

Interview with Marta Malinverni

Dogma: Could you introduce the group housing that emerged in Brussels in the 70s and 80s?

Marta Malinverni: Group housing that emerged in Brussels in the 1970s reflected a broader movement that had already started in Northern Europe in the 1960s, in countries like Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. People were beginning to rethink how they could live differently and create communities that supported each other. In Brussels, this led to the rise of group housing projects in the early 70s. These were typically initiated by groups of 10 to 20 families, who came together to design spaces that featured shared areas. The projects included individual living units, built next to each other, but with common spaces.

The typologies varied: some were unique building blocks, others were sprawling houses around a communal garden. Outdoor spaces were an important aspect of these projects. These shared spaces often included common living rooms, where activities like childcare or social events could take place. Many of the families involved were young, and the communal living arrangements allowed them to share responsibilities like looking after children. These spaces also hosted political or intellectual activities, as many of the participants were middle-class and well-educated.

D: Did they build these houses from scratch, or adapt existing homes? How did they organize the spaces?

MM: There were different types of projects. Some were new builds, where the group hired an architect to design according to their vision—sometimes, the architect was even part of the group. Other projects involved rehabilitating existing buildings. What they all had in common was a deliberate move away from the typical Belgian single-family home, whether detached or semi-detached. They wanted to create something new, often on the outskirts of the city, where land was more suitable for communal living and shared outdoor spaces.

D: What motivated these people to live together, and what challenges did they face?

MM: There were three main motivations: social, economic, and ideological. Socially, they wanted to create a neighborhood. They realized that the modern city, with its post-war architecture, often led to isolation. Many didn't know their neighbors, and they sought to create solidarity and social cohesion. Economically, these projects allowed them to have more space for communal living, including shared kitchens, living rooms, and gardens, which weren't offered by the standard market at the time. Ideologically, they shared a common vision of living together. Daily tasks, such as childcare or household chores, were shared. In some cases, feminist principles influenced this structure, promoting the idea of distributing domestic tasks more equally, rather than placing the burden on women. These communities had established rules, and everyone had to agree to them, which helped create a sense of cooperation and mutual support.

D: Was it easy for these groups to organize and live together? Did they face difficulties with regulations or other obstacles?

MM: One common challenge was the time it took to turn their ideas into concrete projects. It often took years to plan, collaborate with architects, and bring people together. Finding the right location was also a challenge. In terms of legal hurdles, they had to find ownership models that worked for everyone, whether through individual or co-ownership. Inside these groups, someone typically took charge of handling these tasks.

D: Were these communities resilient, or did they have to evolve over time?

MM: That's a great question, as we're talking about projects that started 50 or 60 years ago. Society has changed significantly since then. These projects were originally designed for mono-nuclear families—mom, dad, and kids—but today's needs are different. Not all the original members stayed; some moved away, and others passed on. New residents might not share the same vision as the founders, so the question becomes how these communities adapt.

Another important question is whether the design of these spaces is still flexible enough to meet today's needs. These projects were designed to be adaptable, but how well that flexibility works now is something worth exploring.

D: Do these communities still exist today, and have they evolved along with the families?

MM: In some cases, yes. Some of the original co-founders are still living in these communities, although they are now close to 80 years old. Some of their children have also taken over the properties, but not all the founders stayed. What's interesting, and something I explore in my thesis, is how the common spaces are used today, with a retrospective view of the past 50-60 years.

D: Can you give examples of spaces or activities that have remained the same or evolved?

MM: One case I studied is a project by Belgian architect Thierry Lani, located in Brussels' Château. It began in the late 1970s, and the common shared space included an extra room intended to host people in need, such as refugees, political asylum seekers, or single mothers. This practice has continued to this day, which shows the resilience of that part of the project. Another case is a project by architect Mark Wolf, just outside Brussels. It originally housed 14 families and around 20 children. The common spaces, such as the living room and kitchen, were heavily used for social activities, and even now, the original founders use these spaces for things like senior yoga and cultural events. The room can also be rented out to outsiders, and the funds go toward communal expenses.

D: How did these communities challenge the traditional idea of the mono-nuclear family?

MM: At the time these projects were founded, the mono-nuclear family wasn't really questioned by the participants. But today, that has changed. For example, one of the founding families in one project sold their house to a single mother, who was welcomed into the community. These communities are open and flexible, with a strong foundation of social interaction and solidarity, making them adaptable to new family structures and individual needs.

D: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I think it's important to note that this kind of grouped housing, like other forms of co-housing, is very contemporary. It's a model that's gaining attention again because of its flexibility and ability to accommodate a variety of family types and individuals. More people should know that this way of living exists and that it's a viable alternative.