



## Traces of Obduracy: Imaginaries of ‘Social Inertia’ in the Process of Introducing Collaborative Housing in the Czech Republic

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the sociotechnical change necessary for the introduction of collaborative housing projects into the Czech super-homeownership housing regime. To better understand the obduracy of the current housing system, we examine the major barriers and threats to the implementation of such projects through a series of workshops with non-experts in selected cities. Our findings suggest that the housing system's obduracy is related to social imaginaries that we conceptualise as the 'imaginary of social inertia'. This form of imaginary, along with other factors such as a lack of supporting legal and financial infrastructures, creates a complex network of obstacles that reduce the likelihood of such housing projects gaining ground. In conclusion, our research emphasises the role of imaginaries in studying obduracy and thus provides valuable insights into the processes of urban sociotechnical change.*

**Keywords:** collaborative housing; obduracy; housing affordability crisis.



## Introduction

In response to the various economic and environmental crises, a new wave of collective self-organised forms of housing provision (i.e., collaborative housing; CH) has unfolded in recent years in many countries (Tummers 2016). CH is a form of dwelling based on cooperation, self-organisation and sharing among residents (Czischke, Carriou, Lang 2020) and can take different social and legal forms such as cohousing, *baugruppen*, resident-led cooperatives, community land trusts and so on. CH gains attention since it holds several promises (Färber 2019) that respond to the current confluence of crises. First, CH has the potential to alleviate the global housing affordability crisis in urban centres through the transformation of the housing sector with new housing policies and partnerships—especially between residents and municipalities. Second, it offers model solutions on how to accent the social ecology of housing through democratic governance and the sharing of resources. Third, it provides its residents with room to develop capacities that may, for example, protect them against loneliness, which is especially prevalent among the senior population.

Although significant research has been conducted on CH, including conceptualisations of the segment (Czischke, Carriou, Lang 2020; Malý Blažek et al. 2023), analyses of CH policies (Lang, Stoeger 2018) as well as assessments of its feasibility in solving affordability issues (Archer 2020), there are still several knowledge gaps in this rapidly growing field. This is especially true in countries where the housing system is almost exclusively oriented towards private individual homeownership and where CH has been in its early stages of development. We thus aim to address the following question: How do CH non-experts in the Czech Republic perceive the introduction of CH into an arrangement that culturally, politically and economically relies on individual homeownership (Lux, Sunega 2020)? We, thereby, aim to identify the main ‘traces of obduracy’ that hinder the process of CH introduction.

## Theoretical and Research Context

The Czech Republic represents a country that relies on private homeownership as a means of social and economic securitisation. After 1989, Czech society underwent a transformation from socialism to capitalism, including major restructuring and privatisation of the housing stock. State-owned housing was at first transferred to municipalities and pre-socialist owners, and municipal housing was often privatised to sitting tenants throughout the 1990s and 2000s, leading to the establishment of a ‘super-homeownership housing regime’ (Lux, Sunega 2020). Between 2016 and 2022, housing prices more than doubled (CSO 2023), and rents rose significantly, affecting market newcomers and specific segments of the population—such as young adults, seniors and single-income households. As a result, CH projects have become a source of inspiration for certain Czech municipalities attempting to incorporate CH designs into existing local housing systems.

Our analysis draws upon the literature on actor-network theory (ANT) and its application in urban studies (the ‘urban assemblages approach’; Fariás, Bender 2010). According to ANT, the world is a place that is held together by the constant interconnection of ‘materially heterogeneous elements’ into various provisional collectives or assemblages composed of people, materials, technologies, regulations and so on. In the ANT optic, successful actor networks form arrangements that exhibit varying degrees of *rigidity*. This process has been



noted by the urban sociologist Annique Hommels (2005), who has linked ANT and urban sociology through the concept of ‘obduracy’. She theorises that the city is the composite and interconnection of ‘urban assemblages’ that are constantly in the process of change (i.e., constantly being rebuilt and renovated) while also resisting change.

According to Hommels (2005), obduracy has three layers: (1) frames—the established ways of *thinking and doing* that different groups carry in their heads and bodies; (2) embeddedness—how individual elements, such as forms of housing, are embedded in wider actor networks (the wider and more robust the network, the more resistant to change a given form of housing may be); and (3) persistent tradition—the ‘cultural layer’ of urban obduracy (i.e., a collective idea of what is right, how things should be and what the good life or good housing is). In an article on the concept of ‘obduracy and the city’, Hommels (2020: 6) argues for a future strengthening of the role of ‘imaginaries’ in studies of urban obduracy.

In this text, we aim to engage with the concept of obduracy, focusing on the introduction of CH into an established Central European super-homeownership housing regime. The premise is that the subjectivities and identities of our research participants have been shaped within this regime and that their responses, when confronted with CH, could reveal ‘traces of obduracy’ that are imprinted within them. Specifically, we seek to answer how CH perceived by our research participants, and what the main obstacles are to the introduction of CH according to research participants.

## Methodology and Data

Since there are almost no existing CH practices in the Czech Republic, our entire interdisciplinary applied research project focuses on the possibilities and limits of CH introduction in the Czech Republic. As a group of researchers from different disciplines—including sociology, architecture and environmental studies—inspired by the epistemology and methods of participatory action research, we have intentionally undertaken the role of initiators, participants and observers of the social innovation process (Aiken 2017).

In five partner cities of the research project (Jihlava, Liberec, Opava, Pardubice and Psáry), we have conducted fourteen participatory workshops with CH non-experts (defined as individuals with limited knowledge of CH who have not been involved in CH projects in the past), which included inhabitants from the respective cities and/or housing-seekers. In some cases, local students of architecture, politicians or officers from the municipal council were also involved. The cities are, in all cases (with the exception of Psáry), important regional centres with populations between 50 and 105 thousand people.

The research participants were contacted through a public campaign combining advertisements in local media outlets and relevant Facebook groups, posters in public spaces and information through official city channels (websites, newsletters, bulletins). In all cases, the invitation was introduced as a request for ‘participation in research about CH’. However, the information contained a general promise from municipalities to introduce CH into their housing policies.

The workshops were designed as a series of two or three three-hour workshops. Research participants were invited to participate in all workshops, but replacements were accepted. A total of 176 participants attended the workshops, and informed consent (including for



recording) was obtained in accordance with research ethics. The first workshop introduced research participants to the topic of CH using the world-café method. The second workshop focused on attitudes and perceptions of CH, using the focus group method. During the third workshop, participants were invited to model the process of preparing a CH project. The workshop activities were recorded, and the research participants were repeatedly invited to formulate their imaginings, expectations and feedback. We have used common workshop methods combined with a set of materials and tools developed for this purpose. Experienced facilitators led the workshops and worked closely with the researchers throughout the process. The research design and workshop scenarios were inspired by previous participatory and ethnographic activities with the city representatives and urban planners. Further activities followed.

The recordings were transcribed (890 standard pages) and analysed. Our analysis was based on the grounded theory approach developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), which involved first open and later axial coding. A set of 113 codes was developed and organised into more general categories based on their relevance to our overall research. We ranked the codes by saturation and identified those related to the theme of obduracy in the process of possible sociotechnical change. This procedure resulted in over 300 text fragments that were further classified into more detailed categories, providing answers to our research questions. The results of our analysis are presented in the following section.

## Main Findings

In this section, we present the main findings. First, we describe the ‘traces of obduracy’ of the current arrangement as revealed in the statements of our research participants. Second, we look at some of the conditions identified by research participants—under which they would consider realising CH projects.

### It Is Tempting, But...

There are two primary reasons why research participants found the concept of CH appealing. Firstly, CH has been regarded as a more ‘affordable’ form of housing, making it attractive because of the housing affordability crisis that has recently affected Czech society. Secondly, the idea of living in a community was found to be engaging. Although we have intentionally presented CH as a concept that could involve various designs and practices (Malý Blažek, et al. 2023), research participants generally envisioned the amplification of intimacy among members as well as ‘communes’ or ‘highly intensive communities’ rather than ‘participatory neighbourhoods’. This gave rise to a range of potential future issues and a strong scepticism among research participants towards CH. This scepticism will be summarised in the following subsections.

#### 1. *General ‘Laws of Society’*

The first set of issues stems from the fact that research participants perceive CH as a highly intensive form of collaboration. These issues relate to the *general laws governing society*. In this regard, research participants have alluded to such ‘laws’ on numerous occasions. The first



'law' identified can be described in the words of one of the research participants, 'the fewer the units, the lower the risk of conflict':

*By the logic of things, the fewer units there are, the lower the risk of conflict.*

*And that's precisely that. You know that even in a relatively small family, it's difficult to agree on something (...). And that's a relatively small circle of people...*

Research participants have foreseen that the initial phases may be filled with enthusiasm, which may lead to a temporary suspension of this law, but the challenge of keeping the group together becomes apparent once the initial excitement fades away. The long-term viability is thus uncertain.

*Another thing is that I can't imagine maintaining that enthusiasm for such a long time to be able to regularly meet with that group of people for X years.*

Another law that research participants have been touched upon can be called the one *hundred people—one hundred tastes* law. It refers to an objectively unchangeable situation from which a particular conflict arises. This was particularly visible in cases of property selection, cooking (different tastes, restrictions and preferences) and cleaning:

*Not to mention the idea of having thirty people gather there once a month (...). Everyone has different preferences, someone doesn't eat gluten, someone doesn't like mushrooms—it's just unrealistic, completely absurd, at least for me, to coordinate shared lunches or dinners in a communal dining area.*

*...because one person may clean the washing machine and kitchen counter according to their standards while the other says, 'You're messy. You can't be serious.' (...) Formally, it's fine (...), but when you see it like this, it's not okay.*

## 2. 'It Reminds Me...'

The second set of issues has been related to memories either in the form of personal or collective memory. In the case of personal memory, CH negatively reminded research participants of living in two-generational houses or student dormitories/flats:

*Even two-generation houses can be problematic when it comes to shared living. But that's based on my experience, you know, even on a global level, when people come together...*

In the case of collective memory, CH has been associated with the socialist regime (1948 – 1989) in former Czechoslovakia:

*What I heard from those workshops recently sounds quite idealistic to me. It seems like we're going back to the times of communism, with communal laundries – similar things that used to exist in the past. But I don't think people here are inclined towards that.*

## 3. 'Is It Going to Be Ours?'

The third significant element was the question of ownership. As briefly described above, the Czech housing regime is based on ownership, which has become a social norm and is



considered the standard for ensuring long-term housing. This norm is also inscribed in the concerns and questions of research participants:

*Well, those concern whether it will truly be yours or not, when you're repaying something for 20 years, if it won't still belong to someone else and you can't do anything about it...*

Within the embedded housing system, ownership also means a desired condition to better maintain and take better care of the property. A similar perspective also emerges in the case of 'shared property ownership', which is viewed as something undesirable or inherently problematic:

*What I have a bit of a problem with, or I can't say a definite yes to, is the shared ownership of the entire property. I believe that Czech people might not fully embrace this idea.*

#### 4. The External Factors

Finally, on the practical level, the formal laws also create a level of scepticism that limits the boundaries of imagination:

*This is something absolutely insane in the Czech legal system and environment. (...) A lot of these things can't work in practice.*

### 'If It Is to Work, Then...'

In the situation described above (with perceived ambivalences towards 'community-oriented housing', unchangeable societal laws, scepticism towards shared ownership and associating memories), research participants have defined several conditions under which it would still be possible to realise at least some forms of CH projects.

#### 1. They Have to 'Click'...

The idea that if something like CH is going to work, the people involved 'have to click with each other' was strongly present:

*...[only one] kitchen and dining area, I just can't imagine it at all. It really takes a great group of people to make this happen, so I'm somewhat pessimistic about finding such a group. I just can't envision it—it would truly require gathering the right people for it to work.*

The problem with temporality makes 'clicking' even more difficult. The research participants predicted that individuals must be prepared already before the start of the process of CH introduction. They doubted that people would fit as they go through the process. Therefore individuals suitable for CH are limited to a specific type of person who is already prepared for it:



*...I had those concerns that it wouldn't work, but then I realised that it's actually meant for a group of people who have an interest, awareness and willingness to share. Because otherwise, when I live in a regular apartment building, that willingness among the residents just isn't there.*

This presupposes that the majority of people are not suitable and are, in fact, uncooperative and unsuitable for CH. Additionally, the 'suitable people' must already be compatible with one another and have things in common—for example, regarding their values, age and worldviews:

*...it needs to be a group of similar people, at least reasonably similar in age, who share common interests. It probably wouldn't work if there were significant age differences, or not necessarily age, but differences in their worldviews. Sometimes older and younger individuals can get along. If the older ones lead an active lifestyle, there can be harmony, but it likely requires a considerable level of alignment—a shared vision of life.*

## 2. It's Strict Game Rules...

However, the success of CH is not guaranteed even for a group of people who are predisposed to it. Clear rules must be established from the outset and strictly enforced in the event of any violation:

*...our concerns mainly revolved around the rules of the game (...). I don't know, would rules that are firmly enforceable help?*

There is a shared concern, however, that people will 'ignore the rules'. Moreover, the Czech national character (i.e., 'Czechness'), as described by some of the participants, is such that rules will always be broken—thus making it difficult for CH to function in the long run:

*I can't imagine this type of living functioning without clearly defined rules or some kind of order, but then again, I think to myself that Czech people and rules, everyone tries to somewhat rebel against it, be rebels and not comply...*

Therefore, while a group of individuals who are initially compatible and predisposed to CH may be present, the CH success, according to participants, hinges on the establishment and enforcement of clear rules, which may face resistance.

## Conclusion: Imaginaries of 'Social Inertia'

The main aims of this article were twofold: first, to examine the reactions of non-experts when presented with the idea of CH; and second, to explore the traces of obduracy within the context of our case study.

The results section shows that the potential affordability of CH, particularly during a housing crisis, is its greatest advantage. However, CH is also viewed as 'intensive community living', which is both appealing and problematic due to the intimate, close relationships it implies (and potential conflicts that could arise). The participants' shared opinion that 'social laws' (i.e., the different preferences of different people) could lead to conflict presents a significant barrier to





the establishment and smooth functioning of CH. CH is further burdened by negative associations with the Czech Republic's socialist past and individuals' experiences with multi-generational or student housing. Moreover, CH is seen as being in opposition to prevailing social norms, which favour private housing ownership because of the overall pro-ownership arrangement in the housing sector. Despite this, our research participants believed that some projects could still emerge and thrive. However, they must fulfil at least two requirements: (1) the group of people forming the CH community must be compatible and share certain predispositions already before the start of the project, and (2) this group must establish clear, strict rules from the outset and ensure that they are rigorously enforced.

If we return to Annique Hommels' (2005) concept of 'obduracy', we can see that our results illuminate points 1 and 3 of her triad. The CH concept was outside of our research participants' 'frames' of thinking about housing. Therefore, it went in some sense against the 'imaginaries' of what is typically considered good, appropriate and desirable housing.

To conclude, it was the 'imaginaries of social inertia' that manifested when research participants were confronted with the idea of CH and which represented the most pronounced 'trace of obduracy' of the current housing regime. This involves the idea of a certain stability and immutability of people. Individuals must possess specific traits that allow them to create and fit a successful CH project. If the individuals or those they must cooperate with do not possess the necessary traits from the outset, the 'social inertia' will be so great that it will prevent the creation of such a project or its smooth, long-term and satisfactory functioning.

Collaborative housing is still a relatively niche phenomenon in various housing regimes. Evidence from different contexts, such as in Austria (Lang, Stoeger 2018), Finland (Helamaa 2019) and Central and Eastern Europe (Pósfai 2022), confirm the need to establish infrastructures that will enable individuals to overcome obstacles, such as financial, legal and knowledge barriers. In this article, we deliberately focused on tracing 'obduracy' rather than examining the strategies and dynamics that could potentially overcome the challenges encountered during the introduction of CH. The workshops revealed that there could be various ways for addressing obduracy, including the establishment of infrastructures that would lead to more comprehensible local housing policies, knowledgeable actors and generally a more welcoming and trustful arrangement for collaborative housing. The description and refinement of more efficacious strategies to confront social inertia within the realm of CH represent a promising line for future research and publications.



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