Making Space for Community

ACSA Creative Achievement Award

MAKING SPACE FOR COMMUNITY
Learning from Collective Living as a Basis for Designing Policy

The Bay Area is the global center of the tech industry and one of the richest regions globally. In the USA, 8 of the top 10 most expensive cities are in the Bay Area. At the same time, we struggle with a large unhoused population and a housing access crisis both in the quantity of available units and cost. Two typologies have emerged in the effort to address affordability—to reduce the size of private units to hold onto the individual autonomy of space (micro-units) and to reduce private space in exchange for shared amenities (co-living). The latter promises to build community, providing resilience and creating new social formations, etc. but has been exploited by developers due to loose policy definitions.

Typical Microunit

New Coliving Typologies fall under "Group Housing" designation in the Planning Code. Shown here a recent project that situated shared amenities in subterranean levels, while only providing 8-10% shared space within the building.
A CONTEXT OF COMMUNAL EXPERIMENTATION

The Bay Area also has a history of communal living experimentation. The rejection of commercialism and ideology of shared property and labor in the 1960's and 70's resulted in a proliferation of experiments that offered the ability to define a set of politics that more precisely reflected residents’ shared values and lifestyles. Today, the number of communal living experiments resembles that of the 1960s, yet, they have evolved and diversified into models such as co-living, co-housing, cooperatives, and intentional communities, most of which emerged through bottom-up efforts. How might new policy learn from these typologies to consider how communities are formed and the domestic commons is actively participated in?

Map of contemporary collective living typologies across California State (by Authors)  Map of contemporary collective living typologies across the Bay Area (by Authors)
INFORMED ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH

The methodology applied in this research recognizes that long lasting domestic communities are not created through spatial organization alone, but rather rely on a range of evolving protocols that direct the sharing of governance, finances, labor, and resources. As any proliferation of the domestic commons is shaped by planning departments and other civic institutions, a new territory emerges for architectural research to learn from the lived experience of collective living communities, and to translate these lessons so that they can be applied to housing policy. **Mediating between space and protocols as well as institutions and communities provides a new template for designing policy.**
LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

Since 2017, the authors have worked directly with over forty collective living communities to learn from their lived experience. **While policy is often formed without input from those impacted by it, it is these lived experiences that we considered central to policy reform.**

Interactions with community groups involved measuring and documenting spaces, understanding how sharing manifests, and how governance and labor are addressed. These aspects of lasting communities were captured through a four-part methodology for case study analysis. **Hardware** documents the architectural framework; **Software** considers how spaces are used and shared; and **Orgware** catalogs protocols for labor sharing and governance. In addition, **Environmental Context** examines the relationship communities have with each other and the surrounding neighborhood.

![Community Workshop Meeting with the Embassy Collective (Photo by Authors)](image-url)
INTERFACING WITH INSTITUTIONS AND POLICY

At the same time, the authors have collaborated with the San Francisco Planning Department to address the issues surrounding collective living as they impact legislation for new group housing typologies. The Planning Department was able to articulate concerns from various communities in the city, how developers were using/exploiting current policies, legal ramifications of policy adjustments, and what policies might be most impactful to address. While two critical policies were implemented from the author’s report, the authors have listed a series of long range recommendations for more equitable housing development in San Francisco that are part of ongoing policy reformations.

Policy Reformations were presented to the SF Planning Commission in February 2022

Ongoing discussions with the Planning Department resulted in a collaborative grant provided by the ‘Friends of City Planning’ Organization
HARDWARE

We use the term *hardware* to describe the physical arrangement of collective living spaces. This includes their architectural frameworks as they define spatial adjacencies and sequences with specific attention paid to the physical boundaries between the public and private realm. The selection of examples in the whitepaper foreground shared amenities at different scales, related to the diverse spectrum of relationships that residents participate within. The case studies also acknowledge that sharing space with others is predicated on one’s ability to assert identity and lay claim over private territory, direct careful attention to the form and spatial footprint privacy takes in collective environments. Lastly, the presentation of ‘hardware’ reveals the variety of building types – adapted and purpose-designed – that can host communal living spaces.

*Zoomed in view of Embassy Community*  
(Drawing by Authors)
SOFTWARE

Software as a second analytical lens sheds light on the social groups that inhabit the spaces in the case studies, their familial arrangements, communal endeavors, forms of reappropriation, and scales of sharing resources. In literature, the use of the term software varies from programmed space, to the implementation of ideas and knowledge, to meanings and interpretations (through use). Yet, these different uses of the term share the understanding that the physical form is read, understood, and shaped through activities taking place in it. In the context of this study, careful attention is directed to how many residents share a particular spatial resource as a way of documenting how proximity and negotiation of space in daily life may further the formation of particular subgroups within a larger collective, and how many people can, in practice, productively share certain domestic spaces. The documentation of software in the whitepaper is based on direct observation of lived experience and social interactions where possible, and drawing on interviews and published documentations of use otherwise.

Multi-tiered sharing in the Embassy Community
(Drawing by Authors)
ORGWARE

Orgware designates the sum of protocols that govern communal life – communication practices, agreements for the use of space, the structure and allocation of joint finances, the decision-making processes around shared or conflicting interests, and the distribution of domestic labor. Orgware connects members of the commune, distributes responsibility, and stakes out territories of individual and collective decision-making. Information about the case studies’ orgware has been collected through interviews and surveys with community members.
ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

Several collective living projects have existed ‘in the shadows’—often hidden enclaves of alternative ways of living. More recently, however, we are witnessing an increased reciprocity between collective living projects and their surrounding environment. These relationships are both spatial and non-spatial. As projects form relationships with their context, they have the ability to embrace new forms of resource sharing and allocation. The specific methodology employed involves drawing out the larger context to reveal how projects ‘situate’ themselves and might form and/or tap into surrounding networks.

Three communities in close proximity in San Francisco’s Haight District network to share additional resources (Drawing by Authors)
The results of our analysis were documented in a 308-page White Paper, which became the primary driver for new group housing policy. Approved by the Planning Commission in February of 2022, new mandates for the ratios of private to collective space were signed into law in late spring. The following pages illustrate the content and structure of this White Paper.
The code definitions of *Household, Family* and *Dwelling Units* are the foundation of how *group housing* is understood. Whether a group of unrelated residents is considered a family opens doors to ownership models, financing options, and affects tenants’ rights. The type of facilities needed for a ‘dwelling unit’ impacts where legal boundaries of privacy are drawn in space, and where amenities need to be negotiated with others. This segment of the White Paper reviewed legal definitions of these four terms in Bay Area cities and beyond to raise awareness of differences and promote discussion.
The financial structure of various collective living typologies (from models of land tenure to internal organization) are often complex as they tend to challenge the status quo of market transactions and include other forms of value. These might include access to resources, support, knowledge or someone’s time. Finances are often linked to the agency one has in making decisions on how to live together. Because of this, finances are both the source of many internal tensions that a collective living project might face, as well as the key to its long-term sustainability. In what follows, we identify a series of different collective living models and their various forms of transactions with a focus on ownership of, and access to, space.
The Hardware analysis cataloged building typologies across adaptive reuse and new construction, and illustrated the relative amount, location and type of collective vs. private space and their interfaces.
The Canopy’s residents are diverse—including artists, activists, scientists, lawyers, educators, techies, writers, journalists, and event producers. Residents share bathrooms with those in close proximity, while all other amenities are shared amongst the community. These include an expansive kitchen, two living rooms, and the dreamspace—a mixed-use creative space, which can be used for events and workshops, or sewing projects and woodworking. Residents come together over meals, art jams, and movie nights.

Through photographs, line drawings, and exploded axonometrics, the Software section documented how space is used and appropriated. Special focus is placed on how residents share space. We differentiate between single-tiered and multi-tiered sharing, the latter term applied to communities in which sub-groups share certain amenities while the full community shares others.
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2.3 Orgware

2.3.1 Governance

The following four case studies of Bay Area communal and co-living communities focus specifically on the protocols for organizing labor—material, immaterial, and domestic—negotiation that forms the basis of peer governance. For each community, a diagram lists responsibilities. Different rings in the diagram separate daily, weekly, monthly, and annual tasks. While domestic labor distribution is not the only indicator of a community’s decision-making structure, each case study is also reflective of a specific political model. The key findings in this section address points of consideration pointed in Section 4.2 and 5.5 of Part A.

The Orgware section focuses on the protocols for organizing labor—material, immaterial, and domestic—as a key component of commoning and an indicator for the expansive territory of negotiation that forms the basis of peer governance. While domestic labor distribution is not the only indicator of a community’s decision-making structure, the sample case studies in this section are also reflective of a specific political model of governance.
This section examines sample case studies and their relationships to their immediate neighborhood. Here, international and block sizes in various San Francisco neighborhoods. A final table studies the resulting lot coverage.
The Red Vic, self-governs through a 'do-ocracy' model. Alternating with its main purpose as an intentional community, the Red Vic functions as a community-run non-profit collective, renting out all 22 rooms for shorter term stays. It proceeds benefit nearby intentional communities and local community projects.

The quantitative analysis of each case study involves parsing their program into four categories — private units, semi-private spaces, luxuries, and circulation/service space. Comparing these breakdowns across case studies reveals patterns — ratios of shared to non-shared space, ratios of particular amenity spaces to the number of users, etc. Calculations from these patterns were employed in producing recommendations for new, and more humane, conditions within group housing projects.
Qualitative considerations derived from lived experiences are invaluable in informing the design and development of collective living spaces. Working often empirically through trial and error, communities experiment with a range of ways of creating a closer fit between their lifestyle and the spaces that might support this. A series of surveys conducted between May and November 2021 that was crowd sourced to a series of Bay Area collective living communities are presented, which highlight questions around scale, access and configuration of spaces. The responses are presented in unmediated form, with only removing names of residents / communities for privacy.

2.6 Qualitative Analysis

Arguably, qualitative considerations are equally important for the design and development of collective living spaces. Lived experiences of residents situated with collective living communities is invaluable in this regard. Working often empirically through trial and error, communities experiment with a range of ways of living to create a closer fit between their lifestyle and the spaces that might support this. A series of surveys conducted between May and November 2021 that was crowd sourced to a series of Bay Area collective living communities are presented, which highlight questions around scale, access and configuration of spaces. The responses are presented in unmediated form, with only removing names of residents / communities for privacy.
Workshops and exhibitions through an extended collaboration with San Francisco Planning and Urban Research, California College of the Arts, and other Bay Area Non-Profits advanced these conversations in public forums. These events were designed to bridge between experts and rightsholders, and between communities and institutions, in a common effort to shape new policies around group housing.
ACCESSIBLE POLICY

While policy is often abstract and hidden within bureaucratic documents, the intention was to bring the research to life and engage a wider audience. Exhibitions in the Venice Biennale and Seoul Biennale created a dialogue between residents and institutions in a range of settings. Through physical models and virtual reality, spaces were brought to life and made accessible — diversifying and enriching the conversation around group housing.