuated by painful, depersonalizing, and depriving events and processes. The research question here is to understand if projects and policies based on cohabitation treat social locations as “inseparable and shaped by interacting and mutually constituting social processes and structures, which, in turn, are shaped by power and

influenced by both time and place” (Hankivsky et al., 2012a) and are committed to building greater social justice and equity.

What are the most interesting dimensions of analysis in this perspective? I propose as-clear-as possible ideal-typical dichotomies, adding questions that “open up” the inherent issues conveyed in them:

- a) Chosen cohabitation versus cohabitation as a “last chance”: to what extent can people choose to go to live with others, with strangers, rather than receive other kinds of supports and have a place to live? Also, can they express preferences about where and with whom they live? Do projects provide that the future cohabitants may have a say about matching choices? Many projects try to enhance individual agency and empowerments of dwellers providing for moments of meeting between those who already live in a house and those who could potentially live there, or stipulating trial periods of cohabitation before inserting a new cohabitant. This is the case of most of the projects that I have studied, but there are also some in which this type of attention is not possible (as for example in cohabitation of women who are victims of violence, where it is most important to find a quick solution to their extremely risky condition).
- b) Temporary cohabitation versus cohabitation without time constraints: A “positive” sense of home is usually related to time, that is, to the duration of one’s voluntary residing in a particular place (Vanzella-Young, 2019; Werner et al., 1985). So, is the cohabitation project “time-based”? Are there time limits within which people must leave the house they live in? Are there exceptions to the time limits given by the project, and under what conditions? Are other housing solutions and support provided when people are not eligible anymore to live under the project? Are they helped to find another dwelling? In my research it came out that lots of projects are not able to fully function because users are not in the condition to leave, which somehow invalidates the turnover principle of the project. This is a very problematic issue for most cohabitation projects which, in their design, assume that autonomy in life coincides with autonomy of housing. Other cohabitation projects incorporate since their beginning actions to support cohabitants moving out successfully<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> This is a very delicate aspect in designing temporary accommodation. The richer is the local ecosystem, the more it is easy to create a housing continuum of opportunities for people. Where there are not alternatives to staying into a cohabitation project, the more is difficult to people to respect the project design in terms of temporality.

- c) Cohabitation that fosters homing processes versus cohabitation whose spaces are specially designed to ensure that people do not develop any sense of attachment to the house in which they live: This dichotomy contains many and different subtopics. First, how comfortable is the sharing of spaces within the common home? Does one have “a room of one’s own” (to quote Virginia Woolf)? Or does one have to share a room with others? Is there enough privacy? The second aspect concerns the personalization of space. To what extent can dwellers transform the space by moving furniture, hanging photographs or paintings on the walls, adding furnishings to the existing ones, using their own objects for daily life, and so on? Finally, what is the role of beauty (Sabatinelli, 2017) in the home the cohabitants live in? In some projects, the beauty of the spaces is a fundamental aspect of living together. In others, spaces are deliberately ugly precisely to discourage - if not prevent- that people become attached to the place. This is one of the aspects that can turn people to refuse to grow a sense of home for a dwelling place (Boccagni, Miranda Nieto, 2022). All these aspects are crucial to capture some of the prerequisites for homing that “besides acknowledging people’s need and struggle for a special place to call ‘home’”, it “illuminates the influence of home-related values, aspirations, and ideals on the experience of a particular place; in short, the interplay between experienced and aspired (or good-enough) home, and the tension to bridge the distance in-between. Homing encompasses the social manifestations of the need and desire to tend towards a meaningful horizon of being at home (in terms of security and comfort, but also of recognition and self-achievement), through the experience of place” (Boccagni, 2022: 587).
- d) Homogeneous cohabitation versus heterogeneous cohabitation: do the cohabitants have the same problems, or do they cohabit with people who have different problems, or even none (except, for example, that of access to low-cost housing, as happens in cohabitation between age peers, unproblematic care leavers and students in their first years of university)? In my research I found that most housing services provided through cohabitation of users target homogenous groups but, as mentioned before, there are many projects that propose bringing people with different problems or conditions to live together (see the examples described by Boda et al., 2021; Bosis, 2020; Giuffrè, Marchetti 2020), for example, using peer education or mutual-aid dynamics.

Each of these dimensions has intermediate conditions on the different axes. For example, there are cohabitations in which people are completely free to experience it or not but cannot choose their housemates, for very different

reasons, such as, because the places are few and are already occupied by others, or because the allocation of a “house” rather than another follows the project’s own logic.

## **6. Communalities, convergences, and conclusions**

I will now try to illustrate the common elements that have emerged from the large number of cohabitation cases I have studied. Then I will propose some conclusions. These are preliminary findings, but they allow to understand and bring to light the role that cohabitation plays as a specific ingredient of housing interventions with a high social content when these arrangements succeed in adopting an inclusive and intersectional approach. As a matter of fact, not all cohabitations are able to enhance the quality of life of the dwellers. If it is not well designed and managed, cohabitation can be hell. In fact, I do not have romantic views of cohabitation.

First, the more cohabitation offers elements of choice and agency to the cohabitants, the more it has a positive role in the recovery of the cohabitants, the more it succeeds in becoming an opportunity to improve other spheres of their existence and, above all, the more these cohabitants can be empowered, strengthening their capacities and competencies<sup>9</sup>. The manager of a Housing First project in Bologna explained this very well:

Living together with others who have had the opportunity to choose and not to be constrained allows one to finally feel at home, to share even difficult experiences in a friendly and sometimes supportive atmosphere, to feel entitled to rights and no longer just a person assisted by the State (Housing First project manager, Bologna)

He also explains how sharing living spaces, starting from self-determination, can be a spur to take care of oneself and of one's living space:

If you have a house by yourself, you can let yourself go, you can stay alone in your pajamas, you can wash dishes or not, no one can see you. If you're with others, you know you must do your part and then maybe it becomes nice to clean the bathroom or go shopping when it's your turn (Housing First project manager, Bologna).

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<sup>9</sup> Especially those that are characterized by forms of capabilities deprivation” (Batterham, 2019) or of “capabilities failures” (Shinn, 2015).



From what has emerged from the research, it is from cohabitations of this type that people decide to move in together even when they leave the project because they already know each other, they have made friends, and so they can share living expenses even while waiting to wish or to be able to make other choices (for example seeking for an independent housing solution). On the other hand, having to share domestic space because there are no alternatives and not being able to choose the people with whom to do so, often makes people feel uncomfortable and this living solution, rather than an opportunity, becomes a threat to their potential life projects and induces them to construct their domestic spaces as “unhomely” (Boccagni, Miranda Nieto, 2022). Conflict in the use of space is greater and the propensity to care for it is less. As the coordinator of a flat where vulnerable single mothers with children are placed with procedures dictated by the Minority Court explained to me:

The women who come to us do not know Italian well, they do not know the environment in which they live, nor are they able to fulfil their parental role. They are often bewildered and are not able, at least at the beginning, to take care of the spaces, they do not understand (no matter how much we explain it to them) that they must be able to share spaces, objects, equipment (Coordinator of a shared apartment for vulnerable single mothers with children, Milan).

It goes without saying that there are services organized in cohabitation that represent a lifeline for those who use them even if there is any choice dimension, such as, for example, those for women victims of violence who need a shelter and all the associated care and support.

A second important aspect is that cohabitation, used as an ingredient, always requires highly personalized interventions because it consists of integrating people whose uniqueness is both an opportunity and a possible threat, and, because grouping logics (Brubaker, 2004) normally do not work. This recognition is at the very basis of the intersectional paradigm (Hankivsky et al., 2012b)<sup>10</sup>. From many points of view, organizing social interventions through cohabitation requires even more personalized social work than other

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<sup>10</sup> As explained by Hankivsky et al. (2012b), “From an intersectionality perspective, human lives cannot be reduced to singular and distinct categories, and policy analysis cannot assume the primary importance of any one social category for understanding people’s needs and experiences. Nor does intersectionality promote an additive approach” ... “Instead, intersectionality conceptualizes social categories as interacting with and co-constituting one another to create unique social locations that vary according to time and place. It is these intersections and their effects that are of concern in an intersectionality analysis” (35).

settings because of the additional aspect of “hyper-proximity”, as, on the one hand, it can represent a resource for the person, but, on the other hand, the person is exposed to adjustments that often should be accompanied very closely over time. The meticulous customization of services has consequences for the professional work that accompanies cohabitation. It is not only a matter of matching cohabitants sensitively and potentially harboring solidaristic or even just 'nurturing' relationships, but cohabitation often requires close accompaniment, balancing the level of intervention well in order not to inhibit positive processes that arise between the cohabitants themselves. In any case, what emerges from my research is that cohabitation is an energy-intensive activity. Making cohabitations is often much more difficult than referring people to more traditional services. As this manager of a very large cohabitation project that started on an experimental basis states:

In the beginning it is very tiring. You must convince local public actors, social workers, housing owners. I would say that the important thing is to keep on believing in it (cohabitations manager, Florence).

The third crucial aspect that makes living in cohabitation meaningful is that, with its various models and dimensions, this arrangement can build conditions of empowerment and autonomy (even partial) for the cohabitants. Most of the cohabitation projects studied aimed at vulnerable people do not end with the provision of a house or an apartment, but instead function as a catalyst for services and supports, albeit with significant differences in Italy, where the welfare system, especially at local levels, is highly fragmented<sup>11</sup>. Cohabitation projects, therefore, often succeed in constructing multiple responses to people, including health services, training, job placement, recovery of social skills and abilities, construction of necessary and sufficient conditions to access to a decent home, reconnection, or reconstruction of an informal network. But there also cases when the system fails to support people in these issues, and this is a problem that cannot be neglected.

The fourth aspect to consider is that cohabitation projects are not monads either in terms of spatial location or their relationship with the context in which

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<sup>11</sup> In the North of Italy, this type of projects - even experimental ones - have “landed” in fertile ground more often than in the South. This could be because in the North these projects find a system of services that valorizes, welcomes, and supports them, or because they can count on a substratum of social entrepreneurship that grasps the challenges and manages to aggregate crucial economic and human resources (such as volunteers). Although I have studied very few projects in the South of Italy, it seems that the shortcomings of the ecosystem in which they are immersed, at least in part, often weakens the efforts.

they are placed. The decision to locate vulnerable people in the context of civil habitation is intended to “normalize their life”, but sometimes they may face distrust from residents, especially if cohabitants are perceived as highly problematic targets (as for example adults with psychiatric disorders or with addictions). For this reason, except in the case of cohabitation with a secret address for women victims of violence, most managers of cohabitation units carry out a patient work of weaving relationships between cohabitants and neighbors. They do this by informing condominiums and residents about the social project in condominium meetings even before the project is set up, and organize community events (parties, dinners, or convivial lunches) where people can meet. They also offer careful mediation in case of problems or conflicts. Many cohabitation projects have also a “generative” aspect, in the sense that their beneficiaries themselves become active agents of well-being for the community through their willingness to volunteer, thus offering others what Rossi (2012) has called “social payment”. A good example of how this idea can be implemented is the case of ToHousing, a cohabitation project devoted to young LGBT+ in Turin. The ToHousing flats are in a public housing complex; people of different social and ethnic backgrounds share the large communal courtyards: there are people of about 30 different nationalities, including political refugees, families in the care of social services, elderly former industrial workers, second and third generation children and adolescents and students. The residential complex is home to about 750 people, a microcosm characterized by strong social and cultural contrasts, to which the Quore Association (the manager of the project) has devoted its attention from the very beginning precisely to ensure a peaceful coexistence among the inhabitants of the apartment blocks. Initially conceived to harmonize the presence of the new LGBT+ tenants, the social animation program has organized initiatives to promote the culture of welcoming, fight homotransphobia and racism, producing, also through simple aggregation initiatives, an improvement in the community’s living conditions. During the first year, the initiatives involved both the younger age group of children, through play activities, and the younger age group through drama and body expression workshops. Other meetings and aggregation activities were directed to all the families in the building complex: exhibitions, convivial moments such as ‘The Neighborhood Dinner’, small entertainments and informal gatherings. Some project guests made themselves available to support some of the elderly in the block of flats, carrying groceries or mail or helping with small errands. Younger guests assisted ToHousing social workers and volunteers in running activities for the youngest children and distributing foodstuffs to families in need (Costa, Magino 2021).

The fifth crucial aspect to consider is that cohabitation projects in civilian housing require that applicants have “skills” for living together with others.

These are a set of interpersonal skills, character traits, and behavior profiles that increase the likelihood that strangers will live together without too much conflict that would invalidate the possibility of continued cohabitation. Not everyone is able to handle and respect the minimum rules of coexistence in domestic spaces and not all forms of coexistence are easy to handle. Here the selectivity of social policies is evident (Tosi, 2017). The needs of privacy and appropriation of everyday spaces are sometimes severely threatened by the fact of having to live with strangers, with whom it is required to cooperate and come to terms on various aspects, to be tolerant and to negotiate micro- forms of adaptation day by day. This is one of the critical issues that arises most frequently in interviews. Getting one match wrong can imply the failure of the entire project. This necessary *ex-ante* selection very often ends up excluding the most “problematic” and deprived people, those who are more marginal, more “eccentric” (in psychological or life course terms) or whose condition of inferiority and powerlessness is more entrenched. This issue is very thorny and represents, in my opinion, one of the most obvious failures of cohabitation projects in their attempt to hold together intersectional needs and responses. *Ex-ante* selection is also applied to beneficiaries’ expectations of emancipation from the projects, perhaps even excluding those who, despite having good skills for living together, have low chances of coming out from the project. This latter form of selectivity, however, is much less present than the former, which, instead, is truly pervasive.

As a last aspect, the interviews revealed that where a dimension of mutual help can be developed between inhabitants, cohabitation not only works better (i.e., it does not give rise to harsh conflicts that could undermine the basic conditions of coexistence), but also creates better living conditions and offers new life chances for the cohabitants. Some research suggests that intercultural communal living can be conceptualized as an environment where different informal forms of social support and mutual learning emerge (Mahieu, Van Caudenberg 2020; Giuffrè, Marchetti 2020).

To conclude, it is important to remember that cohabitation is only one of the possible ways for providing housing solutions with social support contents. Cohabitation is not a good arrangement for everyone or for every situation. Cohabitants need to have at least minimal social skills to live together. Organizations and their professionals have to invest additional time and energies to support hyper-proximity forms of sharing and living, especially in the case of strongly deprived people. For this reason, it must be “handled with care”, always taking into consideration the complexities that it entangles at the personal, organizational, and environmental level.

Cohabitation is an arrangement that has not been studied and put into question but deserves to be explored precisely because it is widely used in

various policy areas. In many cases, it has allowed a substantial reduction in the costs of services, an aspect that has been highlighted by a high number of key informants. It generated well-being for the people involved, it created very rich and dense welfare ecosystems, and it has been capable of creating new resources for the community and not just for the cohabitants. Some cohabitations present significant critical issues both for those who manage them and for those who live there, but most of those I studied can respond in a personalized way to the needs of the users even if they must deal with unresolved issues, such as the attempt to always assimilate individual autonomy with housing autonomy. Finally, the possibility for those who lack the mentioned “skills” to somehow access cohabitation remains a concern<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Even if it is out of the scope of this article, I think it is important to remember that, as in other social intervention programs, cohabitations are exposed to many failure risks. Projects strongly depend on continuative financing, on the possibility to find suitable apartments where install cohabitation, on the relationship with local public and private actors, on successful referring practices by social workers and so on.

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