

Sunday Independent

Shared values: 'I don't want to live in a box with my family by ourselves'

Co-housing is popular in Europe, providing low-cost housing for those who couldn't otherwise afford to buy. So why isn't it more common here?

Tanya Sweeney reports.

TWO years ago, Ohio native Megan McGrath moved with her two children from Sandymount to Cloughjordan's Ecovillage, one of a small number of co-housing groups in Ireland. Within a cluster of houses off the Main Street, this innovative scheme is similar to a co-op: rather than living in a single unit, the Ecovillage's denizens take their sense of unity seriously. Half of the residents have shared their home with others. There are a number of common spaces in the village, and neighbours bind together to create a supportive social environment.

McGrath shares her home with her children and an adult couple, but it's no common-or-garden house share. "My view of co-housing is that I am choosing to invest emotionally in the people that I choose to live intimately with," she says. "I don't want to live in a box with my children by ourselves. The couple we live with have no interest in having children and don't co-parent, and have boundaries in place about their own stuff and space. We all have healthy rules, and are happy in our lives, but we also have to be open to criticism and dialogue, too."

A more formal co-housing space is also under development in Cloughjordan and, according to McGrath who is involved in its development, completion is a minimum of three years away.

"The project is designed to protect tenants' rights, and the property will not be influenced by property values and won't be harmed by something like the Celtic Tiger," says McGrath.

It sounds wonderfully progressive, yet McGrath adds: "This is not new. We've forgotten that this is how humans have lived for years."

Except, in modern-day Ireland, the idea of communal living is far from the aspirational ideal. Many are content to buy or rent their home privately, and use it as a retreat. But factor in Ireland's housing and rental crisis, and you get a perfect storm in which the co-housing model could flourish. And a growing number of Irish people are keenly aware that co-housing has its merits. Data from Eurostat shows that in 2014, 9.2pc of Irish households had three or more adults living in them (a rise from 7.7pc in 2013). And according to *daft.ie* data, sharing ad listings have increased 2pc year on year.

Yet ideologically, co-housing is much more than simply sharing living space.

A concept that developed in Scandinavia in the 1980s, co-housing has gained traction in many parts of Europe. Architect Tom O'Donnell

has been researching alternative approaches to housing in Germany, where co-housing has already moved into the mainstream thanks to gentrification and rising property prices.

"Co-housing came from people realising that by coming together and creating a larger entity, there would be certain advantages for themselves in terms of quality of life," he explains. "If you eliminate the developer, have no profit to pay to whoever develops the project, and you can pool your resources, you can build bigger and better for cheaper. And if you have common living facilities, people really see the value in their neighbour."

The models for co-living arrangements are numerous: there are the co-housing projects in which residents have a private space and access to common areas like meeting rooms, cafés, community centres and vegetable gardens (all maintained by community members). Elsewhere on the spectrum, there's The Collective in London which offers residents a private room, bathroom and kitchenette and access to shared facilities, for around £199-290 (€236-345) a week. There's no denying the financial advantages, yet for many, the opportunity to mainline into a community is the main draw.

Closer to home, the O Cualann Housing Alliance's first project, currently under construction, has proved a resounding success: as an approved housing body, O Cualann worked with Dublin City Council to access a site in Poppintree at a "hugely discounted rate", and create an affordable scheme for a cross-section of private renters, social renters, elderly and disabled residents (subject to eligibility criteria). It has resulted in a diverse, vibrant community, and the price of homes is well below market value: from €140,000 (for a two-bed house) to €219,000 (for a four-bed). The project has plenty of communal areas, including a common house where residents can share a meal together.

Says co-founder Hugh Brennan: "We wanted a mix of people and achieved a proper mix of private and public spaces. The residents also developed their own charter. Safety and security, and traffic are a priority on the estate. It's very down to earth and realistic."

Several other co-housing projects are at various stages of development in Ireland. Long-established Camphill Communities cater for people interested in a shared living situation with adults living with a disability. Architect Dominic Stevens is embarking on a social housing project in

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Dublin driven by the needs of people, as opposed to the market. A site in Ringsend, formerly the home of Irish Glass, is mooted as the new site

for 3,000 homes. City architect Ali Grehan has created the Dublin House project, securing a site on Fishamble Street in Dublin where a number of families can access sites for around €150,000. To be eligible to buy the site and build their own family-sized homes, these 'citizen developers' will need to band with other households to form a single unit, like a co-op.

That the co-housing financial model differs from the traditional housing model is a huge boon in the current climate, which begs the question ... why hasn't social housing become as central to the market as it has on the continent?

"Financing is an important aspect," says director John O'Donnell of Camphill. "In Germany, most of the bigger cities will sell sites to co-housing developments, and the most socially advantageous or diverse groups will often get preferential prices."

"I think a lot of [progress] is restricted by regulation," says economist and *Sunday Independent* columnist Ronan Lyons. "The other problem is that renovating a property, like the one on Fishamble Street, is incredibly expensive, even if you cut out developers."

As to the idea of developers creating purpose-built co-living buildings, like The Collective in London, Lyons adds: "It's difficult to build units below a certain size or capacity, and when they do, developers prefer to go down the route of student accommodation."

Nonetheless, a report published by the Housing Agency in April acknowledges the trend and says: "There is a growing requirement for shared apartment accommodation and this needs to be considered when designing apartments."

Architect Markus Lager will speak on Co-housing in Berlin at the **RIAI** Annual Conference 2016 in Dublin on 25 November. See riaiconference.ie for details

5 CO-LIVING PROJECTS

Hubud, Ubud, Bali (hubud.org)

With enviable views of rice fields, a tiki treehouse-style set up and organic cafe cooking healthy treats – it's not hard for digital nomads to feel creative and comfortable here.

The Hive, Thailand (thehive.co.th)

Mixing working and living space in one gloriously modern building, The Hive even boasts its own rooftop bar and luxury spa.

Roam Co-living, Miami/Bali/Madrid/Buenos Aires (roam.co/about)

A perfect solution in an age where people are fluid, Roam allows its denizens to sign one lease and live in any of their co-living spaces around the world. Freedom comes at a rather reasonable \$500 a week. There's a swimming pool, a lawn for pop-up events and classes, and you never have to worry about the cleaning or the electricity bill as it's included.

The Collective, Old Oak Common, London (thecollective.co.uk)

With over 550 bedrooms, the development also houses a co-working space, restaurant, gym, cinema, spa and launderette.

WeLive, New York (welive.com)

WeWork's first co-living project boasts 200 serviced residential units, allowing renters to retreat to their own space while offering a host of communal amenities and projects.

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Megan McGrath from the Middle Country Cafe at Cloughjordan Community Coop. Photo: Frank McGrath