

Making community-based housing inclusive for diverse older adults

HOMeAGE Policy Brief Series

No. 1

This policy brief uses the example of the Brussels Capital Region to illustrate **how community-based housing can create more equal cities for diverse older people.**

It offers **guidance to social housing providers, housing developers, community organisations, and local government officials** who want to develop inclusive solutions that meet the needs of diverse older adults **in Brussels and beyond.**

Community-based housing in Brussels

For decades, public actors such as social housing companies, land management and public service organisations (OCMWs) have provided housing for people with precarious positions on the housing market. Often, such projects offer social support but lack collective spaces for residents to connect.

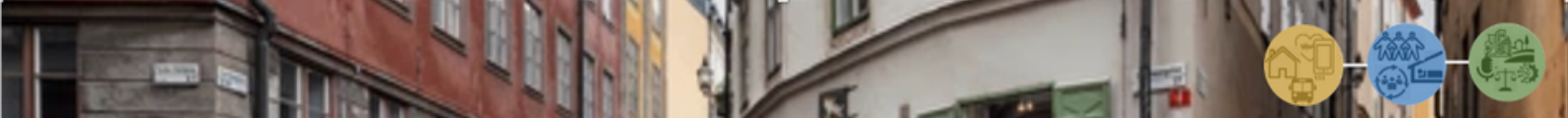
To address this gap, **community-based housing developments offer spaces for independent living but also aim to create a community among residents by providing shared rooms and resources** (e.g. car sharing, food sharing...).

Such an environment can also enable support through intergenerational and neighbourly bonds. This type of housing is particularly interesting for **older adults who live alone** and would enjoy being embedded in a community where social interaction, but also practical support is encouraged. In Brussels, community-based housing projects are being developed by private and public actors.

Key messages

1. Community-based housing is **not only for the wealthy and healthy.**
2. When developing community-based housing, developers should consider issues of fairness and justice: who is the project for? how much say do future residents have in its development and at what point are they involved? **How can their ways of life be acknowledged through housing design and community management?**
3. Community-based housing for specific groups should **include future residents in the planning process to ensure that the house will provide a place for them to feel at home.**
4. If future residents cannot be involved in the first steps of developing a community-based housing project, **representatives of a particular community can be consulted.**





Private developments

Private developers (resident groups, NPOs, foundations, and commercial actors) are driving the growth of community-based housing. A 2020 study identified 49 co-housing projects in the Brussels Capital Region, totalling 1,000 homes (Lenel et al., 2020). Thanks to these examples, more and more citizens are looking for opportunities to create co-living projects. These types of cohousing projects often operate with the legal form of **co-ownership**. However, most developments do not specifically target groups with a precarious position on the housing market, such as older adults or groups with low income.

Ageing and community-based housing

For older adults who want or have to move in later life, community-based housing can provide a great place to age. Being embedded in a community while at the same time living in an independent space can offer autonomy as well as support through informal care services. Neighbours can cook for (and with) each other, participate in social activities within the home, buy groceries or drive someone to the doctor. Additionally, when combined with more formalised care, community-based housing can offer a place to age for those needing more support in later life.

(Semi-)Public developments

In contrast, public or semi-public actors have focused on creating a **rental** offer of community-based housing (Lenel et al., 2020). This can be achieved through a social rental office (SVK/AIS) [1], cooperative or non-profit organisation. These projects often aim at specific target groups and focus on affordable housing.

A prominent example is **CLTB (Community Land Trust Brussels)** - a recognised housing operator in the Brussels region. CLTB explicitly targets lower-income citizens with financial support of the region. By separating land from property, they make housing affordable. The land is owned by CLTB, while apartments are owned by the residents and cannot be resold under private market conditions. CLTB also emphasises the importance of building a community among residents: the group is formed at an early stage often years before they can move into their homes. During this time, they participate in meetings, workshops and social activities guided by CLTB. Currently, CLTB has built 115 units, and another 77 are under construction (Community Land Trust Bruxelles, 2024).

The high demand for CLTB houses and waiting lists for social housing show that various community-based housing projects, mainly in a rental formula, are needed to meet a growing demand for affordable housing and the desire to live in a community.



Community-based housing for older adults from a justice perspective

In this policy brief, we argue that community-based housing can be a viable solution for groups who face precarious housing situations. However, **it is important to reflect on how these projects can be attractive to diverse groups and effectively meet their needs.** To guide this reflection, we draw on theories of justice (see for example Fainstein, 2010; Harvey, 1973; Knijn et al., 2020; Soja, 2013). They provide **guidelines for evaluating current policies and shaping future developments.**

Three relevant principles of justice can be distinguished:

Redistribution

Everyone should have access to appropriate housing.



Representation

Everyone should have a say when it comes to shaping living environments.



Recognition

Everyone has the right to be acknowledged for who they are and want to be.

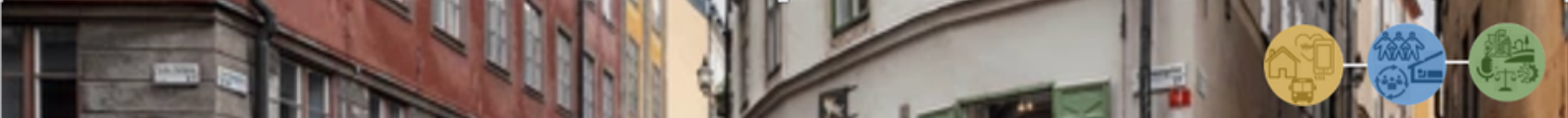


These justice principles ask social housing providers, housing developers, community organisations, and local government officials to think about:

- **Who has access to what types of housing? (redistribution)**
- **Who has a say in shaping the environments they live in? (representation)**
- **Who can be themselves in the place they are ageing in? (recognition)**

Community-based housing can be an alternative that focuses on affordability, on the participation of older adults, as well as on recognising older adults for who they want to be in a community. Initiatives offering an alternative to residential care provision have been present in the Brussels Capital Region for decades, but the quantitative supply is extremely small. Now that more and more projects are being developed, it is important to consider **why, where, and for whom they are being developed.** To make clear why it is important to reflect on issues of justice, we apply the three principles to the example of Passerstraat on the next pages.





Example: Passerstraat in the Brussels Capital Region

Passerstraat, a new community-based housing project in Anderlecht in the Brussels Capital Region, is an example of a development that pursues justice aims in its implementation. It opened its doors in 2023, providing **12 apartments (35m² to 100m²) and communal areas to older adults, single mothers, and families**. The initiative came from the local community centre Cosmos, which realised that housing for many in the area was too small and expensive.

The concept was developed by different organisations, such as Cosmos, Kenniscentrum WWZ – an organisation that is committed to better well-being, innovative housing and accessible care for all Brussels residents –, and De Overmolen vzw – an organisation that develops apartments for groups with a vulnerability (e.g. people with care needs or mental disabilities). **Residents were not involved in the project's architecture but collaborated in designing the 'How to Live Together'**. They have managed the community spaces since they moved in.

Residents were chosen based on their housing needs and their capabilities to participate in the community. The idea is that, **as older people age, the younger ones will be able to help them with small tasks**. Likewise, the older generations look after the children. All apartments are accessible or can be adapted to suit, for example, wheelchair users. The justice principles exemplify how Passerstraat aims to be an inclusive community-based housing project, as is explained on the next page.

Key facts

- **12 affordable apartments** for older adults, families, single mothers
- Community room
- Flemish-African house Kuumba in the same building
- **Owner:** De Overmolen
- **Rental management:** SVK Baita
- **Support service:** LDC Cosmos
- **Allocation of flats & advice:** Kenniscentrum WWZ



Pictures: Passerstraat in Anderlecht, Brussels Capital Region

Redistribution

Passerstraat exemplifies redistributive justice by **providing housing to people with a precarious housing situation** – mainly adults with low incomes and a migration background. This is realised through a collaboration with the social rental office Baita.



Representation



The development shows that the participation of residents in community-based housing can happen in different ways. While residents were not involved in the initial design of Passerstraat, **residents are invited to shape the communal spaces and community life**. In addition, the community organisation **Cosmos represented future residents' interests** from the start. Cosmos promotes intercultural care for older adults in Anderlecht, aiming to provide housing and care to all older adults.

Recognition

The Flemish-African house Kuumba is located in the same building as the community-based housing project. Kuumba, an organisation where volunteers of African origin play an important role, fosters exchange between African cultures and Flemish culture. All seniors in the project have a migration background, most of them from the Democratic Republic of Congo. This was a purposeful choice: the collaborating organisations recognise the **importance of housing people with similar histories**. **Being able to communicate and feeling a sense of similarity makes ageing a more comfortable experience for the residents.**



Challenges to just community-based housing

When developing community-based housing for people with precarious positions on the housing market, **justice principles can contradict each other**. For example, in the case of Passerstraat, future residents were unknown during the development phase, and their preferences for the built spaces could not be considered. In line with current architectural trends, the apartments have an open kitchen – the living room and kitchen are in the same room. However, some residents would have preferred a separate space for living and cooking. This is particularly important for Muslim women who may wish to take their headscarves off in the kitchen – an important factor to feel at home in one's apartment. Additionally, many residents cook with frozen food, which the built-in kitchen does not provide enough space for. This is why residents often have more than one freezer in their living area or bedroom. While in many privately developed community-based housing projects residents can participate in the architecture of their own space, this was not the case in Passerstraat. **The project was developed with low levels of resident participation, which allowed for faster development, affordable spaces, and fewer time and energy resources needed by residents.** However, it also hindered residents from shaping their own surroundings.

Authors and Contact details

Luisse Stoisser, HOMeAGE, SARLab luisse.lilo.stoisser@vub.be

Luc Lampaert, Kenniscentrum WWZ, luc.lampaert@kenniscentrumwwz.be

An-Sofie Smetcoren, HOMeAGE, SARLab an-sofie.smetcoren@vub.be

How did this policy brief come about?

This policy brief results from a collaboration between Kenniscentrum WWZ and HOMeAGE researchers. Through regular discussions over the course of nearly a year, we combined the theoretical perspective of spatial justice with the experience of Kenniscentrum WWZ in developing community-based housing for individuals facing precarious situations on the housing market in Brussels.

About HOMeAGE

HOMeAGE is a Marie Skłodowska Curie doctoral training network on 'Advancing Research and Training on Ageing, Place and Home'. It aims to institute an interdisciplinary, intersectoral, and international programme of doctoral training and research that drives the development of new leaders in excellence for the advancement of evidence-based innovation on ageing in place.

For more information, please visit <https://homeage-dn.eu>.



About Kenniscentrum WWZ

The Knowledge Center for Wellbeing, Living and Care (Kenniscentrum Welzijn, Wonen, Zorg) is committed to greater well-being, innovative housing options and accessible care in Brussels. They support organizations so that they can improve the quality of life of Brussels residents.

For more information, please visit www.kenniscentrumwwz.be.

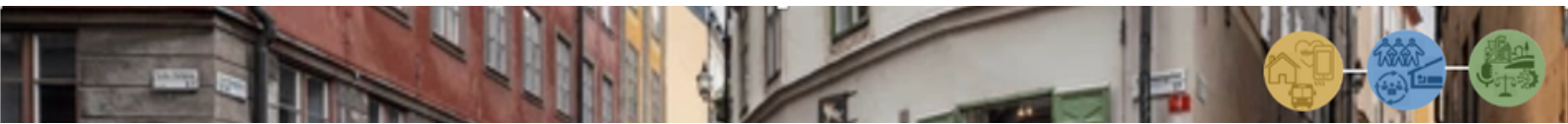


About SARLab

The Society and Ageing Research Lab from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) conducts research on *ageing well in the right place* and responds to emerging, critical challenges in policy and practice concerning older people.

For more information, please visit <https://en.sarlab.be>.





Notes

[1] The Social Rental Offices (SVK or AIS) are recognised by the Brussels Capital Region and are subsidised non-profit organisations. Their mission is to socialise part of the Brussels rental market. They manage the rental of properties belonging mainly to private owners and put them for rent at affordable prices to families with low incomes. The eligibility criteria are the same as for social renting. Unlike social rented housing, prices are set by the government according to the number of rooms (and not based on income). Today, SVKs are responsible for the rental management of more than 7,800 housing units spread throughout the Brussels Capital Region. This sector is recognised by the Brussels Capital Region since 1998.

Sources

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