

Cohousing in Australia and the UK –  
collective approaches to building,  
dwelling and sharing together on finite  
and financialised land

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## Abstract

This study explores cohousing as an alternative model of multi-residential housing through cases from Australia and the UK. In advancing a heterodox form of property relations through the governance, planning, and development of cohousing communities, these cases can be contrasted to the many conventional multi-title properties that are beset with issues over sustainability, increasing costs and building defects. Yet, cohousing struggles amid increasingly financialised land and housing systems in both countries with one core barrier being the availability of suitable, affordable land for cohousing. This research initially focuses on the process by which groups acquire land, and then both the formal legal methods and informal norms used to underpin their collective governance of the land and housing. To further explore cohousing's alterity, the research subsequently examines cohousing as it relates to two major points of mainstream thinking. Firstly, the approach to urban planning that demands 'compactness' and density particularly in housing. With cohousing a socio-architectural model where residents actively share space and goods, it offers a more socially and environmentally conscious compactness. The second debate discussed is the demand for increased housing supply favoured by policymakers in Australia and the UK. Cohousing, as a model where residents are actively part of deliberations over design and construction, presents as an alternative method of housing development running contrary to the dominance of for-profit builders and housing delivered at scale and pace. Overall, the cohousing cases show that multi-residential property models can reject a dependence on economic goals, in favour of social and environmental imperatives, including through alleviating the stress on finite land.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Cohousing – an alternative multi-residential housing model?

The increasing demands of people struggling to find stable, secure housing in Australia and the UK are well-debated in both top-down political soundbites and policy proposals (NHSAC, 2024, Starmer, 2024). Yet with governments in both countries long abrogating any meaningful role in stemming the financialisation of housing, let alone direct delivery (Burke et al., 2020, Ryan-Collins et al., 2017), policymakers often appear incapable or unwilling to act to create safe, sustainable housing for all. Instead, they are content with gesturing towards their chosen solutions, such as increased supply, with little consideration for the efficacy of such proposals (Brill and Raco, 2021, Gallent, 2019, Gurran and Phibbs, 2015). There is a dearth of new interventions in what housing could look like if we were to value its true importance. Rather than seeing both housing and land as financial assets, there is a need for more alternatives that instead prioritise housing security, affordability and sustainability. Yet, despite the broadening need across a range of demographics and tenures, there remain few options for housing security that sit between what is provided by the market or a shrinking state. Individuals and families are confined to search for increasingly elusive stability in a private market beset by inequality, and the deepening effects of financialisation. Heterodox answers to how housing could operate often remain overlooked by government actors, formed by communities taking action in ways that attempt to counteract state recalcitrance or for-profit developer obsession. Set against this backdrop, this thesis aims to highlight one such model of collaborative, community-led housing: cohousing. While studies have analysed a cross-section of the many barriers to cohousing in both countries (Chatterton, 2015a, Crabtree, 2018a, Meltzer, 2005, Nelson, 2018), this research sets out to examine the challenges for groups in obtaining land, the obstacles pre-development and in planning, and then critically, how communities govern their land and housing post-construction. In doing so, it interrogates

cohousing as a contrasting model of multi-residential property, arguing that it offers a viable alternative to conventional approaches, particularly those delivered by for-profit developers.

In introducing cohousing, several features stand out. The model brings together a group of households who have intentionally chosen to locate their homes alongside each other (Field, 2004). These are private households, in that each have separate common functions such as bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens and dining areas, but the households share other spaces and facilities. These shared facilities are usually located in what is called a 'common house', a space that allows for communal activities, especially shared meals facilitated by a common kitchen and dining space separate to each individual household (Nelson, 2018). The common house often has other facilities that may not be found in the private homes. This may be a communal laundry, or guest room that can be used by visiting friends and family, thereby allowing all the dwellings to not need a spare bedroom if desired (Fernández Arrigoitia and West, 2020).

Collaboration amongst residents is crucial to cohousing. This can take a variety of forms but living together in the final built homes is often premised on the group of households taking an active role in the design and, in some cases, construction of their homes (McCamant and Durrett, 2011, Meltzer, 2005). This often involves painstaking time envisaging what the development will look like, finding a suitable land site and working with a range of professionals including architects, development managers and contractors. However, the most important aspect of collaboration is when the homes are built, and the households come together to manage how they will live alongside each other. This assumes a range of agreements and routines, from how gardens will be used, to how homes and shared spaces will be maintained, to how common meals will be provided and how often (Blandy, 2013, Jarvis, 2015b). Important questions are often decided before the group even lives together, including the legal and financial structures of the development, to what happens when a home becomes vacant. The introduction of new

households can therefore represent an emblematic moment for cohousing groups in ensuring that what the community originally envisaged lives on despite any turnover in residents.

For some incipient cohousing groups, there may be a defined target or targets for the project, for example age or gender (such as an older women's cohousing), sexual orientation or gender identity (such as an LGBTQI+ cohousing), or for residents of an identified local area. But what unites most cohousing groups is that the people in them have each intentionally sought housing arrangements that are underpinned by collective support and the sharing of facilities, spaces and technologies (Field, 2004). There may be different reasonings for this involving people from a range of demographic standpoints, those with young children, older people whose children have grown up and are seeking to downsize their home, or others looking for a new supportive network – a chosen family. Sometimes, economic motivations are important, in that people may be looking to create affordable housing opportunities from the design, construction and ultimate sharing of the development. Cohousing can come in a variety of tenures, full ownership, shared or co-operative ownership, as well as homes for rent. Occasionally there are multiple tenures in the same development.

While shared facilities are found in a variety of multi-residential housing types, such as common laundry facilities in both private and public housing, or communal gardens and spaces, it is how the group came into the housing and the joint emphasis on sharing and living collaboratively with others that marks cohousing out. They are multi-residential homes that differ from that which is conventionally delivered by governments or for-profit developers, for no intended resident in mind. It as such offers a different approach to property, beyond the conventional set of relations. Today, in both Australia and the UK, the increasingly arduous search for housing security casts households or families as being on individualised housing trajectories, searching by themselves for security (mostly) in the private sector with shrinking state-support. In other multi-residential models tenants are often limited in what they can collectively control, both in built form and

social use. Residents may, as in the case of social housing, share a common landlord who manages the development including the design and use of shared spaces. Or, alternatively, a shared legal model may govern individual homeowners or tenants through a leasehold or strata title, in an environment where communal areas run as an add-on to the private home, rather than being fundamental to it (Bright et al., 2025, Sherry, 2018). Cohousing, as shown through the models analysed here, offers residents not only responsibility, but methods to act on their collective obligations to the built form and each other.

In seeking to explore cohousing's heterodox approach to property, including land, this thesis places the cohousing model within a relational frame of understanding. In arguing that cohousing operates as an alternate expression of property relations in multi-residential housing, the research contributes to three areas of literature. Taken together, these distinct, yet overlapping areas of research serve to underpin the empirical analysis of the governance, planning, and development of the cohousing cases. The first focus is on the governance of multi-residential housing, and how cohousing relates to conventional approaches, in particular 'multi-title' forms of property, strata title and leasehold used extensively in Australia and the UK (Easthope et al., 2014). This provides the initial link between how each of the groups engage with understandings of property through the acquisition of land, and the methods of governance around both land and housing that communities create. With conventional approaches to land tenure, in strata title and leasehold accused of providing responsibility without control over large communal land spaces (Sherry, 2017a), the cohousing communities are investigated for what they show by contrast in their ongoing rules, considerations and principles for land and housing both pre- and post-construction. Importantly, the de-facto governance processes are argued to be as important as the legal norms. A focus on the informal and formal governance of cohousing groups and the difference that they offer fills a gap in the research (Larsen, 2019).

In outlining critiques of the mainstream legal forms, before analysing the formal co-operative structure taken by many cohousing groups including two of the case studies, helps draw out the alternative set of multi-residential property relations. It is argued that cohousing, particularly when instituted through the co-operative legal structure, offers a compelling alternative approach to value that can contribute to debates over shifting property relations in multi-residential housing. In particular, a relational approach to property is used to understand how housing developments, in this case cohousing, not only elevates the value of 'human flourishing' – embodied in the security provided by a home (Alexander, 2012), but the responsiveness of new built property towards finite, environmentally-pressed land.

In opening the discussion from the initial acquisition and titling of land to the socio-spatial impact of cohousing on neighbourhoods, this necessitates an engagement with the planning frameworks in both countries. With Tummers (2016) arguing for further research that examines 'cohousing as the citizen's challenge to institutional planning' (p.2037), this study identifies a significant orthodoxy relevant to cohousing: the pursuit of denser, 'compact' cities. Conventional approaches to compactness in Australia and the UK, through their dominance in urban planning, have an substantial impact on the built form of cities, and subsequently how land and housing is experienced in relational terms. By contrast, cohousing, through its unique alignment of shared space and facilities, and community-centred model offers an alternative to mainstream compactness, and by association to dense forms of multi-residential property. In outlining this argument, the research introduces post-growth planning (Durrant et al., 2023), as a theory to break through the relationship between financialised property and compactness.

The last key contribution of the research is to understand how cohousing operates as a development model for new housing, and in particular how the case studies compare to conventional methods of housing provision. In doing so, the research scrutinises the interaction of community-led cohousing with state actors, and in particular how groups relate to the

dominant discourse in housing development: that increased supply is imperative to address the housing 'crisis'. In interrogating the literature that surrounds this debate, this takes in both the conventional approach to supply, and the rejoinders that emphasise housing financialisation and inequality. The demand for increased housing supply, delivered at scale and pace, represents an approach to property that privileges economic conceptions of value, rather than the social use or environmental effect of housing on land. Yet, in seeing cohousing as part of a 'deliberative development' alternative (Sharam, 2020), the research also aims to add to understanding of the creation or contestation of norms of multi-residential provision by such community-led groups (Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia, 2015). This focuses analysis onto the choices cohousing communities make in terms of development, from diverse issues such as built footprint and environmental impact, to how any prospective cohousing project responds to existing local communities in terms of accessibility, tenure, and affordability. Before considering these research questions further, the key systemic issues that surround cohousing will be briefly outlined.

## 1.2 Issues in the housing system – contextualising cohousing

In considering cohousing as an alternative multi-residential housing type, like other emergent housing models it must be contextualised within the broader challenges facing the housing systems of Australia and the UK. While cohousing can never be a panacea to all housing issues (Hagbert et al., 2020), outlining the deep inequalities in housing helps to understand whether cohousing does actually constitute an 'alternative' to conventional practice (Delgado, 2012). The rate of homelessness is the most pressing indicator of housing affordability, but this is not to discount other related stresses including overcrowding (Crisis, 2025, NHSAC, 2024). As Pawson argues in the Australian context, the rising unaffordability of rental housing is the primary factor underlying increasing homelessness (2021). In 2024, the Australian capital cities recorded their worst ever affordability scores in the long running Rental Affordability Index, but beyond this headline there was a deteriorating situation in outer suburban and regional areas (Witte and

Ratnam, 2024). In England, homelessness is at a record high, as shown by indicators including those living in accommodation provided by social services, alongside hostels and other temporary modes of accommodation (Hart and Pennington, 2024).

Those in housing precarity are now spread across a number of tenures: private and social rental, joined by those with mortgages (Dorling, 2014, Madden and Marcuse, 2016). In the UK, the 'Affordable Housing Commission' found that housing stress was affecting a growing number of people, with increasing insecurity of tenants both in the private and social rental sector, as well as older owner-occupiers living in unfit properties (2020). While in Australia, there has been renewed focus not only on the precarity of those in private rental (Morris et al., 2021), but also the interrelated peaking of home ownership (Pawson et al., 2020). How cohousing relates to changing understandings of housing tenure, a noted research gap (Larsen, 2019), is crucial to analysis of the alterity of property relations in cohousing communities. As will be discussed further, interrogating the ambiguities around the dominant articulations of tenure (Hulse, 2008), and making space for diverse understandings that disrupt the conventional binary of owning and renting is a key task for this research.

Despite the growing levels of housing stress across the spectrum, the conventional pathway to housing security remains the same. While renting, potential owners are expected to build enough equity to attain a mortgage, often with help from their parents. Those renting have less security and are spending more income on housing costs, meaning many are unable to move from being renters to owners if desired (Burke et al., 2020, Dorling, 2014). Securing a house to own is considered a fundamental method to not only support immediate family, but also future generations of family. Both Australia and the UK are increasingly conceived of as 'inheritocracies' with inherited housing or equity becoming fundamental to how many younger generations can gain housing security, to the detriment of those without this 'bank of mum and dad' (Aedy, 2023, Hammond, 2023). This pursuit of a stable housing asset to pass on, illusory to many, represents a

flawed approach to property based upon individual agency in a financialised system. How cohousing communities offer an alternative form of housing security, not premised upon equity growth, is again critical to the research task at hand.

Those renting or wishing to own homes are disadvantaged compared to those landed-property owners, both individual but particularly institutional. Individual property owners use their assets as security to gain ongoing income as well as finance and credit and institutional owners obtain substantial ongoing rents through large land and housing portfolios (Ryan-Collins et al., 2017). The inequalities in ownership flow into the housing market. The link between land prices and housing costs is an often forgotten yet crucial part of the discussion around housing unaffordability (Martin et al., 2017). A longitudinal study by Knoll et al. (2017) showed that land price inflation was propelling the increase to house prices across 14 advanced countries in the post-WWII era. Furthermore, a study of asset to GDP ratios in the UK over a 20-year period showed that land value had increased to 250% of GDP, far more than both capital stock and the housing upon land (Ryan-Collins, 2018). Meanwhile Australian research has catalogued that those accumulating the bulk of wealth from house-price inflation are then able to purchase further housing and land as investments, fuelling the problematic cycle even further (Adkins et al., 2019). Moreover, as will be discussed further, the high values for urban land, often 'banked' by investors, serve to lock out community-led cohousing schemes who struggle to compete with conventional, vertically-integrated developers that can withstand both planning and construction challenges (Pauker and Hamiduddin, 2024).

It has long been clear that the for-profit private sector is now the preferred vehicle for the creation of new housing in both the UK (Dorling, 2014), and Australia (Gurran and Whitehead, 2011). This again forms part of the context for how cohousing, as an alternative model of development, must be considered. Along with a decrease in the number of specialist or small builders, the dominance by a select few construction companies has led to greater standardisation

in multi-residential housing with an increasing focus in urban areas on high-value, high-rise buildings. Planning orthodoxies such as the need for 'compactness' align to such inner-urban housing intensification and this further privileges the pursuit of scale by large developers (Robinson and Attuyer, 2020). Yet the diminution in the type of homes that are built, and the players that are building them has led to increasing attention on construction quality. In the major Australian cities of Melbourne and Sydney there has been a recent boom in high-rise housing (Troy et al., 2020), that has been accused of being poorly designed and constructed (Nethercote, 2019, Alves, 2020). A survey of apartments in NSW showed that of the buildings registered since 2016, 53% had at least one serious defect (Gock and Kleinig, 2024). Similar problems with apartments, and costs for removal of dangerous cladding have been reported nationwide (Alves, 2020, Bachelard, 2023, Cunningham, 2024, Visontay, 2022). There has also been renewed debate over building quality in the UK (Wainwright, 2023), a problem made emblematic by the Grenfell tower fire, and the exposure of many high-rise apartment buildings to flammable cladding (Burn-Murdoch, 2023). A review commissioned by the previous Conservative Government looked at the dearth of quality provided in the housing market, amid the lack of self and custom-building (Bacon, 2021).

Lastly, a final key housing issue is the legal structures that govern multi-residential developments in the cities of the UK and Australia (Bright et al., 2025, Easthope et al., 2014). Cohousing, in offering an alternative approach to multi-residential governance, can respond to the disenfranchisement of multi-dwelling renters and owner-occupiers who are often victim to the whims of landlords or developers, with minimal control over maintenance or the retrofitting of sustainability measures (Bright and Weatherall, 2017). Multi-title regimes in the UK and Australia, utilizing the leasehold and strata title models respectively, are accused of not providing robust means for residents to remedy building defects or issues collectively (Sherry, 2013). While living alongside each other, sharing the structure and common spaces of the building, owners and tenants are often unable to deliver governance arrangements that effectively use their strength in

numbers. In this sense the growth of multi-residential housing, at the expense of single-household types, has yielded only a rehashing of an individualized pathway.

### 1.3 Key research questions

These noted failings in how housing functions, particularly the emergent issues in multi-residential developments, should provide an opportunity for alternatives that eschew many of the fundamentals of the mainstream system. In highlighting a model like cohousing, with its utopian history, this study builds on previous research which have heralded the promise of housing projects premised on collective governance, mutual support, the encouragement of social sharing and structures aimed at decommodification (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). As discussed further in Chapter Two, cohousing in the UK and Australia has evolved out of radical movements aimed at addressing perceived societal failings. 19<sup>th</sup> century worker movements in the UK and utopian communities in settler-colonial Australia promoted ideals of communal living as bulwarks against the dominion of state or capital (Birchall, 1988, Burgmann, 2008, Metcalf, 1995, Nelson, 2018). This thesis instead focuses on urban examples of cohousing, a more recent phenomenon in both countries. In building on the utopian lineage of cohousing, this research concentrates on the potential for the urban iteration of the model to represent an alternative to multi-residential housing. As the case studies intend to show, cohousing offers a clear contrast to conventional approaches, facilitating multiple households to design, build and govern their housing together, and offering affordable, mixed-tenure homes in the 'saturated space' of cities (Huron, 2015). Yet, cohousing remains a very small segment of both the Australian and UK housing systems, albeit with some signs of growth. This research not only aims to dissect this niche status, but analyse what the challenges for cohousing may suggest about the dominant approach towards property in both countries. While other research on cohousing has catalogued the impact of financing and regulatory hurdles, housing development industry preferences or lack of community-group capacity (Fernández Arrigoitia and West, 2020, Jarvis et al., 2016, Nelson, 2018,

Palmer, 2016), this study focusses on the challenge of how members access, govern, and utilise property in land and housing. A number of researchers have touched on, but not interrogated in full, the process by which cohousing groups secure and govern their land (Chatterton, 2013, Coates, 2011b, Droste, 2015, Jarvis et al., 2016, Szemző et al., 2019). Important as these contributions are, this research aims to conduct an in-depth examination of how cohousing groups acquire land, the planning frameworks that they operate within, what their development model is, and how they govern their land and housing together once their scheme is finalised. Beyond further illustrating the challenge of sourcing land, this study argues that cohousing can subvert and resist the financialised approach to property, through its alternative approach to multi-residential housing.

To analyse how cohousing groups come to acquire, build on, and govern land, this research will utilise the theoretical lens of property relations. In considering the relational understandings of cohousing communities to property, this draws on Blomley's (2004) invitation to look beyond the initial purchase of land to observe the subsequent enactments of property, and what this means for social relations. This draws attention not only to the land acquisition story of cohousing groups, but also how property relations towards land and housing illuminate continued 'doings' of property. So, while beginning with the mundane details of the search for, and acquisition of, a plot of land for a cohousing community, the research opens out to enquire whether the collective approach of cohousing members to their land and multi-residential housing helps overturn conventional norms of property. This builds on critiques which highlight how property is a social construct that has hitherto been formed by those seeking to profit from land and housing to the exclusion of social needs and environmental imperatives (Alexander, 2010, Christophers, 2010, Harvey, 1982).

The neoclassical understanding of property that underpins most conceptions of land and housing in Australia and the UK has come to value land sites just as any other commodity (Ryan-Collins et

al., 2017), neglecting its unique properties – that it is finite, and that its use fundamentally impacts on the wider environment, built and natural, that sustains human and non-human species (Shrubsole, 2019). Moreover, the development and use of property in liberal settings has come to be associated with a set of rights and obligations prescribed as an exercise in individual agency, rather than anything collaborative or even communal (Harvey, 2011). When such a private, individualised attitude to property is combined with the treatment of the home as a financial asset fundamental to family wealth creation and the wider workings of the economy (Ronald and Elsinga, 2012), a major hurdle for collaborative, non-speculative use of land is erected.

In this context, the thesis is compelled to question how cohousing could forge a viable alternative to conventional property relations, not grounded in the exchange value of housing and land. One possibility suggested here is for a ‘post-growth’ form of property (Alexander, 2010). In this way, the property relations of cohousing members could be seen as responsive not only to social need, but also to the climate and ecological crisis, including the stress on finite land. The post-growth field has emerged from broader scholarship that critiques the dominant fixation on economic growth (Hickel and Kallis, 2020). In centering environmental limits not least those in land, post-growth housing visions reject market-led housebuilding in favour of more diverse housing models and tenures, including those which address environmental footprints through a more efficient, sustainable use of space (Durrant et al., 2023, Knuth et al., 2020). Such relational understandings of property ‘value’, particularly when created through collaborative, intentional means, offer a sharp contrast to the treatment of housing and land as an asset (Christophers, 2010).

To further interrogate whether cohousing could be an alternative form of multi-residential housing that addresses the challenges highlighted above, this thesis seeks to answer a series of interconnected questions. These serve to probe the workings of the case studies particularly as they relate to the governance of land and housing, and reflect on the interaction between the

cohousing case studies and dominant ideas in the planning of urban areas and development of housing.

- i) How do the cohousing case studies govern their land and housing, and how does this relate to the conventional management of multi-residential property?
- ii) How have the cohousing developments approached their respective local planning regimes, and what is their relationship to the housing density and compactness agenda?
- iii) Amid the dominant focus on housing supply by governments in both Australia and the UK, what approach to housing development is offered by the cohousing case studies?

The first question initially demands a close analysis of the process by which the studied cohousing groups acquired the land for their developments. This involves digging into their respective inception stories, how they found and purchased the land, and, then ultimately the methods by which the groups govern their land and housing collectively. It aims to reveal the alternative property relations towards housing and land encapsulated in cohousing, and the potential of collective models of governance. In particular, it focuses on cohousing groups who have utilised a co-operative governance structure, that offers the most direct contrast to the dominant leasehold and strata title systems in the UK and Australia. Moreover, an answer to the first question is predicated on whether there are benefits in the alignment between the socio-spatial architecture of cohousing, and the co-operative form of multi-residential governance. This includes differentiating itself from for-profit, multi-residential development through the creation of new tenures, opportunities for affordable housing, and the fulfilment of local housing need.

The second question focuses on cohousing's interaction with the planning system in both Australia and the UK, a subsequent 'doing' of property by cohousing groups, that through

alternative planning visions has a wider impact on their respective neighbourhoods and cities. However, cohousing remains a unknown quantity for many planners in both countries (Chatterton, 2015a). In attempting to find a route through government scepticism, many cohousing practitioners have advocated for a 'participatory' form of planning that could unlock the possibilities of the cohousing model (Horelli, 2002). In arguing that the promise of enhanced community participation in planning has failed to overcome a financialised approach to property, community-led models like cohousing can instead be aligned to a form of post-growth planning that is attuned to power relations over land and housing, social needs and environmental limits. To probe this potentiality, this thesis views cohousing through its contestation with, and subversion of, a dominant norm: the pursuit of the 'compact city'.

While the drive for compactness has several facets, two are especially pertinent: the prioritisation of development on brownfield land, and the increased density of housing in established areas. Both aspects have been framed by mainstream compactness proponents as answers to challenges of housing supply and urban environmental sustainability (Floater et al., 2014, Troy et al., 2020). Compactness often underpins other policies such as transit-oriented development, mixed-use development, and a focus on walkability or active transport, yet action often fails to meet the rhetoric. Furthermore, conventional compact urbanism aligns processes of densification, infill, and reuse of existing brownfield land to the pursuit of economic growth (Haarstad et al., 2022). In fixating on a growth-dependent model based on the success of profit-seeking housing projects, compactness can be accused of imposing the gentrifying impacts of urban infill on existing communities, often to meet dubious green objectives.

This research draws attention to how cohousing operates as an alternative expression of density, shared space, and design for inner-urban environments. Cohousing provides an important reconsideration of the relationship between space and private housing, not only through the use of greater shared spaces, but the associated restriction of private residential areas. In questioning

compactness orthodoxy the framework of post-growth planning will be used. Post-growth planning's critique of compact for-profit housing (Durrant et al., 2023), offers a lens through which to view cohousing's alignment with heterodox planning approaches. This situates cohousing in debates on how new housing development can be better integrated not only in the built form but social fabric of communities, particularly in recognising how multi-residential schemes work together with finite land. Moreover, it addresses an identified gap in research around how public planners might facilitate or frustrate the post-growth potential of cohousing (Cucca and Friesenecker, 2021).

The third and final overarching question interrogates the approach to housing development of cohousing groups, thereby examining how cohousing relates to housing provision more broadly. This situates cohousing within one of the most contentious housing debates of the day, the need for increased housing supply. In both Australia and the UK, political discourse over the housing crisis has recently fixated on the importance of boosting supply (Mulheirn, 2019, Murray, 2021a). Proponents claim that increased supply will provide more affordable housing options, yet this sweeping solution has been much critiqued. The prominent supply focus masks a fault-line in these countries – that housing has become valorised for its durability as a financial asset (Aalbers, 2019), rather than for the supportive role that affordable and stable housing provides. Indeed, the pursuit of housing as an asset exacerbates access to affordable housing (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). Moreover, claims for more sustainable housing recede into the background amid the pursuit of increased housing units (zu Ermgassen et al., 2022). In this context, community-led housing initiatives like cohousing that sit outside both dominant private development and the government delivery of public housing struggle for recognition and support.

Discussion of the supply agenda as part of the final research question also profiles the interaction of cohousing groups with state actors, both local and national, given the role of government in fostering this demand for supply. This includes schemes that were directly supported by

government to successful ends, and those who received but then lost political backing. Related sub-questions include whether cohousing deserves state support, and more pointedly, how does it relate to public housing provision, if at all? Moreover, the research asks whether cohousing meshes with an alternative housing role for the state that diverges from its fixation on economic growth and supply at all costs. In returning again to new understandings of property beyond growth, a more deliberative model like cohousing could respond to new principles that laud housing diversity, ecologically responsive housing, and intentional communities.

Together the research objectives aim to contribute to policy discussions around the cohousing model, and the planning and development of multi-residential housing in Australian and UK cities more broadly, thereby addressing the local manifestations of housing unsustainability (Hill and Mazzucato, 2024, zu Ermgassen et al., 2022) and unaffordability (Burke et al., 2020, Ryan-Collins and Murray, 2021). This includes learning from any successful cohousing projects and policy innovations that could prove instructive. Beyond the immediate development of housing for local communities, this centres cohousing within debates around how we build and dwell collaboratively in urban areas and steward our collective resources together.

## 1.4 Chapter structure

This thesis is composed of eight chapters, including this introduction. The three main empirical sections are Chapters Five, Six and Seven. The following, Chapter Two, delves into the literature surrounding cohousing, while, in explaining its length, it also offers a conceptual framework to work through the empirical material. Initially discussion turns to defining the model and what its proponents see as its core benefits. Relatedly, in outlining the history of cohousing the research focuses on its evolution and status in both the UK and Australia, and how the current literature has discussed the key hurdles to the model in each country. As part of a focus on the problems faced by groups in obtaining suitable, affordable land sites, a relational understanding of property is advanced. In arguing that cohousing offers a heterodox approach to multi-residential property,

its alterity is situated within three areas of the land and housing system in both Australia and the UK. This firstly takes in literature that describes how property has come to be financialised, before discussing the governance of multi-residential housing. In unpacking housing governance, this concentrates on how cohousing contrasts to the conventional legal structures for multi-residential property in both countries; leasehold in the UK and strata title in Australia. Subsequently the relationship of planning in both countries to cohousing is discussed. Within this, the emphasis on compactness in urban planning authorities in both Australia and the UK is examined before surveying the literature that surrounds cohousing as a 'compact' alternative. Lastly, the review focuses on how cohousing, as a form of deliberative development, relates to the promotion of increased housing supply. With governments in both countries aligning policy and funding to boost supply as an answer to the housing 'crisis', it is argued that community-led cohousing initiatives are squeezed, not only in obtaining developable land, but by the demand for pace and scale.

The methodology used to interrogate the cohousing schemes is discussed in Chapter Three. This includes the research design that underpins the qualitative focus, with a series of semi-structured interviews detailing the workings of a series of cohousing cases in both the UK and Australia. The process of how case studies were settled on, and the many unexpected frustrations and opportunities that occurred during the fieldwork phase are carefully dissected. The primary research material is a series of semi-structured interviews with cohousing members, supportive practitioners such as architects and development professionals, as well as key government stakeholders. The cohousing communities cover the spectrum from long established groups, through newly built, to those in construction. An introduction to the full list of cohousing case studies comes in Chapter Four. This allows for a review of the basic details of each scheme, including the number of households, their prospective or actual architectural design, alongside a potted history of their initiation. This includes the process by which the land sites were acquired,

given that the use of land forms a crucial frame through which the cohousing model is interrogated.

Chapter Five unpacks the first question outlined above, in reflecting on what some of these cases might suggest about the governance of land and housing, and alternative approaches to property in cohousing communities. It focuses on two cohousing case studies, one in Leeds, England, and another in Nipaluna/Hobart, Australia<sup>1</sup>. This empirical chapter analyses the methods used by both groups to govern their land and housing collectively, with the two being co-operatives. This first portion of research finishes by discussing how diverse tenure models are supported, how the schemes structure member equity, and how they seek to maintain their community into perpetuity.

The second empirical segment, Chapter Six, turns attention to how selected case studies interact with the planning regimes in both Australia and the UK. It looks at two cohousing projects, one in Leeds, England and the other in Kamberri/Canberra, Australia. Both cities are aiming to drive compactness, and housing intensification through urban infill, including on brownfield land, is a vital element of their respective planning approaches. The cohousing projects also aim to introduce greater density and mix of housing to their neighbourhoods, premised on the sharing of space, gardens and technologies. How these cohousing schemes challenge compactness orthodoxy is interrogated, particularly in much sought alternatives to conventional urban infill and density. In building on debates in urban planning and critiques of compactness this research contends that cohousing can form part of a post-growth planning agenda that rejects the extractive, unsustainable housing development associated with mainstream compactness. In discussing these two case studies, this research suggests how a post-growth planning system could utilise cohousing.

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<sup>1</sup> For all Australian place names, the First Nations names that correspond to the respective colonial names for cities will be used alongside the colonial names, so Nipaluna/Hobart, Kamberri/Canberra, Naarm/Melbourne, Gadigal/Sydney

Chapter Seven, the final empirical section, profiles three cohousing schemes, Squeezed in London, Chapeltown Cohousing in Leeds and Cohousing Co-operative in Nipaluna/Hobart. While they all initially received government support, only Chapeltown Cohousing (ChaCo) and Cohousing Co-operative were built. All these schemes have not only been actively supported by government, including through funding, but they also interact with social and affordable housing. The development in Chapeltown includes several properties for both affordable rental and shared ownership, and the bid for the land was prepared in partnership with a housing association, which has sited social housing properties adjacent to ChaCo. Cohousing Co-op is one of the few examples of cohousing that is only open to members eligible for social housing, offering an important re-imagining not only of who social housing tenants are, but how cohousing fits into the broader social housing system. Squeezed meanwhile lost the support of its main government partner, who cited a desire to build social housing on the proposed site first promised for community-led housing. In the context of a political and policy debate where governments routinely argue that the creation of new supply should be the overriding focus, these three case studies offer important counterpoints. This helps to analyse the role of government in relation to cohousing, and questions how it could approach a model that diverges from conventional bang-for-buck housing supply. Given the deliberative, community-led model of cohousing, the research questions what it offers the housing system. If it is not an answer in scale terms, could it instead pose a reenvisioned set of property relations?

Chapter Eight of the thesis draws together the lessons from the cohousing schemes, in how the analysis contributes to the academic and policy literature surrounding cohousing. Through both empirical learnings and new theoretical understandings of property relations, the research outlines how cohousing operates as an alternative model of multi-residential property. There is much to learn from the informal processes and formal legal norms that cohousing groups use to govern their communities. Moreover, the socio-architectural model of private and communal residential space can challenge planning orthodoxy, including over compactness. Lastly, this study

shows how cohousing subverts mainstream conceptions of property development. With governments in both Australia and the UK concentrating on increased supply as the solution to public discontent over housing, cohousing offers a contrasting vision for new development, beyond scale and pace.

## Chapter Two: Literature review

### 2.1 Introduction

This literature review begins by defining the cohousing model and its key characteristics in Section 2.2. From its utopian history, cohousing has developed as a model underpinned by supportive networks of households bound together through shared space, facilities, and community ties. This espoused value of sharing is regularly linked by advocates to benefits in environmental sustainability, and an ability to create affordability through mutuality and efficiency. This chapter then discusses the history and status of cohousing in both the UK and Australia, in connecting the current iterations of cohousing to the lineage of radical housing and showing how the respective sectors are placed. With cohousing in both contexts still niche, amid some signs of new growth, attention turns to how researchers have discussed barriers prohibiting further expansion of the model in each country, including the lack of finance, paucity in development capacity, or scepticism towards the model. While recognising these contributions, this research follows on from that broader survey through the development of a conceptual framework in Section 2.3. This focuses on the challenges experienced by groups in negotiating a dominant set of property relations with one clear indication of this hegemony being the inability of many cohousing groups to obtain suitable and affordable land for development. Yet, in arguing that cohousing is an alternative form of multi-residential housing, this review then unpacks the literature which reveals that alterity, and how a heterodox understanding of property can be advanced in the empirical chapters.

Firstly, beyond the initial 'legal event' (Blandy et al., 2006) of the land acquisition, the analysis in Section 2.4 situates cohousing within conventional methods of multi-residential governance; leasehold in the UK and strata title in Australia. In building on critiques of these legal forms (Bright, 2025, Sherry, 2018), the research outlines the literature on the informal processes and

formal legal norms that cohousing groups use to govern their communities. This alternative relational understanding of property is further exemplified by how cohousing responds to planning norms in Section 2.5. While other studies have catalogued the common planning challenges faced by cohousing, this study will analyse cohousing through its engagement with the demand for ‘compactness’ (Kain et al., 2022, McFarlane, 2023). With housing intensification and increased density pressed onto much valued urban land, this overview begins to outline how cohousing’s own approach to space offers an alternative type of ‘compactness’. Lastly in Section 2.6, the community-centred development model of cohousing is examined through the literature, in particular how it pushes against the growing tendency for standardisation and volume-building in multi-residential property development. In particular, amid governments in both Australia and the UK concentrating on increased supply as the solution to public discontent over housing (Gallent, 2019, Gurran and Phibbs, 2015), cohousing appears as a model out of step with this imperative. Taken together, while this survey of literature may initially indicate more obstacles to cohousing in both countries, beyond those in land acquisition, an alternative conceptualisation of property provides a route beyond the hurdles erected by the financialised land and housing system.

## 2.2 Exploring the cohousing model in Australia and the UK

### 2.2.1 Defining cohousing – key characteristics

Cohousing can be seen as an association between organisational and spatial forms, in that the social design of the community is inextricably linked with its physical or architectural design (Tummers, 2015). This is reflected in key characteristics consistently associated with cohousing including the organization of shared, communal space alongside private homes, resident participation in the design and implementation of the cohousing project, ongoing collaboration thereafter, and the fostering of a cohousing ‘community’ (Vestbro and Horelli, 2012). In expressing how the architecture of cohousing responds to the organisational form, McCamant and Durrett

coined 'social contact design' (SCD) (1994). SCD principles encourage in cohousing projects opportunities for both spontaneous and planned socialising and community building. In learning from McCamant and Durrett, Williams highlighted the importance of resident participation not only in the inception of the cohousing project; its design, building or recruitment of residents, but ongoing collaboration in aid of 'inter-dependence, support networks, sociability and security' (2008, p.269). With McCamant and Durrett representing one school of thought as pioneering North American practitioners, Nelson (2018) an Australian researcher, is more closely associated with the European tradition of cohousing. Nelson defines cohousing as 'purposively co-located and connected neighbourhoods of multiple households, each household with a private dwelling but sharing, with their neighbours, specific common spaces, typically a common kitchen and dining area; resources, such as laundries and gardens; and activities, such as preparing and eating meals collectively' (2018, p.109).

Before further delving into the debates around cohousing, it is clear that there is consensus across the literature that sharing is fundamental to the model (Jarvis et al., 2016, McCamant and Durrett, 2011, Meltzer, 2011, Williams, 2005a). In particular what most cohousing researchers unite around is the centrality of shared facilities, particularly those that are located in a 'common house' or 'cohouse' (Vestbro and Horelli, 2012). This includes communal, shared facilities like laundries, entertainment rooms, gardens, offices and workspaces, gyms, and kitchen and dining areas. Most of these spaces are brought together under the same roof, to encourage spontaneous meetings. The fundamental role played by the common house, particularly in facilitating regular meals and gatherings, is seen as differentiating cohousing from other types that might include common facilities such as a laundry or meeting space or that might have semi-regular or annual festivities (Jakobsen and Larsen, 2019). Other aspects which are regularly evoked is that visibility of communal spaces should be maximised, with facilities positioned in relation to common walkways to encourage further interaction. The placement of cars on the periphery of

communities allowing for central pedestrianised spaces is also important for many cohousing developments, with some aiming to be car-free entirely (Chatterton, 2013, Jarvis, 2015b).

Because cohousing projects has been influenced by country-specific norms and building regulations over various eras, beyond some of these common design traits there is no pro-forma architectural model (Tummers, 2015, Vestbro and Horelli, 2012). Nelson works through various architectural types with criteria including low/high rise<sup>2</sup>, low to medium density, and the location of common facilities (2018). For instance the Swedish model is more medium- to high-rise often with an inbuilt floor of common facilities, compared to the Danish low-rise medium-density with a separated common house. Within this, it is possible to distinguish between urban and rural cohousing projects with rural developments naturally more likely to be low-rise (Jarvis 2015). Northern American cohousing communities, along with Australian and UK varieties are often single storey, but as discussed below some more multi-level designs are emerging.

### 2.2.2 Modern history of cohousing

There has been three distinct waves of cohousing, the first beginning in Northern Europe, the second in North America, the last in Australasia (Nelson, 2018, Sargisson, 2012). Given its social nature, iterations of cohousing were often interconnected with popular movements of the era. This includes early communitarian groups that critiqued and pushed back against 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalism, and later feminist and utopian movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Nelson 2018). The modern cohousing movement has been linked to utopian housing communities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Tummers, 2015, Sargisson, 2012). Vestbro and Horelli (2012) chart the evolution of modern communal living models from incarnations in both Northern Europe and migrant communities in the United States. Many of their studied communities were committed to gender equality including projects brought by feminist movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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<sup>2</sup> While recognising that there are regional differences in how 'low' and 'high-rise' are defined. For instance in Canada low-rise can be four or fewer storeys

They were often characterised by architectural designs that centralised kitchens amongst a group of households and social initiatives that collectivised housework, childcare and hired-help. Coates (2011a) argues that these earlier iterations inherited communal housekeeping proposals from the British co-operative movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Via further interventions particularly by feminists in the middle of the century, cohousing crystallised into a distinct model predominating in Scandinavia in the 1960s and 70s (Vestbro and Horelli, 2012). The Danish ‘living communities’ or *boføllskab* and the ‘*kollektivhaus*’ model in Sweden were soon joined by the *Centraal Wonen* in the Netherlands (Nelson, 2018). The cohousing movement further extended into Germany with the *nachbarschaftliches wohnen* (Ibid). These Northern European iterations of cohousing constitutes for many the ‘first wave’ of the movement (Vestbro and Horelli, 2012).

A ‘second wave’ of cohousing originated in North America approximately around 1986 (Williams, 2008). Its inception has been attributed in large part to the aforementioned work of American architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett (Sargisson, 2012). They sparked interest in cohousing especially in the United States through the publication of *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* (1994). The term ‘cohousing’ was popularised in the English-speaking world through their work. They were inspired by the Danish cohousing movement including their shared spatial designs to support multigenerational living. However, there were divergences from the 1<sup>st</sup> wave of cohousing. As part of their own architectural practice, they cast cohousing as a resident-led, private development model (Williams, 2008). While emphasising a collaborative design approach bringing together architects, developers, and incipient cohousing groups they eschewed the utopian strain of cohousing in Europe. A third wave of cohousing was discerned in Australasia and is picked up in the discussion below (Williams, 2005a).

### 2.2.3 Cohousing and environmental sustainability

Cohousing advocates, in highlighting a key benefit, argue that the evidence for the sustainability of cohousing is primarily linked to the core activities of residents, particularly the sharing of

facilities, resources and land (Nelson, 2018, Meltzer, 2000). These practices enable households to cut waste; energy from heating spare rooms; minimally used individual goods like tools, while encouraging collaboration on things like gardens or renewable technologies (Daly, 2015). Meltzer has conducted a number of studies into the environmental impact of cohousing design and the sustainable practices of residents (2000, 2006, 2011). A study of 12 cohousing communities from North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan found a range of quantifiable efficiencies associated with cohousing (Meltzer, 2011). Upon moving into cohousing, residents disposed of between 22-29% of freezers, washers and dryers in favour of communal options, and there was a minimal increase in dishwashers, televisions and refrigerators. Based on self-reported surveys by residents, there was an increase in energy efficiency by 5-6% and water conservation by 9%, albeit with variable results between case studies (Ibid). There was also a reported growth in pro-environmental behaviours relating to waste, toxic materials and other pollutants over a studied four-year period (Ibid). While Meltzer has cautioned that cohousing is not a panacea to environmental degradation, he argued in an earlier study that: 'cohousing demonstrates a physical, instrumental, and social context within which pro-environmental attitudes and behavior are nurtured and sustained' (2000, p.129). Clark (2021), through their analysis of two English cohousing communities, alongside co-living and other forms of shared living, has provided more recent evidence of cohousing's ability to generate 'lower-than-average domestic environmental impacts' (p.311). This includes through the use of carpooling, sharing of renewable energy infrastructure, laundries, tools, and other small household items.

For advocates of cohousing communities, the kind of everyday 'eco-collaborative' practice of residents supported by social structures of sharing and solidarity can provide new ways to live sustainably (Nelson, 2018, Daly, 2015, Jarvis, 2017). The argument follows that a pursuit of greenhouse-gas emissions reductions and environmental repair cannot simply rely on the deployment of renewable-energy powered or energy-efficient technologies but requires 'pro-

environmental' behaviour on a mass-scale (Marckmann et al., 2012). To minimise the resource footprints of occupants, alongside existing efforts to reduce household water and energy use, reductions in material consumption are required including that of food, goods and, services (Nelson, 2018). In contrast to conventional ideas of sustainable household behaviour grounded in individual agency (Schlosberg and Craven, 2019), it is argued that cohousing communities provide 'collectively-negotiated' methods to support low-footprint lifestyles (Jarvis, 2017). Associated with the move to a collaborative form of sustainability is a proposed shift from household to community or neighbourhood level action such as on the selection and use of renewable technologies (Daly, 2015, Nelson, 2018). It contributes to a fresh approach to the localisation agenda and the building of essential community-infrastructure (Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia, 2015, Seyfang, 2010). Cohousing practitioners like Chatterton (2013) have argued that new projects provide further sustainability prompts to urban planning agendas for example on active transport and the need for productive growing spaces in cities, including allotments.

These arguments are particularly relevant amid the oft-cited increasing rate of urbanisation worldwide (UN-Habitat, 2007). With calls for cities to embrace greater density and compactness to improve environmental sustainability (Floater et al., 2014), Meltzer's previously cited study of 12 cohousing communities showed a significant increase in density, equivalent to double American or Australian suburbs (2011). This has been joined by studies which have attested to the relative density of both cohousing in the UK (Jarvis, 2011), and Denmark (Larsen, 2019). Changes in demographic and household size have also been argued as reasons to support cohousing with a growth in one and two person households in the Global North (Daly, 2015). Cohousing can support these households to live more sustainably through the sharing of facilities like laundries. The contribution of cohousing to providing more 'compact' forms of urban living will be discussed further below, particularly as a method that runs counter to conventional urban planning.

### 2.2.4 Cohousing and affordability

Another key focus of cohousing research has related to questions of the model's affordability (Palmer and Tummers, 2019), with perspectives surrounding the affordability of cohousing developments as compared to other housing options. Of the Meltzer study referred to earlier, a third of his cases were 'genuinely' affordable, but overall the samples appeared 'no more affordable than regular housing, possibly less so' (2011, p.55-56). Nelson (2018) counters that, while the complexity of cohousing projects often adds to their construction time, they do deliver longer-term benefits compared to separate residences. In supporting affordability, cohousing can eliminate the need to build individual laundries or spare rooms (Nelson, 2018). Instead, communal laundries or bookable spare-rooms shared amongst a group of households can help to economise by keeping build and ongoing costs such as energy bills down. Cohousing communities have also pooled resources on other goods including large renewable energy systems or everyday items like tools (Chatterton, 2013). A major challenge, including for cohousing case studies discussed here, has been the large increase in construction costs, particularly post-pandemic (Archer and Cole, 2023, Rowley et al., 2023). As discussed further below in Section 2.6, large housebuilders have been able to better withstand such cost pressures than the small builders who commonly work with community-led groups.

There have been some notable cases of affordable cohousing. This includes the 'Low Impact Living Affordable Community' (LILAC) in Leeds, UK. As the name suggests, the project aimed to be affordable from the outset, instituted via the legal structure of the Mutual Home Ownership Society model (MHOS) (Chatterton, 2015b). This sets the proportion spent on housing at no more than 35% of net household income. Despite these mechanisms, LILAC's MHOS model has been argued to not be open to the poor or low paid, only middle income households with some personal savings (Hodkinson, 2012b). Chatterton has recognised issues with the replicability of the model including with the land being received at market levels from the local council, with

half the receipt being deferred (Chatterton, 2013). The project further received a government grant for decontamination of the land. The LILAC model has been envisaged to fit into the 'intermediate housing market' with rents above those of social housing but below market price. This aims to cover 40% of all UK households.

The retrofitting of conventional housing stock to create cohousing communities has been offered as one method to improve the affordability of the model (Williams 2008, Sanguinetti 2015). Other suggestions include diversifying with a mix of rental and owner-occupied properties (Williams, 2008). The presence or absence of government support is prominent in discussions around the affordability of cohousing, particularly in contexts such as Germany (Droste, 2015) and across Scandinavia (Hagbert et al., 2020). Improving affordability is crucial if cohousing is to break away from its current niche and addressing high land costs is an important step (Droste, 2015, Nelson, 2018), a discussion to which this research aims to contribute.

### 2.2.5 Cohousing in the UK

The first development to distinctly call itself 'cohousing' in the UK was reportedly *The Community Project* in East Sussex. In 1997/8 the group renovated a disused hospital to create 21 units for 74 people (Ruiu, 2016). Beyond this project, the UK cohousing sector was formed out of a wider lineage of radical, alternative housing models. This began with early worker movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that developed co-operative forms of housing, some along socialist or utopian lines, with prominent early examples such as the Rochdale Pioneers (Birchall, 1988, Fitzpatrick, 2018). Utopian planning ideas also emerged later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including Ebenezer Howard's 'Garden City' (Howard, 1902). The concept of shared space designed for social interaction, while on a more expanded scale in Howard's model, includes some of the principles that have been formalised in many cohousing projects. Coates (2011b) has drawn a link between the Garden City ideal and cohousing, and the advocates that followed on from Howard, including architect Charles Reilly who grouped houses around a central green space with communal facilities. Furthermore,

the Garden City proposal represented part of a growing push for communally-owned land (Monbiot et al., 2019). This was followed by self-build movements which briefly gained some traction, before the government-led planning and housing reforms post WWII (Hall, 2014). In the 1960s and 70s while the State began to retreat from the housing space, squatting movements grew to challenge housing orthodoxy and commodification, and to reclaim space in major cities in the UK (Vasudevan et al., 2011). Squats and communes alike proved to be early testing grounds for forms of shared living, even if the term cohousing wasn't used at the time (Jarvis, 2015b). Today the ranks of cohousing in the UK have swelled to over 30 established communities, 11 of those being newbuilds, the remaining 20 being retrofitted buildings. There are a reported further 65 groups in the process of development (UK Cohousing Network, 2024). Cohousing is often defined as forming a small part of what is called 'community-led housing' in the UK, sitting both across and alongside related types of mutual and co-operative housing, community land trusts and self-build groups (Field, 2020, Thompson, 2020a). It is estimated that there are around 1,200 community-led housing groups, managing or owning 170,000 homes (Archer et al., 2019). A large portion of these are co-operative housing (mutuals), with the latest account indicating that there are around 900 such groups in the UK (Confederation of Co-operative Housing, 2025). Membership is restricted to residents, who have a large degree of governance and control, across different types of collective ownership. Co-operative housing is around 1% of all homes in the UK (Lang and Roessl, 2013). This compares unfavourably to other European countries, including Germany at 6% or Sweden with 18% (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Cohousing communities in the UK may adopt a co-operative or mutual form (Nelson, 2018). Another related legal model which a number of cohousing communities are taking on in the UK is the Community Land Trust (CLT) (Hudson et al., 2019). CLTs differ from co-operative entities by deliberately separating housing tenure from ownership of land, with the land usually held in trust and residents acting as members of the trust (Thompson, 2015). Commonly, covenants are placed upon sales of the properties to enshrine affordability in perpetuity, ensuring decommodification of the land in particular. In the UK there

were 290 CLT groups counted in 2018 covering 826 homes, with the movement estimated to gather pace with 5,810 units in development by 2022 (Archer et al., 2019).

Cohousing in the UK has only seen limited support from central and local government. This has mostly come as part of assistance for broader community-led housing. In the early 2000s there was central government sponsored research into cohousing as an option (Williams, 2005b). In recent moves, the Greater London Authority (GLA) has initiated the Community-Led Housing Hub which acts as a pro-bono advice service for groups looking for funding, land or technical support (Fernández Arrigoitia and Tummers, 2019). This has in part been tied to a London-wide initiative to support borough councils to bring forward small land plots for community-led housing (Greater London Authority, 2019 ). Meanwhile, the UK government's Community Housing Fund, was presented initially as a game-changer for community-led housing, with an announcement of £60 million per year for five years. However, the fund was beset with delays and closed after 18 months in March 2020 (for schemes outside of London) (Heath, 2022). There has also been one-off top-up of £4 million to support projects currently in development (Community Land Trust Network, 2021). More recently, the newly elected Labour Government announced an investment of £20 million for community-led housing projects, the details of which are yet to be clarified (MHCLH, 2025). Ultimately, the cohousing sector has predominantly relied on a range of bottom-up initiatives to support the spread of the model. The Cohousing Network UK was established in 2007 to share knowledge amongst cohousing communities, raise awareness, and advocate for the sector (UK Cohousing Network, 2020). In 2019, it joined with peak bodies for the Co-operative and CLT sectors to form the umbrella advocacy and advice organisation Community Led Homes (Fernández Arrigoitia and Tummers, 2019). In a number of parts of the UK cohousing groups have been assisted by Community-Led Housing advice hubs (UKCN and CLH 2021, Field 2020), although as Pauker and Hamiduddin (2024) show the funding that these hubs receive from local authorities in particular is sporadic. Beyond funding allocated for community-led housing, there are some examples of cohousing projects which have some integration with the social housing system in the

UK. The Threshold Centre in Dorset became the first 'mixed-tenure' scheme, whereby half of its tenants were supported for social housing through a housing association that worked with the scheme (Heeks and Couzens, 2011, Ruiu, 2015). As the case studies of OWCH and ChaCo in this thesis show, there are a few schemes which have followed from the Threshold Centre's lead.

In terms of geographic spread, there are cohousing groups either established or in development in most major urban areas of the UK, but also in a mix of smaller towns and rural areas. It is present in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (UKCN and CLH, 2021). There is a diversity of construction types: new builds, refurbishment of disused buildings such as the East Sussex hospital mentioned above, and retrofit of existing housing to add shared spaces. There is a significant portion of cohousing communities that are self-building. However, the general lack of a self-build movement in the UK as discussed below, along with the minimal support from authorities may represent one of the impediments to an expansion of cohousing, although this argument has not been tested in specific research. A number of groups are forming particularly catered towards seniors (Szemző et al., 2019), and as an option senior cohousing has received some attention from both government and charity sectors alike (Brenton, 2013). Yet this will require significant investment to catch up to the likes of the Netherlands, where 200 senior cohousing communities exist (Brenton, 2011). As the case study of the Older Women's Cohousing shows, there are particular barriers experienced by seniors cohousing groups, beyond the other challenges that the broader sector faces.

### 2.2.6 Cohousing in Australia

Many of the current cohousing groups in Australia emerged out of activist networks, particularly connected with the ecology movement and communal living communities (Crabtree, 2005, Daly, 2015). It is argued that Australia is second only to Israel in number of intentional communities per capita (Sargent, 2008). Many of these communities still exist today, and they represent part of the housing ecosystem and history that surrounds cohousing. Akin to the UK, a number of Australian

studies of cohousing or intentional communities more broadly have drawn on the history of utopian housing movements (Crabtree, 2018a, Nelson, 2018). Radical socialist and anarchist groups sprang up to lead new housing ventures in response to the acceleration of industrial capitalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Around this time, the country's first urban commune was established by the Melbourne Anarchist Club in the State of Victoria (Cooper and Baer, 2019). Communal living experiments emerged in almost every state of Australia. A prominent movement of the time was William Lane's quest to build a socialist community in Paraguay, uprooting himself and a number of followers from the clutches of colonial Australia (Burgmann, 2008). In response to these ventures, a number of state governments supported communal groups financially. Historians have argued the emergent trade union movement prompted governments to act, particularly with Lane a leading labour figure at the time. Authorities were afraid that more groups would leave, and therefore according to Burgmann at least initially 'utopia would be realised with state assistance' (2008, p.35). Despite state support, many groups foundered particularly as their crops failed. Government support wavered with concerns that many communities were riven with both governance problems and lack of knowledge about Australia's climate (Metcalf, 1995).

The next discernible era in communal living came in the 1960s and 70s with the counter-cultural hippie movements (Crabtree, 2018a). Anti-materialist in nature, many were inspired by Schumacher's claim that 'Small is Beautiful' (2011) and his critique of hyper-consumerism (Cooper and Baer, 2019). Many of these intentional communities were based in rural areas, particularly in Northern NSW (Metcalf, 1995). Indeed, the growth of communal living at the time led NSW authorities to create planning legislation allowing for the creation of multiple homes on a single property (Crabtree, 2018a). Today, this multiple occupancy planning regime continues to be used by intentional communities and co-operatives in the state (Ibid). However many of the communities did not last long, with again practical knowledges often lacking particularly in self-building (Cooper and Baer, 2019). Despite this faltering, there is a strong inheritance from this

time including in the unearthing of 'permaculture' in Australia (Dawborn and Smith, 2011). It is argued that in the late 1970s, there was a splintering of the communal movement, with disagreements over how to position communities in relation to the capitalist market and state (Cooper and Baer, 2019). In the late 1980s and early 1990s a distinct cohousing movement in Australia surfaced (Nelson, 2018). It has been represented as being part of a 'third wave' across Australasia that inherited some elements from the US 'second wave', but also from the green groups of past decades. Like the previously discussed intentional communities, it too was largely confined to rural areas and centred on environmental conservation and the creation of local food production (Jarvis, 2015b, Williams, 2005a).

While numbers are hard to quantify there are an estimated 17 cohousing communities in Australia that have formed but with a growing number of new developments (Cooper and Baer 2019). The housing ecosystem that Australian cohousing is a part of is not as developed or diverse as in the UK. The broader community housing system is minimal, amid a small social housing system. The co-operative housing system, which is a significant pillar of UK cohousing, is smaller in Australia. There are an estimated 4,800 co-operative dwellings with the majority situated in the larger states of Victoria and NSW (Crabtree et al., 2019a), with most of those being 'rental' rather than equity co-operatives (Crabtree-Hayes et al., 2024). There are a number of examples of cohousing communities using a co-operative structure with many backed by non-profit housing organisations like Common Equity Housing Limited (CEHL) (Crabtree et al., 2019a). In Australia the use of CLTs is very minimal, with the model failing to grow at a similar rate to the UK (Crabtree et al., 2019b). There has been new attention to the CLT model from both community-led housing campaigns and some governments, but the model still remains in its infancy (Australian Community Land Trust Network, 2024).

In a shift from the history of intentional communities and early cohousing communities in Australia, there has been a recent growth in the number of groups setting up in urban or

suburban areas of major cities. Partly this may be a factor of the mega trend of urbanisation in Australia, with people clustering in cities for work or lifestyle reasons (Burke et al., 2020, Buxton and Mercer, 2024). It has been argued that governments and developers may be receptive to new policies that promote urban densification and experimental housing proposals like cohousing (Crabtree, 2018a). A few projects are evidence of this shift. Cooper and Baer undertook an in-depth study into two inner-urban projects, Christie Walk in Adelaide and WestWyck in Melbourne (2019). They explicitly see them as fitting into the utopian tradition of experimental housing, arguing they represent 'prefigurative projects...[that are] an attempt to inject ecotopian spaces into the city' (Ibid p.6). Previous analysis put Christie Walk at the forefront of ecocity design in Australia, emphasising its environmentally sustainable features and medium density in the centre of Adelaide (Crabtree, 2005). Other similar development types are emerging, including the medium density form taken by Melbourne group Urban Coup (Palmer, 2019). In this sense while Australia may not be experiencing a rapid scaling up of cohousing, it is diversifying and spreading out in a range of architectural forms, backed by different legal entities. There is now an umbrella organisation, Cohousing Australia, which advocates on behalf of groups and also links prospective members to projects and shares knowledge about all aspects of development (Cohousing Australia, 2020).

### 2.2.7 Research on barriers to cohousing in Australia and the UK

In the review thus far, cohousing has been introduced through literature that surrounds the broader sector in Europe and North America, the first two 'waves' of the model. Following that, it surveyed two of the most prevalent arguments used by advocates for cohousing, in its sustainability and affordability, both qualities which can be linked to its model of socio-architectural sharing. It built on these wider discussions with accounts of the history and current state of cohousing in both the UK and Australia. This showed a model that remains a niche segment of the respective housing systems. In interrogating this status, focus turns to what

barriers have been identified through country-specific research. The challenges faced by cohousing in both countries will be discussed together, while not losing site of the specificities of each.

Researchers have identified several barriers facing cohousing. The difficulty in sourcing finance for development is often cited, with many schemes requiring upfront investment from future residents, either in the shape of equity or debt (Nelson, 2018). In attracting finance through either individual or collective mortgages prospective communities regularly encounter a reluctance from lenders. This is most pronounced in Australia (Cooper and Baer, 2019), with the UK having a more well-developed small and independent banking sector with select building societies known as supporters of community-led housing (Heywood, 2016). Some aspect of self-financing is evident in most schemes, collecting together funds via a variety of means (Crabtree, 2005). Sweat equity is also crucial to many developments, with many groups choosing to 'finish' their built form or landscaping through their own labour (Meltzer, 2005).

In both Australia and the UK, groups are often starting from scratch with no well-trodden path of development or legal processes to follow (Jarvis et al., 2016), although there have been attempts to address this through how-to guides from both Cohousing Australia (Daly and McGee, 2023) and its UK counterpart (UKCN and CLH, 2021). Meanwhile, study (2005b) of UK cohousing in comparison to the American sector spoke of an absence of expertise towards cohousing, particularly from professionals including developers, property agents, and planners. Today, while there is increased development industry knowledge of collaborative housing (Palmer, 2019), many groups face a lack of understanding of what cohousing is, particularly from government agencies (Fernández Arrigoitia and West, 2020). Meanwhile, as discussed previously, while the UK has had some limited support for intermediary advisory organisations designed to support community-led housing (Szemző et al., 2019), in Australia voluntary, bottom-up networks remain the only source of bespoke advice beyond for-profit development industry professionals (Palmer, 2016). The lack

of awareness towards cohousing from some professionals and government actors is for many researchers indicative of broader failures to communicate the benefits of the model (Jarvis et al., 2016). While cohousing advocates have long recognised that cohousing will remain oblivious to much of the population (Meltzer, 2000), studies have pointed to the need to break down stigmas about what the model represents (Sanguinetti and Hibbert, 2018). For instance, a focus group of older Australians found that participants negatively associated cohousing with the 1960s share houses of their youth (Riedy et al., 2019).

Part of the challenge that many researchers touch on is the need to improve inclusivity of cohousing communities according to race, income, age, and gender (Jarvis et al., 2016). As will be discussed further below, partly as a result of the dominant approach to property and associated lack of access to affordable land, housing equity or other wealth could become the determinant for the success of most cohousing groups. Williams (2008) has argued that the high capital costs of cohousing developments often lock those without equity out of the model. Meanwhile Arbell (2021) has compellingly argued that cohousing in the UK has become synonymous with a white, middle-class disposition, beyond any already existing economic exclusions. This necessitates addressing the cultural bias against diverse, inclusive developments inherent in the sector. In their Australian based study of Christie Walk and WestWyck, Cooper and Baer (2019) noted that while the groups weren't homogenous, there was a predominance of well-educated, white, and professionally employed residents. It is worth noting there are only a handful of developments in Australia which are targeted at lower-income households (Crabtree, 2005, Crabtree et al., 2019a).

Making the cohousing model more inclusive is not simply about attracting new possible residents, but also about convincing governments about their eligibility for support. As Field (2020) argues, community-led housing is often perceived by government agencies as a model for the middle class, while Szemző et al. (2019) discerned a scepticism from UK municipalities that collaborative housing could support local authority goals. Amid minimal support for community housing

delivery in the UK, the paucity of backing from stakeholders, particularly government, to help cohousing groups overcome financial, planning, and other institutional barriers is seen as crucial (Jarvis et al., 2016). Meanwhile, in Australia the rental co-operative sector receives government funding with those providers like the previously mentioned CEHL being classed as 'community' housing, with their tenants eligible for rent assistance from the Federal Government (Crabtree-Hayes et al., 2024). Isolated projects have attracted some funding, with Murandaka gaining support from a one-off Federal Government stimulus package which was introduced in the wake of the global financial crisis (Jordan, 2012).

While not discounting the issues faced by groups, in obtaining finance, the paucity of development industry capacity, or the scepticism to and lack of awareness of the model, the primary obstacle focused on in this research is how cohousing groups access land for their developments. While some of the other barriers presented here are also instructive and feed into the discussion, a focus on relations around property for cohousing is able to inform several key debates that surround the model as a multi-residential alternative, including the key research questions that interrogate the governance, planning and development of cohousing.

## 2.3 Introducing a relational understanding of property

Central to this project is an emphasis on the 'property relations' surrounding the land and housing of cohousing developments. While advancing an approach to the case studies through a relational understanding of property, this study acknowledges the alternative frameworks that could have been used, including through viewing multi-residential property from a governance perspective (Fitzpatrick, 2018). In essence, this research flips that analysis in observing not only the governance, but the planning and development of cohousing from the lens of property relations, aiming to develop a productive conversation between heterodox legal theory, planning and housing scholarship, and urban studies literature (Blandy et al., 2018, Blomley, 2004, Durrant et al., 2023, Thompson, 2015). In concentrating on the relations around property for cohousing

groups, this uses Harvey's definition of 'property' as 'land and its appurtenances', or in other words the buildings sited on land (1982). In learning from Harvey, Christophers (2010) outlines how property is a social construction, a concept 'put to work' (p.95), primarily by those seeking to profit from both land and housing often through the labour or rent of others. Crucially for this thesis, the extraction of value from land in for-profit development is also analysed for its environmental impact. This aims to draw the relational focus on housing together with scholarship that has unpacked the environmental damage of neoliberal norms of property, particularly on finite land (Alexander, 2010, Varner, 1994).

In focusing on property relations this recognises not only the flaws of the dominant conception of 'private property', how the term has been limited through state ratification (Lund, 2016) and how such hegemonic forms have been created in order to service capital accumulation, but also how conventional understandings of property can be subverted through alternative, relational understandings of value. Given the flaws with orthodox forms of private property, it is legitimate to question whether the frame of property should be eschewed as part of projects for alternative approaches to land and housing. Gerber and Gerber (2017) for instance argue instead for a positive embrace of the term 'possession' that rejects property's 'construction of an abstract world of monetarily-evaluated commodities' (p.552). Yet, given that most community-led housing projects, including the cohousing groups discussed here, still operate within the spectrum of private property - with elements of communal control, the discourse cannot be avoided.

Furthermore, as Blomley (2008) suggests, the 'language of property...can provide a powerful, extant, political register for naming, blaming and claiming' (p. 325).

The focus on property relations not only draws attention to how land and housing is treated like a financial asset, but the ways in which these processes can be resisted, including by cohousing schemes. The financialisation of both land and housing has been the subject of extensive research in recent years (Aalbers, 2019, Beswick and Penny, 2018, Christophers, 2015, Fields and Raymond,

2021, Ryan-Collins and Murray, 2021). In defining financialisation, this thesis sees it as where housing has been turned into an asset that through its sale and use as a form of credit, is able to accumulate significant returns to capital, and is much sought after by a range of actors from large-scale corporate interests, to 'mum-and-dad investors'. In a local manifestation this is contributing to home ownership rates peaking in both countries (Burke et al., 2020, Gallent, 2019), and transfers of equity which are exacerbating existing geographical and socio-economic divides (Dorling, 2014, Piketty, 2014, Ryan-Collins and Murray, 2021).

The understandable focus on housing affordability highlighted in the section 1.2, has often obscured the financialisation of land. How finite, environmentally-precious urban land is treated through the development of housing serves as a major undercurrent to this research, given the obtainment of land is a hurdle to cohousing groups. These incipient communities experience the effects of what Ward and Swyngedouw (2018) explain as 'assetisation', or the turning of a piece of land into a financial asset. Community-led cohousing projects are competing with those developers and landowners who drive this 'supply-side' of financialisation. Yet, as outlined by Christophers (2015), the discourse of financialisation can be simultaneously totalising and limited, and consequently restrictive to those articulations which push against the great weight of what has been 'financialised'. In utilizing a relational understanding of property, this thesis aims to simultaneously treat the workings of property seriously, including in how its hegemonic form has contributed to the financialisation of both land and housing, but also with the due irreverence that comes with any counter-hegemonic challenge to a socially constructed concept.

### 2.3.1 Dominant understandings of property

The 'private ownership' model of property has long operated at the centre of both the discourse and practice of the [Western] capitalist system (Singer, 2000). Under this orthodoxy, individual private ownership is elevated, and an extractive relationship to property is prioritised, including the use of land and housing as assets. Moreover, state ownership is tolerated as a peripheral

concern and as Blomley argues, in its hegemonic form ‘only certain relations are named “property” and particular social actors recognized as viable owners’ (2008, p.321). It is this conceptualisation, particularly as articulated by dominant state and corporate actors in the ‘property-owning democracies’ of Australia and the UK, that has marginalized alternatives to the private, increasingly financialised form of ownership (Layard, 2019, Meyer, 2015, Ryan-Collins and Murray, 2021). The ownership model includes so-called absolutist proponents, who argue that the right to exclude is the animating idea of property (Blandy, 2013), and reject restrictions on the use or sale of privately owned property (Nozick, 2017). However, Underkuffler-Freund (1995) shows that while this sparse, private conception of property ownership often dominates theoretical discussion, the reality is that the institution of property is more socially-grounded, including in numerous obligations on owners.

A group of scholars, so-called ‘legal realists’ argued that property is not simply defined by the private control and dominion of owners but a ‘bundle’ of rights, duties, liabilities and powers (Alexander, 2010). Articulated most notably by Honore (2013), the ‘bundle of rights’ thesis delineates rights to possess and use, as well as manage, gain income, and extract capital value from property. Moreover it denotes security from expropriation and expectations for the return of property - for instance a rental. It also outlines exclusions from terms on the possession of rights, along with duties related to the harm of others, or others property, and liabilities concerning to the recouping of debt related to property. Advocates have argued that these rights can be separated out, and operated by both owners and other stakeholders which allows for the analysis, discussion, and subsequent regulation of different rights in the bundle (Singer, 2000). While in part an attempt to ground property rights in the multitude of obligations to others, it has been argued that this approach has only a facile understanding of social relations, and that its abstractness draws attention away from how power shapes the ‘spaces’ of property (Blomley, 2004).

As Blandy et al. (2006) show, this flaw is particularly visible in relation to multi-residential housing. There is a lack of clarity on what constitutes the bundle of rights in multi-residential housing, and how it is affected by the role of professionals in both the development and ongoing management of buildings. In an analysis of both the strata title model in New Zealand and leasehold in the UK, they found that 'many respondents expressed powerlessness in the face of the contractual right to manage exercised by professional managing agents' (p.2381). The right to manage is thus distorted through the manipulation of laws by developers and property managers. This provides an important backdrop to the alternative proposition of many cohousing groups, including the case studies discussed here.

### 2.3.2 Property relations and land

Understandings of property as a resource governed by certain rules, understandings, and relations have often centred on the role of land (Schlager and Ostrom, 1992, Blomley, 2004, Meyer, 2015). As Elden argues, 'land' has come to be seen as a form of 'territory' to which property relations have been attached (2010). This is supported by Sherry (2017b) who claims that land is unique in property terms, firstly in that 'it never ceases to exist' and that as humans, we all have to be on some piece of land, at all times' (p.47). Furthermore, given that it is finite, this elevates its role in sustaining both human and non-human life. Yet, land is not treated as exceptional under the conventional private property ownership model. This is an assessment hundreds of years in the making. Neoclassical economics, the foundation stone on which neoliberal capitalism has been built, classified land just the same as capital, goods, and labour (Christophers, 2010, Ryan-Collins et al., 2017, Shrubsole, 2019). However, viewing land as simply another commodity to be traded fails to recognize its characteristics. As a finite commodity its capture distorts market processes unlike most other goods, creating monopolies that benefits 'rent-seeking' landowners (Christophers, 2010, Christophers, 2020, Stratford, 2020).

The concept of rentierisation focuses attention particularly on how unearned rents are extracted most pertinently from landed-property, for example housing on prime land sites, through the exploitation of the unique characteristics and finite nature of such sites (Christophers, 2019, Christophers, 2020, Ryan-Collins and Murray, 2021). There are two arguments against the kind of rents being acquired in relation to land. The first is that it is unearned income whereby landowners can charge huge rents or attract large sales for properties unrelated to their investment in the land. The uplift in land value is largely linked instead to public investment, agglomeration effects of population density, and the socio-cultural attraction of certain locations (Ryan-Collins et al 2017). The second cited reason to target rentierism in land is that it is inefficient, due to the distortionary effects of the monopolies created with it (Stratford, 2022). This financialisation and endless extraction from such life-sustaining land is also criticised for environmental reasons, and has become a key feature of the 'post-growth' critique of the dominant economic system (Baumann et al., 2020), including of housing development on finite land (Nelson and Chatterton, 2022).

The capture of ground rents by a select few has been amplified in urban areas. This is relevant given suggestions that cohousing groups in both the UK and Australia have experienced greater difficulties amid a move away from rural sites, to an increasing urban focus (Chatterton, 2013, Crabtree, 2018a). The contestation for prime land from which to extract rents, through new housing development, dominates the politics of many cities (Robinson and Attuyer, 2021). This is not a new phenomenon and has been the subject of influential studies particularly in relation to land in urban areas of the UK. Harvey (1982, 2009) was a forerunner in developing an explicit scrutiny of power and political economy in cities. Massey and Catalano (1978) spotlighted landownership in Britain, and how largescale private owners of land have long influenced the nature of political change. Cox (1984) also navigated the politics of British landownership, but in contrast to Massey and Catalano was more circumspect on the possibility for community movements to affect a land system riven by 'adversarial' politics and multiple constraints on

reform. Beyond the UK, Blomley (2004) and Logan and Molotch (2007) with their analysis of North American cities, renewed the emphasis on how conflicts over urban land often pit existing communities and those attempting to gain from the financialisation of land.

In relation to Australia, a defining issue is the colonial settlement of First Nations lands.

Government bodies can be seen as intimately connected with the dispossession of land from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly in enshrining a land titling system that was underpinned by the racist evocation of terra nullius (Bhandar, 2018, Keenan, 2018). While the High Court decision on the case brought by Eddie Mabo in 1993 opened the route for claims to native title that have returned control of a third of the country's land to First Nations, the urban centres of Australia have proven a harder context for the reassertion of land rights by Indigenous groups (Wensing and Porter, 2016). Redressing this situation must begin with an understanding of how the land ownership and governance practices of First Nations people diverge from the Western approach codified in state law and continued statecraft, and an acknowledgement that more than ever amid an ecological crisis there is much to be learnt (Crabtree, 2013).

### 2.3.3 Advancing an alternative property relations

Dominant conceptions of property are today in flux and as Blomley argues there are alternatives that 'can be recuperated both from within and without' (2004, p.15), which leaves space for heterodox models of property like cohousing. In recognizing the deficiencies of legally-informed frameworks such as the bundle of rights, property relations allows for a focus on the socially- and environmentally-embedded nature of property (Christophers, 2010, Singer, 2000, Varner, 1994). A relational understanding of property has been used by thinkers across geography, law and economics, to broaden conceptualisations of property beyond how it is defined in narrow legal terms (Blomley, 2004, Christophers, 2010, Ostrom, 1990, Singer, 2000). What is articulated legally, for instance in a land title for a cohousing development, responds to and interacts with a complex, evolving set of social norms, environmental realities, powerful interests, and state actors (Blandy,

2013). While property shapes our lives, it can be structured differently, including by prioritising social and ecological understandings of value, over economic imperatives (Alexander, 2010, Blandy et al., 2018). This is not to discount the 'hegemonized claims' made over property by the state and for-profit corporate interests who are able to wield legal norms to their advantage (Blomley, 2004). So while simultaneously arguing that property relations are dynamic, and that moments of crisis and the workings of social movements can shift norms and laws (Blomley, 2008, Davidson and Dyal-Chand, 2009), there are limitations in simply focusing on formal legal articulations of property, particularly in common law approaches like in Australia and the UK. A key restriction is the *numerus clausus* principle which entails that there is a 'closed number' of rights that can be permitted under law, with limited manoeuvre for customization. As Sherry (2017b) opines: 'unlike contract law, parties are not allowed to dream up almost any property entitlements they please' (p.53). And yet, the temporal nature of property relations does lend itself to the shifting of *de jure* expressions in legal canon, as well as the *de facto* relational understandings of property between people also being taken up through new rights (Blandy et al., 2018, Blomley, 2008). It is this interrelationship between what Ostrom (1990) calls the *de facto* 'working rules' of property and the hard edge of legal orthodoxy that has intrigued many scholars of alternative property relations (Blandy, 2013).

Locating cohousing as an alternative to the conventional approach to multi-residential property casts the research within a broader literature of collective responses to the governance of resources and spaces. In moving beyond the limitations of 'private property' another term is required. One possibility, in articulating a relationally-centred response is Alexander's delineation of 'governance property' (2012). Particularly through Alexander's discussion of condominiums in North America, governance property can most obviously be seen as a riposte to the exclusionary articulations of private property. While it offers a lens through which to critique the conventional management of multi-residential property (Apps, 2021), it is still grounded in a relatively narrow frame of ownership. This is unlikely to be adept in dealing with the diversity of tenures,

governance processes, and approaches to shared and private space that are found in the cohousing model. As such, this research aims to build on relational understandings of property which, in analysing how grassroots groups engage with both legal formalities and informal norms and structures, have turned to the 'commons' as an alternative to private property (Blomley, 2008, Fitzpatrick, 2018).

### 2.3.4 Linking property relations with a commons alternative

The commons can be understood as something that exists both spatially but also socially, with a distinct community of members that develop practices, ideas or rules that collectively govern a shared resource (Felstead et al., 2019, Monbiot et al., 2019). Many accounts of the commons explain the concept dialectically through its relationship with the physical enclosure of land and space (Chatterton, 2010, Hodkinson, 2012a). The various episodes of enclosure, both from feudal times and more recent parliamentary acts, have steadily eroded the rights of 'commoners' to grazing fields, forests and more. Today, only 3% of England is 'common land' with the vast majority of the country owned privately by aristocratic interests, companies, and crown and church holdings, with 5% owned by individual homeowners (Shrubsole, 2019). Acts of enclosure were not confined to European countries, with the phenomena going hand in hand with processes of colonization (Huron, 2015). The advent of enclosures in the UK are particularly relevant to this study, given colonial-era Australia inherited the British legal approach to land. The practice and law of enclosure in Australia sits alongside the imperial invocation of 'terra nullius' that acted as an erasure of the history and claims to land of Indigenous Australians (Crabtree, 2013).

While the historical episodes of English enclosures took in shared grazing land, public parklands or nature reserves (McCarthy, 2006, Shrubsole, 2019), the concept of the commons has grown beyond this battle. The 'urban commons' is a recurring area of focus in the literature. This relates to it being the site of the most violent examples of the enclosure, control and privatization of

space, but also activist struggles to reclaim and/or construct commons (Bunce 2016, Huron 2015). These movements represent an alternative to blatantly neoliberal imaginings of the city (Chatterton, 2016, Harvey, 2012, Hodgkinson, 2012a, Madden and Marcuse, 2016, Vasudevan, 2014, Marcuse, 2009). Today, the 'resources' associated with the commons are multitudinous, and this includes processes of 'commoning' articulated within housing. Standing (2019) for instance situates cohousing and related 'co' housing models as examples of the 'social commons' which reassert the local community provision of housing.

The range of social processes that sit behind acts of 'commoning' speak to the complexity of relationships, practices, and governance types that are involved (Chatterton, 2016, Huron, 2015). What may begin as a 'common' mindset amongst a group can through a mixture of actions, norms and rules create a physical entity of a 'commons'. This includes acts such as occupation or squatting, a changing of boundaries, or positioning of objects (Felstead et al., 2019, Vasudevan, 2014). The often social values of sharing, solidarity, and mutual support are seen as examples of the 'relational commons' or what Hodgkinson (2012b) sees as the glue that binds together groups engaged in differing acts of commoning, whether that be in social commons like cohousing projects or the use of natural commons such as reserves. This social relational concept bridges more radical evocations of the commons that demand collectively decided alternatives to the individualisation of most aspects of life under neoliberal capitalism (De Angelis 2006), and the historical study of common property regimes analysed by Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom, 1990).

Ostrom argued that communities organise around collectively agreed rules or members rights to sustain 'common pool resources' with a range of examples including from indigenous communities. Ostrom's evocation of local knowledges contributes to animating what Standing calls the 'social memory' of the commons, a process of recalling practices and values that have been a significant part of human history (Standing, 2019). If Ostrom's thesis forms one approach to the commons, other responses have adopted a more political approach critiquing global

neoliberal capitalism while advocating theories of resistance and reclamation of the commons (Harvey, 2012, Klein, 2001). In this vision, the commons operates in a dynamic fashion, combining defensive actions with those that are generative of 'new forms of life' (Jeffrey et al 2012, p.1249). 'Commoning' is, in other words, cast as an adaptive force that is continuously shaped by the contributions and connections between groups of people, often drawing together different knowledges and ontological theories to produce, and reproduce, the commons (Jeffrey et al 2012, Felstead et al 2019). Particularly for the neo-Marxist analyses of landownership highlighted earlier from Harvey (1982) and Massey and Catalano (1978), the dialectal relationship between enclosure and the commons remains crucial. Harvey argued that capital, if left unchecked, will 'destroy the two basic common property resources that undergird all forms of production: the laborer and the land' (2011, 105). This analysis has been taken forward by those highlighting aforementioned processes of 'rentierisation', the exploitation of unearned rents from land (Christophers, 2018, Christophers, 2020). This foregrounds both the protective nature of anti-capitalist commons that impose 'limits to capital' (Hodkinson, 2012b), alongside creative processes that take privately owned, rentier-exploited property back into common ownership (Blomley, 2008, Christophers, 2020).

There does however remain a tension between the existence of private ownership and expressions of common control and governance. A number of analyses suggest that while private ownership will continue to persist (Christophers, 2020), changes in both discourse and examples of creative resistance will be necessary. Blomley for instance has argued that: 'property rights, for too long, have been the exclusive domain of the Right, configured in restrictive and antisocial ways. Reclaiming the commons, then, requires a reclamation of language' (2008, p.325). Beyond such discursive initiatives, Harvey (2011) has also made space for more radical groups, including alternative housing initiatives to exercise private property rights 'from which they can reach out to further a politics of commons interests' (p.103).

### 2.3.5 Cohousing and commoning

In articulating the 'commoning' alternative that cohousing provides to conventional property relations, through heterodox forms of ownership and governance, Bossuyt's (2021) categorisation of four types of multi-residential 'property regimes' is instructive. Leasehold and strata models could be seen as 'planned market' regimes, that are defined by their tradeable income rights, but with limited control over governance and maintenance. The terms for their development have been often set, or 'planned', by external actors. Aside from self-management regimes whereby conditions of sale may be determined by an external actor, or an 'intentional market' type that includes some collective self-build groups, Bossuyt describes many collaborative housing projects as being typical of 'common' regimes, where 'commissioning, management, exclusion and income rights are all held in common' (Ibid, p.9).

This 'commons' categorisation of cohousing is echoed in work that has drawn links between the historical lineage of cohousing and projects that are emerging today. The co-operative sector, noted previously as formative to cohousing in several of the studied countries, is seen as a traditional method to organize the commons (Balmer and Bernet 2015). The squatting movement too, with various attempts to occupy space and reclaim the commons (Vasudevan, 2014), is a further link to the history of cohousing. Housing struggles prompt us to think beyond the reclamation of the commons, to what frameworks of common governance can support 'social reproduction' (Huron, 2015), in the spaces, facilities, gardens and affordable homes generated by some cohousing projects (Chatterton and Pusey, 2019). For example, physical spaces like communal laundries or co-buildings for dining and community gatherings are underpinned by social practices of commoning (Tummers and MacGregor, 2019). Many cohousing researchers have foregrounded how these everyday commoning practices are ripe for the cultivation of eco-collaborative practice, with residents learning environmentally sustainable behaviours together (Pickerill 2016, Tummers and MacGregor 2019). Furthermore, cohousing communities including

distinct 'eco' varieties are variously seen as common sites of 'experimentation' (Chatterton 2016), 'risk-taking' (Pickerill 2016) or utopian spaces of 'prefigurative commoning' (Hodkinson 2012). This again brings in the relational lens, to focus on how the informal and formal norms created in cohousing give rise to new approaches to property, that respect both the environmental limits on land and the social impacts of housing development. As such, given the intersection between the commons and post-growth scholarship, the possibility for cohousing groups to use such commoning practices to model housing degrowth has already been well canvassed (Cucca and Friesenecker, 2021, Lietaert, 2010, Nelson and Chatterton, 2022).

Many of these analyses have drawn attention to the processes within cohousing communities. And yet, beyond these internal forms of governance and practices of commoning further attention needs to be paid to the legal models of many cohousing groups, and how they may also relate to the commons. In property terms, cohousing like many 'mutual' housing models, can be considered an 'unpure' expression of the commons (Thompson, 2015), or what Rose (1998) calls 'limited common property', that is: 'held as a commons among the members of a group, but exclusively vis-a-vis the outside world' (p.132). Blandy (2013) too has concluded that cohousing shared spaces and facilities 'might be categorised as limited-access common property, with accompanying individual and jointly owned private property rights' (p.159). The degree of exclusivity as raised earlier is a core debate around cohousing, which in part relates to how schemes protect the integrity of their vision over time, including the affordability of homes. This is particularly in the context of land price inflation undermining efforts to reduce future speculation on housing. As Thompson (2015) argues, the concept of stewardship can provide a fundamental route to protection not only of the current housing community, but to a broader public via methods that maintain affordable, self-governed housing in perpetuity.

If groups are to eschew conventional property titles such as leasehold or strata, then attention turns to how their alternative legal models may underpin processes of commoning. In the section

that follows, the relational understanding of property is applied to the governance processes before and after the acquisition of land. In sifting through the relevant literature, this takes in how approaches to land and housing are legally ratified in Australian and UK cohousing groups, including through specific titling regimes. Yet crucially, this review of current research aims to highlight how informal norms are key parts of the governance systems that are found in cohousing communities.

## 2.4 Governance of multi-residential housing

The first research question outlines a focus on how cohousing communities govern their land and housing, and how this relates to conventional practices of multi-dwelling management. Before discussing how multi-residential housing governance is seen throughout this study, and in particular how it responds to the broader lens of property relations, it is important to recognise that governance is a term with a wider lineage. In particular, in drawing from Foucault's work on governmentality (McKinlay et al., 2012, Swyngedouw, 2005), the allied term of governance has been used to reveal how power is exerted over individuals in their search for housing security, including in articulations of the ideal tenant (Flint, 2004). Governance has also been used to track the changing nature of how housing, particularly in for-profit developments, is equated with a range of aspirations and values that facilitate the financialised approach to housing (Piniara, 2022).

Yet as outlined by Healey (2009), and used further by Fitzpatrick (2018), governance not only signifies the regulation of behaviour in housing by powerful external actors, but also the 'collective action' of groups to develop alternative structures and processes whether in a housing community or beyond. In this sense the term 'collective governance' may be more apt to analyse what cohousing groups are undertaking, yet the shorthand will be used. Rather than deploying a more restrictive framing like housing 'management', governance is used to delineate not only the management of, and collective agreements over physical space in multi-residential housing, but

also the social activities and relations that make up the everyday practices of communities. Such 'everyday practices' are often treated as a separate, yet overlapping framework (Blandy, 2013), yet this study argues that they are intrinsic as any formal structure to cohousing governance. In acknowledging the broader Foucauldian frame of governance, in focusing on the potentiality of cohousing groups to 'govern' their own multi-residential housing this is not to discount the role of external stakeholders, legal structures, or broader cultural contexts impacting on housing governance.

Lastly, analysing governance necessitates engaging with the related terms of tenure and ownership, yet both concepts come with their own complexity. It is important to firstly distinguish between legal articulations of land tenure that have underpinned titling approaches such as leasehold, strata title and freehold from discussions of housing tenure – for example when denoting the rights of a renter as opposed to an owner (Blandy and Goodchild, 1999, Hulse, 2008). Moreover, housing tenure is often 'taken for granted' (Hulse, 2008), and while often used definitively in property law, these certainties do not necessarily translate to lived reality, most particularly in models like cohousing (Bossuyt, 2021). While those renting or owning are the predominant housing tenures discussed below, this binary often fails to capture the depth of tenure-like relations in a cohousing scheme. A number of scholars have identified a need for more research on tenure in cohousing or allied housing types (Bossuyt, 2021, Larsen, 2019).

While ownership is also blithely used in much housing research, this again fails to recognise the complexity of arrangements that exist (Ronald and Elsinga, 2012). For example, the case studies contain examples of shared-equity frameworks, along with nominal-equity memberships. While legal norms prefer the certainty of owners and non-owners, this fails to capture the diversity of types of housing 'possession' (Gerber and Gerber, 2017), not to mention the broader informal and formal rights that exist in relation to residential dwellings (Bossuyt, 2021). While recognising the flaws with both tenure and ownership, they cannot be excluded from the discussion, particularly

given their use in mainstream legal literature. Together, along with governance, they form the basis of property relations, alternative or not, in cohousing communities.

This section will also introduce a relational lens to consideration of both de jure and de facto governance structures in multi-residential property. In particular, attention is turned to the conventional 'multi-title' forms of housing development in both Australia and the UK, strata and leasehold. What is occurring in both countries represents a breakdown in multi-residential property, due to the collision between poor quality built outcomes and defective legal models (Bright, 2023). The lack of input that residents have in the initial design process, but also in ongoing governance of their homes and common property is leading to a new form of precarity particularly for apartment-style living. These fault lines forms the context for the first research question, in interrogating how the cohousing case studies contrast to conventional forms of multi-residential governance.

In looking at cohousing community governance, this could entail a number of formal and informal processes at certain points in the development of a cohousing scheme. Groups may form as a legally-defined entity at the inception of their development, for example in a co-operative form. Alternatively, groups may utilise informal, non-binding processes of decision making until a time when they need to construct a legal entity. As Daly and McGee (2023) outline, groups may maintain a specific legal model when acquiring land, that may be used throughout the development phase – such as a company structure, before utilising a separate approach when the project is finished. While recognizing Bossuyt's warning not to analyse models like cohousing through property labels such as title alone (2021), the collision between orthodox and alternative multi-residential models is often first conditioned in this process of acquisition and titling, what Blandy et al. (2006) terms a 'critical legal event'. As discussed below, whether cohousing groups conform to the use of dominant titling forms such as leasehold or strata title is instructive to analysis of their governance. As such, this discussion will firstly focus on the legal structures and

titles used by groups in their final completed form, given that this provides the clearest point of contrast with how conventional multi-residential models are governed. Following that, it will introduce the informal, yet pivotal structures that groups use for their collective governance.

### 2.4.1 The dominant forms of multi-title development governance

In discussing the orthodox formalisations of land tenure for multi-residential housing, the primary focus here is on leasehold in the UK and strata title in Australia given they represent the dominant forms of 'multi-title development' (MTD) in respective countries (Easthope et al., 2014).

Furthermore, community-led cohousing models exist in a vexed relationship to both types of MTD respectively, with some points of crossover but more points of differentiation. While few cohousing models in the UK use leasehold structures, preferring to form as a company limited by guarantee or as a co-operative (Wrigleys Solicitors, 2015), strata title is regularly used by cohousing groups in Australia (Sherry, 2013). Given the growth of both MTDs and private multi-residential housing, the future evolution of cohousing needs to reckon with it either shifts with or works against the respective regimes. Moreover, leasehold and strata are important wider considerations, given that freehold housing is increasingly out of reach for many aspiring home owners in both countries, with apartments often the default choice for those able to afford even that. In property relations terms, both strata and leasehold serve to envelop residents, both owners and renters in a complex web of interactions and obligations, the terms of which may have been set before they arrived (Blandy et al., 2006, Sherry, 2013). Most immediately with their neighbours, some of whom may be owner-occupiers, others who are renters, and then the building managers, contracted under different agreements whether leasehold or strata. As Blandy (2013) shows in the case of leasehold, building developers often exert control over developments long after construction has finished, including through retaining a freehold, or through the appointment of a building manager. Particularly in leasehold, the building owner becomes an omnipotent if not opaque presence in the lives of tenants, as will be discussed.

In basic terms, leasehold usually delineates an entity holding the 'freehold' over several properties, with leaseholders acting as tenants usually by payment of ground rent and an annual service charge that maintains the properties including the common areas. It is a major part of the UK housing landscape, with England leading the way with 4.98 million leasehold homes, the majority being apartments (Kollewe, 2024). Strata title differs from leasehold whereby owners instead hold freehold titles over individual apartments as well a share of the common property (Hulse, 2008). Owners are convened in a body corporate, that usually appoints a management company to maintain the property and common areas. At the last count, strata covered over 2.5 million private apartment residents, and 1.5 million in other housing types, with a conservative estimate suggesting 1 in every 10 people in Australia lived in a strata scheme (Easthope et al., 2023a). Such is the growth of strata, that the government in Australia's most populous state, New South Wales has predicted within the next 20 years that half of their population will either reside or work in either a strata or community-titled (the horizontal version of strata) scheme (Sherry, 2017b). Strata and leasehold are both fundamentally based upon a dualistic conception of ownership, whereby the home, in many cases an apartment, is separated out from the land, meaning that there is a physical division of the property (Apps, 2021). This dualism is crucial to the respective models, with slightly different forms of separation. But unlike cohousing communities, as will be discussed, this relationship is often foisted upon the residents.

Moreover, in linking to the previous discussion on financialisation, both leasehold and strata are implicated in a new class of financial vehicle (Bright et al., 2025). Bright (2025) has detailed the increase in value of residential UK ground rents to investors, and how landlords have sought to lobby against leasehold reform given the success of this investment model. Yet some reforms have been enacted, including the prohibition of ground rents above notional sums for new leases (Bright, 2023). Leaseholders, however, are also subject to increasing service charges, with real estate agents Hamptons finding that leaseholders paid £7.6 billion in charges in 2023, a 51% increase since 2018 (Walsh, 2023). Strata title owners in Australia have experienced a similar

growth in new liabilities. Increasing fees charged by management companies has led to \$7 billion annually being extracted from owners of strata properties (Besser, 2024). While reforms continue to be enacted for both leasehold and strata systems at a state-by-state basis, experts on both models caution that the landlords and developers of such multi-title properties will continue to use a range of legal methods to extract profit (Bright, 2023, Easthope et al., 2023b). The ownership of the land beneath these projects, whether initially or in perpetuity sets the mechanism of rent extraction in motion, linked as they are to the future obligations, and associated payments of individual owners.

As Sherry (2017b) has detailed, before the advent of leasehold and strata, both the British and Australian legal regimes, linked by colonial ties, traditionally legislated against the kind of financial payments that might facilitate multi-residential dwellings. As such, while covenants had been allowed to restrict some uses of land, the kind of 'positive obligations' on owners that were present in the US were rejected. This provided an impediment to apartment models that obliged ongoing payments in order to maintain common areas, fix lifts and pay gardening upkeep (Sherry, 2018). The inability to impose 'positive obligations' on freehold owners was circumvented in the UK by the use of leasehold, a model which had already been utilised over many centuries; linked to traditional landownership. Amid the growth in British cities it became the preferred method for apartments (Sherry, 2018).

Meanwhile in Australia, governments were historically averse to land leasing as a proposition, given the demand of many colonial settlers to shun aristocratic restrictions on land ownership (Easthope et al., 2014). Developers, keen for a model that could drive new apartment designs and largescale developments in Australia took matters into their own hands. The first strata title act emerged in New South Wales, with a group of construction companies undertaking the extraordinary act of presenting to the government a draft bill (Sherry, 2017b). The eventual bill was brought before Parliament only after it underwent further intervention from eight lending

institutions who were drawn to the ability of strata systems to create separate mortgageable titles (Sherry, 2017b). The NSW legislation was built on by other states around Australia, and in Queensland a related form emerged with 'community title', which constitutes a form of extended strata. This is today used in large-scale developments by volume housebuilders, with the creation of new neighbourhoods (Sherry, 2013). This union between developers and financial institutions, in corraling government to develop the strata system in Australia, speaks to how implicated the model is with processes of for-profit investment in housing. It caters to their needs rather than the interests of future homeowners. Crucially, those designing the model back in 1950s Australia could not have foreseen what strata would govern today. Apartments were typically constructed in 6-12 unit developments, the size of which are today dwarfed by schemes with hundreds of units, with vast common areas and shared spaces (Sherry, 2017b).

The financialised nature of such multi-title developments, while offering an easily mortgageable product for development serves to remove occupants from the day-to-day operation of their building and shared spaces (Blandy, 2013, Easthope et al., 2014). In governance terms, the autonomy of tenants to collectively manage their properties is heavily restricted. The imposition of leasehold or strata, and the choice of property manager in both contexts, is often decided well in advance of residents moving in, often by developers who might maintain some controlling stake (Bright, 2023, Sherry, 2017a). In Australia, the strata rules set by body corporates in apartments have been accused of being poorly regulated, with restrictive covenants and by-laws often difficult to change once established. This has led to bans on domestic pets, curbs on the play of children in apartment buildings and numerous other restrictions (Sherry, 2018). The disenfranchisement of tenants in many strata schemes can also mean that the common elements and spaces are often considered inconvenient burdens, that often fall victim to loose ties between residents (Apps, 2021).

Meanwhile the leasehold system has come under increasing scrutiny given the high-profile cases of defects in many apartment buildings across the UK. These have included the vast bills linked to the urgent removal of flammable cladding, defects that were exposed by the Grenfell tower fire, that has led to ongoing battles over whether leaseholders will be liable for these costs rather than developers or freeholders (Burn-Murdoch, 2023, Kollewe, 2024). These cases have exposed the ultimate lack of power that leaseholders have, particularly when substantial repairs are needed. This comes amid a wider failure in building design, with Carmona et al. (2020) finding that of a selection of new developments in England that were surveyed, three quarters were deemed mediocre to poor. There is no financial incentive for freeholders, the landlords of the sites underlying these UK leaseholds, to make repairs, given that the worth of the freehold interest is minimal. All the value pertains to the ongoing revenue generated through the leases, so this ensures that things like repairs, particularly major defects such as dangerous cladding cost far more than the freehold interest (Bright, 2023). In the wake of Grenfell some minimal reforms have been brought in to allow leaseholders to initiate remediation claims against their landlords, but this pathway entails litigation that is risky and costly with no promise of quick resolution (Ibid). Ultimately, if repairs are done to fix major defects, the timeline will be defined by the landlord, and costs potentially levied on leaseholders. With developers often long extricated from liability, and ownership structures opaque, many leasehold buildings have fallen into legal quagmires. The impact of a defective building is not just felt by leaseholders but also renters, whose precarity is exacerbated by the ambiguity of repair schedules. There have also been noted cases of strata apartments in Australia with major issues of build quality (Besser, 2024, Easthope et al., 2023b). Combined with noted deficits in regulation of both planning and building inspections (Gock and Kleinig, 2024), this has raised further questions around the relationship between strata title and new developments. While the problems are most pronounced for such unsafe apartments, questions also arise as to how multi-residential buildings under leasehold or strata systems may undergo remediation to 'future-proof' them in the face of changing climatic conditions

(Weatherall et al., 2018). A recurring issue with apartment build quality is poor thermal efficiency, which when coupled with high energy usage through air conditioning is detrimental to the environmental credentials of many new developments (Easthope et al., 2023b).

Beyond the aforementioned changes made in the wake of the Grenfell fire (Bright, 2023), the incoming UK Labour Government has committed to reform the commonhold system (Pennycook, 2025). This aims to build on the initiation of the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002, which allowed residents to band together to buy the freehold for their respective units and manage the common spaces collectively through an owners corporation with a managing agent of their choice (Blandy et al., 2006), thereby making it similar to a strata system. Yet, this option was only embraced minimally, with a reported 20 commonholds set up in the decades following (Bright et al., 2025). Ahead of the new reforms, key questions have been posed for any new commonhold legislation. Firstly, with the system reportedly targeted at new developments, commentators have queried what will happen to existing leasehold developments, with the potential for a 'two-tier system' (Scoffin, 2025). Other critiques levelled at commonhold include how the system of obligations would be maintained (Teys, 2024), and whether developers or investors would balk at its lack of transactional efficiency (Blandy, 2013).

In Australia, some piecemeal reforms have been initiated in relation to strata, fragmented necessarily by the nature of the Federal system, and the presence of separate strata laws in each state. New South Wales has recently brought in changes which have included greater powers for owners to initiate claims for minor renovations, including accessibility infrastructure and sustainability upgrades including solar panels, along with some new penalties for developers in order to compel presentation to annual general meetings (NSW Fair Trading, 2025). Meanwhile in Victoria, a review of the relevant act has been initiated with potential recommendations forthcoming in relation to governance, and new duties for owners corporation managers (Victorian Government, 2025).

## 2.4.2 What legal models are used by cohousing groups?

Strata title is regularly used by cohousing groups (Sherry, 2013), and this includes some of the secondary cases in this study (Cascade Cohousing, Canberra Cohousing and the Commons). In a number of instances, strata title is deployed because it is comprehensible both to residents and outside entities particularly financiers, but also as Cooper and Baer (2019) show in their example of Christie Walk it was used out of a desire to appear 'normal', and intelligible to the broader public. Yet, the two primary Australian cases in this research, Cohousing Co-operative and Stellulata utilise company title, with the body holding the title being a co-operative and a company, respectively, with the former's model interrogated in detail in Chapter Five. In 'equity' co-operatives, either the full or limited version, members exchange their equity for a share in the co-operative, with associated decision-making and occupancy rights (Apps, 2021). In these cases, the co-operative would hold the title to the land and housing. In rental or nominal equity co-operatives, the group may also hold the title as in the case of Cohousing Co-operative, but it could instead be held by a government body or community housing association (Crabtree-Hayes, 2023). Regardless of who may hold the title most co-operatives, including in the two cohousing cases discussed below, operate as mutuals, thereby each member has one vote, in following the internationally recognised principles of co-operatives.<sup>3</sup> Particularly for those groups that hold assets such as a land title, a core concern for co-operative cohousing communities is their ability to ensure that the affordability of schemes are not undermined, particularly through the dispersal of assets. As will be discussed in relation to the primary Australian case study of Cohousing Co-operative in Nipaluna/Hobart, some groups enshrine protections in their constitutions, to ensure that members cannot benefit from the winding up of a co-operative, and that assets are dispersed in that event to a similar entity with the same protections. However, there have been advocacy

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<sup>3</sup> Voluntary and Open Membership, Democratic Member Control, Member Economic Participation, Autonomy and Independence, Education, Training and Information, Cooperation among Co-operatives, Concern for Community – see International Cooperative Alliance (2025)

efforts aimed at Federal reform to ensure that all co-operatives are supported by statutory provisions to maintain the strength of any asset lock adopted by a community (BCCM, 2025).

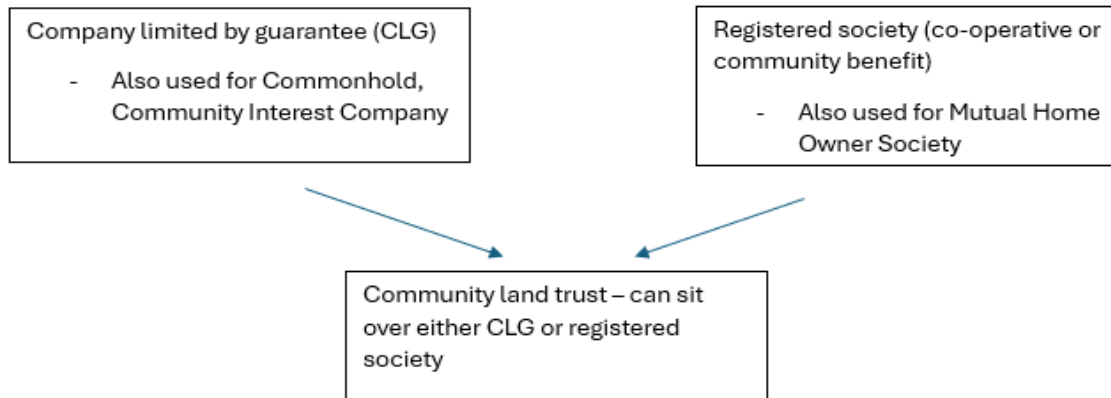


Figure 1: Legal models used by cohousing groups in the UK, (Wrigleys Solicitors, 2015).

- **Strata title**
- **Company title**
- **Community title**
- **Hybrid (for example strata with cooperative overlay, or company title with co-operative overlay)**

Figure 2: Legal structures in Australian cohousing schemes, adapted from Daly and McGee (2023)

All the UK cohousing groups spoken to for the study were either companies limited by guarantee (CLG) or co-operative societies. Under the CLG structure, the company operates for the benefit of those who are liable for a 'guarantee', and in most cases members pay a nominal initial fee. In many cohousing groups all members operate in the running of the company. In the event of a land purchase, the company may be the purchaser of the freehold, with members taking leases in the individual properties. Cohousing communities which take the co-operative form are registered under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act (Great Britain, 2014). For those that choose to be a Co-operative Society, they are restricted to operating for the mutual benefit of their members (Wrigleys Solicitors, 2015). Groups define constitutions which operate as the formal articulation of their rules, including the terms by which members are admitted or withdraw

from the co-operative. Yet as will be discussed, this is often not the limit for how groups make agreements together.

As in the Australian context, a key issue for UK cohousing models, particularly those that take on co-operative structures is the strength of their protections to prevent the dispersal of land or housing assets for private gain in contravention of collective agreements. Until recently, there represented a key distinction between bonafide, 'mutual' co-operatives and other registered societies such as community-benefit societies, with the latter models able to include statutory covenants that would ensure assets were not dispersed to entities for the purposes of speculation (Wrigleys Solicitors, 2015). This represented a core concern for the co-operative sector in the UK, that housing groups could 'demutualise' and lose the benefits of affordable housing for future members. However, there have recently been legislative reforms through the *Co-operatives, Mutuals and Friendly Societies Bill* which would allow such mutually-controlled co-operatives to opt for the same statutory asset locks as community-benefit societies, following a member vote (Shepherd, 2023).

Another relevant model for cohousing in the UK as highlighted in 2.2.5 is the Community Land Trust. A number of UK cohousing groups have taken on elements of the CLT structure, usually by way of co-operative-CLT hybrid, whereby the land underneath the co-operatively controlled housing is held by a community land trust, to maintain asset protections. Examples of such hybrid arrangements include Bridport Cohousing (Hudson et al., 2019) and Lowfield Green Housing Co-op in York (Edwards, 2025). There have been further tweaks made to traditional co-operative models in the creation of the aforementioned Mutual Home Owner Society (MHOS), a form of co-operative used by recent cohousing projects like LILAC in Leeds (Chatterton, 2015b). While there have been a few variations in how MHOS models work, they generally take elements of the CLT, with a separate entity holding the 'headlease'. While the MHOS model is still in its infancy a number of cohousing groups are known to be interested in it (Wrigleys Solicitors, 2015).

### 2.4.3 The importance of agreement-making processes in cohousing

Even if cohousing groups utilise a strata title or other form, with pre-set rules or covenants over members rights and responsibilities, the 'house rules' formed by agreement often represent the true 'social contract' that members abide by (Cooper and Baer, 2019, Meltzer, 2005). The creation of comprehensive and clear agreement-making processes was identified as a vital step for cohousing groups. This often came soon after the 'forming' process, with consensus agreement-making part of the 'norming' that underpinned groups at all stages of development (Jarvis, 2011). Often one of the first decisions that groups make is how agreements will be made into the future. While some groups might choose a more traditional majority rules process with stipulations for qualified majorities of 75% or even consensus for bigger decisions (Daly and McGee, 2023), consensus agreement-making is often the predominant method used. Sociocracy is an allied form of consensus process which cohousing groups are also utilising (Arbell, 2020, Beck, 2020), including as discussed later in one of the case studies Stellulata. Sociocracy links small circles of discussion, done in 'rounds', that enables housing groups to eschew binaries of objection vs acceptance, while working towards informed consensus (Giesecke, 2019). As part of the consensus agreement-making processes, groups often follow several steps. The method outlined by Seeds for Change (2013) from Lancaster Co-operative is one that has been replicated in other UK cohousing groups (Clark, 2021, Hammond, 2017), including in the case of Chapeltown Cohousing (ChaCo). While ChaCo's procedures will be discussed in further detail later, the recommendation from Seeds for Change identifies stages enroute to consensus, as shown further below in Figure 3.

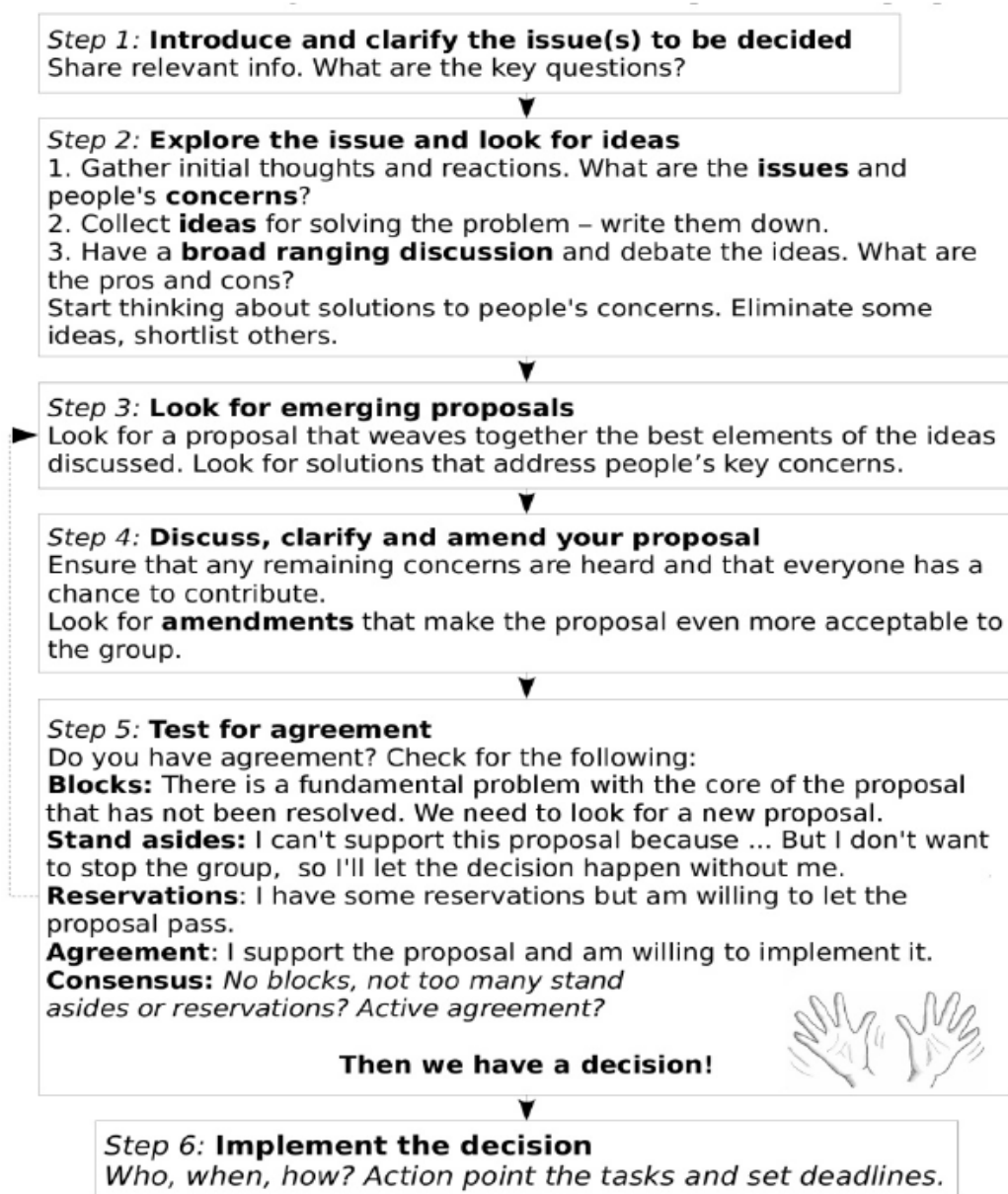


Figure 3: The consensus process – from *Seeds for Change* (2013)

As such, processes are circulated and replicated amongst the wider cohousing sector. LILAC in Leeds for example utilised the process implemented by Radical Roots, the network of housing and worker co-operatives (Chatterton, 2015a). This method represents a similar set of steps to Seeds for Change, to 'ensure that decisions are not rushed, [and that] there is much discussion on topics, and that outcomes may be owned by everyone' (Chatterton 2015a, p.264). General meetings are the key arena where consensus agreement-making processes are used, and in the

case of LILAC, all proposals that require an agreement are circulated well in advance, to allow internal discussion with proponents before meetings (Ibid).

Beyond the general meeting, subgroups are often a key part of the agreement-making procedure, that feeds into wider meetings and which are delegated with certain tasks (Felstead et al., 2019). For example, in the case of the Older Women's Cohousing in London, there are 18 subgroups, covering aspects such as the use of the guest room, gardening and membership (Fernández Arrigoitia and West, 2020). Some cohousing groups have smaller management committees of elected members, while others choose to eschew any kind of hierarchical structure, deciding just to utilise the general meeting and sub-group structure (Arbell, 2020, Meltzer, 2005). For those using a management committee, these are usually very transparent, and in the instance of OWCH contains provisions for yearly elections. Along with the use of consensus as a key principle, many groups also have defined communication practices. For example, Clark (2021) details the range of communicative practices by communities such as LILAC, Canon Frome Court and Springhill Cohousing, with non-violent communication often a core value. Lastly, in addition to any defined set of rules or agreement-making processes, many cohousing groups also have mission statements (Meltzer, 2006). As Jarvis (2015b) details in their study of cohousing groups in the UK, US and Australia, agreement-making is often a continuing process of education, with groups continuing to refresh the collective understanding of how consensus principles work, particularly in the case of new members joining.

## 2.5 Cohousing – an alternative planning intervention?

In considering cohousing's relationship with planning to date, it has been associated with expressions of 'participatory planning', a field that holds a variety of associated ideas including deliberative, collaborative, or community action planning (Healey, 1997, Horelli, 2002, Sandercock, 2003). However, such participatory theories prove incomplete when it comes to analysing the property relations generated by alternative housing models, given they often lack a direct critique of hegemonic relations that flow from the state, landowners and property

developers. As this thesis further outlines, a relational understanding of property could assist in moving on from the limitations of participatory planning theories, to one that pushes back against dominant planning norms. To this end, with the case studies showing how prospective cohousing schemes battle with planning orthodoxies, as outlined in the second key research question this study will focus on the discourse and policies of 'compactness' as the lens through which to analyse cohousing. Multi-residential housing, particularly in urban areas, has been conditioned by the drive for housing intensification, often in aid of a compact city ideal. Cohousing, as a model that has a unique relationship between private and shared space, can add to critiques of mainstream densification (McFarlane, 2023), but also offers an alternative approach to 'compactness' (Haarstad et al., 2022). Yet, before interrogating compactness further, the interaction between cohousing and planning is discussed in greater detail.

### 2.5.1 Research on cohousing and planning

A number of studies have pointed to the integration of the cohousing model in local, regional or even national planning systems, with examples including the US (McCamant and Durrett, 2011, Williams, 2005b), Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden (Blomberg and Kärnekull, 2019, Tummers, 2015). However, in respect to Australia and the UK, cohousing is often an unknown to planning departments both regional and local. Williams (2005b) for example has argued that while the UK planning system did not hinder the model, there was no mechanisms existing to proactively enable cohousing groups. In both Australia and the UK many cohousing proposals encounter difficulties in negotiating planning systems that have no specific guidance or regulatory framework set up to deal with the housing type. In the UK the National Planning Policy Framework was until recently silent on community-led housing altogether, until an amendment in December 2023 was proposed (DLUHC, 2023b) . This included an inaugural definition of community-led housing (p.69) and a proposal for a 'community-led exceptions site policy' which would encourage local authorities to provide planning permission to CLH groups on plots not yet allocated for housing

(Wrigleys Solicitors, 2024). In Australia there is a largescale lack of definition of cohousing within planning documents, but this is slowly shifting with some state and territory authorities starting to refer to cohousing specifically in strategy documents, if not formal planning regulations (ACT Government, 2023b, Tasmanian Government, 2023a). While academic research has gone to great lengths to aid understanding of how cohousing relates to, and overlaps with, a range of a community-led and collaborative housing models (Crabtree-Hayes, 2023, Griffith et al., 2024), particularly in architectural terms, governments are missing the subtleties of what cohousing entails. As such, developments often face hurdles in complying with codes that are not strictly relevant to them, such as conventional multi-unit regulations. These often lead to difficulties in relation to fire regulation, parking standards, and classification misnomers when it comes to how common houses function as a shared space with no regular resident, while still containing laundries, toilets and bedrooms (Jeske et al., 2024).

The regulation or mis-regulation of cohousing by planning authorities, in both the UK and particularly Australia, has become more of a pronounced issue in recent decades, especially given the turn towards urban, professionalised cohousing schemes in contrast to the longer, more rural history of intentional communities in both countries. In historical planning terms, cohousing can perhaps be seen as allied to two interlinked movements in both countries, the communal living movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Cooper and Baer, 2019) and the longer history of self-build (Benson and Hamiduddin, 2017). Regarding the former, while many rural communes have often flown under the radar of planning authorities in both countries, there are some historical examples of regulation. As highlighted earlier, the growth of communal living in the 1960s led authorities in the Australian state of NSW to create planning legislation allowing for the creation of multiple homes on a single property (Crabtree, 2018a). Today, this multiple occupancy planning regime continues to be used by intentional communities and co-operatives in the state and as a template nationally, including for many ad hoc planning judgements on cohousing.

While cohousing, particularly in North America, has been linked to the new urbanism agenda for walkable neighbourhoods of housing and commercial mixed-uses (McCamant and Durrett, 2011), in order to interrogate the relationship between the case studies and their respective planning regimes, this thesis analyses the dynamic through the orthodoxy of compactness. Compactness policy has proved influential if not in action, then rhetoric, in informing a range of planning theories, including new urbanism (Anabtawi, 2023). As in the case of new urbanism, with compactness and densification a major driver of planning in UK and Australian cities (Easthope and Kerr, 2024, McFarlane, 2023), its mainstream application is implicated with dominant neoliberal urban policies, including in its promotion of pro-growth, for-profit forms of land use (Xue, 2022). Yet, in advancing critical debates around compactness, this research draws attention to how cohousing operates as an alternative expression of density, shared space, and design for inner-urban environments. Cohousing provides an important reconsideration of the relationship between space and private housing, not only through the use of greater shared spaces, but the associated restriction of private residential areas.

### 2.5.2 Critiquing the compact city

Projections showing that the majority of the global population will be city-based this century (UN-Habitat, 2007) are a much discussed point in urban scholarship. Claims that we are entering a unique 'urban age' that brings both extraordinary risks and opportunities (Burdett and Sudjic, 2007), have been countered by critiques that show how urban areas have and will continue to exist in an extended relationship with flows of capital and people beyond cities (Brenner and Schmid, 2014). One significant facet of this debate relates to policy programs that seek to manage and harness urban change, particularly through an emphasis on compactness and densification of housing and people (Kain et al., 2022).

Many contend that while compactness is regularly evoked, sprawl remains the dominant pattern of urban growth (Chen et al., 2020, McFarlane, 2023). Arguably, this condition means that

compactness agendas will always be reached for, particularly by those in policymaking circles. The densification of urban areas is regularly proffered as being central to the response to the climate and biodiversity crisis (Floater et al., 2014), with calls for planners to focus on issues of walkability, transit-oriented development and 'sustainable' infrastructure and buildings (Talen, 2012). Furthermore, proponents of compactness point to how having people living closer to work and leisure can support greater economic growth (Glaeser, 2011).

Critiques of compact urbanism and density argue against a reductive focus on built form and infrastructure, and instead point towards the experience of both (McFarlane, 2023). This lends itself to portrayals of compactness that reject a technocratic approach, including Jane Jacob's idealisation of the New York streetscape (2000), to other discussions in sociology and architecture (Gehl, 2011). These depictions are grounded in conviviality, openness and an embrace of the messiness of the city. These historical alternatives also stand in contrast to recent compactness agendas whether that be the North American orthodoxy of new urbanism where village ideals have often simply given license to new malls (McFarlane, 2016, Sennett, 2019), or the Green Growth-ification of urban planning (OECD, 2013), both of which have fed the 'urban growth machine' (Logan and Molotch, 2007).

With compactness a global frame, there are divergences between articulations of compactness where non-speculative property development is more established, such as in some European cities (Kain et al., 2022), and the dynamics under examination in Australia and the UK.

Institutional context is important in shaping planning norms (Tummers, 2015), and in the UK and Australia, compactness has become associated with for-profit real estate players using density to extract greater value from a development (Robinson and Attuyer, 2020), rather than for any social gain. This further draws in the relational approach to property, in revealing how planning orthodoxy around compactness in these countries privileges the economic gains that can be made from housebuilding, supercharged through urban regeneration and infill led by large

volume builders. Moreover, in linking to the final research question highlighted in Section 1.3, supply-focused models of housing have privileged the density visions of private sector actors (McFarlane, 2020), a phenomenon strengthened by recent so-called 'Yes-in-my-back-yard' advocacy (Knuth et al., 2020).

Amid the many descriptions of the compact city the 'high-density' city has been prominent (Anabtawi, 2023), with an allied 'product' in the 'mixed-use city' and the more process-focused 'intensified city' (Burton, 2002), whereby policies aim for greater compactness. Density itself contains multiple context-specific definitions, with some favoured over others by policymakers. As Dovey outlines, density revolves around 'how much activity, population and built form can be concentrated into a given urban area' (2016, p.30), considerations that must be thought through together. Doing so for housing schemes begins with net dwelling density, or how the built form interacts with a land site, the gross density that includes the housing and all other space in the plot, then the relationship of the plot and building(s) together with the neighbourhood, and to the city as a whole.

In focusing on the residential plot, particularly amid discussions of multi-residential housing two concepts figure in housing density. In addition to the building footprint and height, commonly called plot ratio, floorspace to population is another consideration. Yet, what the mainstream compactness agenda in countries like Australia and the UK regularly misses is how varying densities and compact cities are sets of interactions between diverse groups, who encounter compactness in different ways, often with unequal effects. This again raises the importance of viewing property in relational terms. For instance, while there is a vital ongoing debate around house sizes in cities, particularly in relation to environmental pressures (Nelson, 2018, Tunstall, 2022), there is a risk that commercialised visions of urban compactness inflict cramped living conditions on an unwilling public, many of whom are in housing stress. Dorling (2014) and Tunstall (2015) show that particularly amid the erosion of the council housing system, there has been a

decrease in average house size in the UK, but this has hidden an increase in bigger properties for the rich and decreasing household space for those in lower to middle-income brackets, particularly in multi-residential developments in London and the South East of England. A few trends have exacerbated this gap, not least the lax regulation of space standards. Space standards per person have been part of UK housebuilding particularly since the advent of the 'Parker Morris' space standards, named after a Parliamentary committee concerning public housing standards in 1961 (Nelson, 2018). There is a set of Nationally Described Space Standards but many local authorities use these as minimums and provide space standards within their local plans as optional recommendations (Hubbard, 2024). Meanwhile, a build-to-rent model that regularly reduces private space in favour of greater shared amenities is coming to the fore in the UK (Durrant and Brill, 2023). Unlike the kind of intentionally-designed cohousing that is discussed further below, these shared facilities in such build-to-rent schemes tend to be supposed luxuries such as gyms and co-working spaces. In this way, forms of 'micro-living' have been sold as aspirational, embraced by real estate speculators amid dubious claims of affordability and environmental sustainability (Harris and Nowicki, 2020, Hubbard, 2024). Relatedly, the co-living model of multiple-occupancy short-term apartments with shared facilities is growing, again spurred by developers catering to young, supposedly mobile urbanites (White and Madden, 2024).

In Australia, there is a different dynamic at play in relation to housing size, which cohousing must engage with. The country has long experienced a growth in housing sizes which have undermined efforts to shrink energy demand (Power, 2021, Lane and Gorman-Murray, 2011, Stephan and Crawford, 2016), and deliver greater density of housing (Bucci, 2022). The perceived Australian preference for large homes has been cited as a challenge for cohousing (Cooper and Baer, 2019). The floor space of an average Australian construction is one of the highest in the world, above the US and Canada and 2.8 times that of new builds in the UK (Nelson 2018). Nelson has shown how if the average Australian home was shrunk to the size of its UK counterpart:

*'The savings in terms of heating and cooling would be equivalent to mandating builders to enhance thermal energy in a 204sqm house to an 8-star standard (currently considered in state-of-the-art range) (2018, p.41).'*

In breaking away from this path, there is evidence that would suggest more Australians would be prepared to downsize. One survey of residents in Kamberri/Canberra found acceptance of possible constructions half the size of the Australian average, if certain amenities could be ensured (Nelson, 2018). A substantial minority of Australians are said to be in favour of medium density rather than large detached homes, and both those under 30 and over 60 are said to be open to smaller homes, including apartment designs (Newton et al., 2022, Nelson, 2018). However, existing stock and prevailing imperatives by developers to build big means that the growing diversity in preference is not being met (Riedy et al., 2019, Kelly et al., 2011). Australian housing development is increasingly bifurcated between new larger houses in the outer-suburbs of cities, and high-value apartment schemes in inner suburbs, a so-called 'vertical sprawl' (Troy et al., 2020). As the discussion of multi-title development has already highlighted, the push for housing intensification and greater supply, has privileged a form of rapid apartment construction often characterised by their poor quality and lack of amenity (Alves, 2020, Bachelard, 2023, Cunningham, 2024). Moreover, despite the trend towards increased housing size, new models of for-profit co-living are also emerging in Australian cities (Bergan and Power, 2024), similarly sold as aspirational like their UK counterparts.

As such, there is an opportunity for alternative models of both multi-residential governance and density to break through, which sets the context for cohousing. Particularly in Australia a key part of the discussion around lacking housing diversity and denser housing is the absence of so-called 'missing middle' varieties (Pawson et al., 2020). These include categories of housing such as duplexes, triplexes, townhouses, and small apartment buildings, multiunit forms which as Parolek argues: 'can house relatively large numbers of people in low-impact, relatively inexpensive ways'

(p.180). Missing denotes that these types have often been deprioritised in recent decades (Ibid).

Middle has two meanings, the first relates to its scale between single family and large apartment buildings while it has also often been evoked as a more attainable form to 'middle' income tenants or homeowners (Ibid, p.181).

In addition to scale and size, density needs to be considered in relation to intensity (Dovey, 2016), linking to Burton's 'mixed-use city' of residential spaces in close connection with services and facilities (2002). This brings the activities and encounters of people into focus alongside the built environment, how day-to-day population movements are frustrated or facilitated by the design and infrastructure of urban areas, the open spaces between residential and other buildings, thoroughfares and transport links. Yet, a deferral to for-profit, private development particularly breaks down in relation to 'compact' agenda items such as walkability, which often get forgotten in large residential projects (Parham and Jones, 2021). As Dovey and Pafka (2020) suggest, creating accessible mixed-use routes and thoroughfares is extremely complex. It requires new housing developments to be attuned to existing local social dynamics and urban morphologies, something that is often illusory in private, profit-facing projects.

For the process of intensifying cities, oft-discussed policies include the aforementioned transit-oriented development that locates housing alongside new transport infrastructure, zoning changes to enable greater density, the creation of multiple mixed-use areas and other design adaptations including those to improve active transport and reduce car use (Floater et al., 2014). This compact programme has been applied to diverse cities from Bogata to Beijing, Copenhagen to Curitiba. In English post-industrial cities like Leeds, a key form of intensification and driver of compactness is the use of brownfield land for infill (McLaren and Bailey, 2023), with the National Planning Policy Framework favouring the model (Brill and Raco, 2021). Brownfield land is frequently evoked as an underutilised resource in the pursuit of new housing in urban areas, with one recent analysis claiming that in England there was 'unused' brownfield sites that could

accommodate 1.2 million homes (Laville, 2022). In Australia, governments are also prioritising brownfield land, with New South Wales recently targeting for 82% of new housing to be built on established 'brownfield' sites (Rose and McLeod, 2024).

Yet, the process by which investor-driven housing projects infill urban areas, including through brownfield development, can also overlook existing places and communities (Gans and Weisz, 2004). Despite the three-pronged concept of sustainable development being regularly touted, with equal balance between social, environmental and economic imperatives, profit maximisation is still the primary motivator for developers on brownfield sites (Ferm and Raco, 2020). While transit-oriented development has been a workable strategy for many cities in creating infrastructure links to new infill housing, the allied policy of land value capture defers to the logic of stimulating speculative private development (Canelas and Noring, 2022, Troy et al., 2020). Increasingly, transport connections are costed and built on the premise that developers can profit from the uplift in land value, their payments subsidising the infrastructure. Yet as Ferm and Raco (2020) show, the reliance on value capture has led to a prioritisation of development 'viability'. The maximum possible social goods such as affordable housing are traded away by governments anxious to ensure that successful private real estate ventures secure the minimum public benefits.

Much of the superficiality of compactness orthodoxy relates to the alignment between compact city programs and green policy ambitions. The sustainability arguments revolve around the efficiencies of consolidating high-rise housing together with businesses and services. To critics it there is an often unproven assumption that denser urban forms necessarily create better environmental outcomes (McFarlane, 2020). There are questions around the sustainability particularly of the high-value high-rise apartments catering for those able to live unencumbered by rising energy costs (Haarstad et al., 2022). Moreover, despite the growth in transit-oriented development and notable cases of integrated transport planning such as London (Floater et al.,

2014), there is no clear and sustained emphasis in many Australian and UK cities around reducing private car use and encouraging further active or public transport use. Reductions in private car-spaces, or car-free residential developments are patchily delivered (Melia, 2014), often resisted (Taylor and Rowley, 2016), and steered less by strategy than the whims of market actors (Troy et al., 2020). Moreover, shared mobility has failed to be delivered with any coherence (Marsden et al., 2019), and rather than urban car sharing schemes relying on de-commodified approaches as originally hoped for (McLaren and Agyeman, 2015), they have instead succumbed to the ‘pseudo-sharing’ of commercial models (Belk, 2014). Lastly, while there is compelling evidence for how compact cities can ‘spare’ biodiverse land from urban development (Collas et al., 2017, Stott et al., 2015), these otherwise laudatory aims are again not matched by consistent action. Profitable densification in the urban core is often paired with sprawl beyond it (Knuth et al., 2020). This uneven form of housing density driven by commercial imperatives rather than the purported aspirations of compact city policy, exposes the facile use of the agenda. Taken together, these critiques of mainstream compactness, echo the same refrains of a relational analysis of multi-residential property governance. Just as strata title and leasehold privilege the ease of transaction in multi-title developments over the collective control of spaces, mainstream approaches to densification elevate the economic value that can be extracted from a new property development, rather than the social or environmental benefits from compactness.

### 2.5.3 Locating cohousing within post-growth approaches to compactness

As discussed in previously introducing the second key research question, this study will interrogate whether cohousing can unsettle mainstream articulations of compactness. This builds on studies which have observed the effects of cohousing at a housing block or even neighbourhood-level, as a type that allows for more collaborative, responsive and just patterns of development or regeneration (Fromm, 2012, Vestbro and Horelli, 2012). Particularly in the European variants of cohousing this has found expression in community projects around social

care including for ageing populations, the localisation of economies, and projects aimed at energy transition (Tummers, 2015). While perhaps not yet as integrated or abundant, the neighbourhood level activism of cohousing communities have been noted in both Australia (Crabtree, 2005, Cooper and Baer, 2019) and the UK (Chatterton, 2016, Jarvis et al., 2016). This collaborative approach to new housing development reveals a potential ally for cohousing, that of a 'post-growth' form of housing and planning, a field which emerged from broader scholarship that critiques the dominant fixation on economic growth (Hickel and Kallis, 2020).

Post-growth scholarship can be deeply sceptical of a compactness agenda that sees urban economic growth as something that can be decoupled from rising carbon emissions (Alexander and Gleeson, 2018). Yet, post-growth planning is not uniformly doubtful of compactness (Xue, 2022), and it is within this alternative compact city vision that cohousing could be relevant. In doing so, this research questions whether cohousing can combine housing intensification with a responsiveness to environmental and social needs. In centring environmental limits not least those in land, post-growth housing visions reject market-led housebuilding in favour of more diverse housing models and tenures, including those which address environmental footprints through better use of space (Durrant et al., 2023, Knuth et al., 2020). While smaller private households are a noted outcome of many cohousing developments (Jarvis, 2011, Larsen, 2019, Nelson, 2018), the deployment of social sharing is fundamental to their efficient built form. In utilising communal spaces and facilities alongside private households, this would not only represent an alternative, more relationally-informed 'doing' of multi-residential property (Blomley, 2004), but also an approach to compactness rooted not in economic extraction but a prioritisation of ecological and social imperatives.

## 2.6 Cohousing provision constrained by state and developer interests?

With the previous two sections reviewing the literature surrounding the collision between orthodox forms of governance and planning, this final segment will survey the context that surrounds cohousing as a heterodox model of multi-residential development, a field constituted of select, yet important contributions. In their focus on the limited alternatives in Australia to the provision of 'multi-unit dwellings', Palmer (2016) used a structure of provision (SOP) approach (Ball, 2014) to identify the obstacles to innovation, including among cohousing and 'collective self-organised (CSO) housing' more broadly. Amid a rapid increase in consolidation in urban centres, this spoke of the challenges in advancing an alternative SOP that prioritised 'housing and social benefits equally with economic benefits' (Palmer, 2016, p.31). In drawing further from international comparators in the UK and Berlin, this opened out discussion of non-speculative forms of multi-unit housing provision, in particular the need for 'legislative definition' of the Australian CSO housing sector, amongst other targeted policies.

Fitzpatrick (2018) meanwhile utilised a SOP lens to develop a typology of 'mutual' housing groups in London, including some cohousing schemes. This was tied into a focus on the governance of mutual housing, in building on the work of Ostrom (1990), to understand how different groups used internal structures to negotiate challenges in development and post-completion. Other studies have canvassed the development challenges of cohousing groups (Chatterton, 2015a, Crabtree, 2005, Field, 2020), but as Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia (2015) argue there is a need for further research on 'how financial arrangements are created and contested during the initial development stages of a cohousing community' (p.108).

With for-profit, often largescale developers entrenched in both countries, there has been some discussion of where cohousing should be positioned in relation to more mainstream players.

While there are regional and country specifics, cohousing projects have been initiated on a

spectrum of full self-development to conventional speculative property development. Particularly close, very communal projects may be created and delivered solely by members, who thereby hold all the risk in the land acquisition and construction phase (Jarvis 2015). At the other end of the spectrum, there is the developer-initiated project, and subsequent sale to any prospective buyer. This latter process is often found in the United States (Scanlon and Fernandez-Arrigoitia 2019, Williams 2008). In observing the difficulties encountered by self-starting cohousing groups in the UK, with difficulties in finding land and initiating development, Williams (2005b) has argued for more use of direct partnerships with developers or even developer-led schemes to match the model in the US. Increasingly, and as shown by the case studies, a self-forming group may work with an architect and or development manager to their specification. It is this type of provision that is discussed further below, through the broad rubric of 'deliberative development'. In other models a developer funds the land acquisition and construction before selling the properties back to members (Scanlon and Fernandez-Arrigoitia 2019).

In learning from and extending upon these contributions, as highlighted in key research question three, this study examines cohousing as an alternative multi-residential development model through its interactions with a financialised land and housing system. In further using a relational lens to examine the dominant approaches to landed property (Blandy, 2013), this thesis analyses the range of development interests, state actors and social norms that influence and impede cohousing development. The section following firstly unpacks the role of land and property developers in limiting available land for development. Secondly, the diminishing role of the state in direct housing provision is discussed. Lastly, in following research which has cast light on how dominant discourses of the housing 'crisis' have shaped policy, in both Australia and the UK (Gallent, 2019, Gurran and Phibbs, 2015), this review surveys the construction of the housing 'supply crisis'. The demand for more supply, particularly when expressed through government reliance on increasingly monopolistic for-profit developers, serves to limit the ability of cohousing groups to bring forward an alternate, 'deliberative' method of development.

### 2.6.1 Land and property developers

When cohousing groups attempt to acquire land for development, in many cases they will be competing with conventional developers. In the UK, many developers themselves have large 'banks' of land, although accurate accounts of how much land is muddied by a broader lack of transparency around ownership and the number of subsidiary companies involved in land development including specialist land promoters (Shrubsole, 2019). Land banking is thus a major part of the strategic approach of housing developers, but must be caveated by an understanding of whether the sites are easily developable or not. For example, an estimated 82% of all land held by developers in the UK are sites without planning permission (Ryan-Collins et al., 2017).

Moreover, the role of land promoters, entities who act as intermediaries between house developers, land owners and planning authorities, further adds to the opacity of the relationship between land and housebuilding (McAllister et al., 2023). For example, 41% of those land sites with outline planning permissions<sup>4</sup> had applicants who were land promoters or developers (Shepherd et al., 2022). Taken together, these roles underpin a development sector that plays a patient game firstly in finding sites, determining their potential future approval for housebuilding, and often lobbying for new local planning permissions. Seen from this perspective, developers are intent at risk minimisation and given a few companies control a significant portion of the market, a drip-feeding of housing delivery and stagnation of innovation is the norm (Gurran and Bramley, 2017, Ryan-Collins et al., 2017).

In Australia, the picture is slightly different. Land banking in Australia also does exist, but is more likely undertaken by distinct 'land developers' who often operate separate from housebuilders in packaging up sites to bring to market when the conditions suit them (Gurran and Bramley, 2017, Ryan-Collins and Murray, 2021, Shepherd et al., 2022). This combined with the predominance of the 'build to order' model and low-density housing, means that land developers are the

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<sup>4</sup> An initial approval given to allow proposals to continue, pending detailed design work

beneficiaries of windfalls when land is rezoned and values increase (Ryan-Collins and Murray, 2021). This results in land value contributing a significant portion of the total value of the land and housing package (Burke and Hulse, 2010). What can be concluded is that in both the UK and Australia, there are a select few landowners or developers benefitting significantly from the capturing of ground rents, with land values very much leading house price growth.

Furthermore, the development of housing is now dominated by largescale volume builders (Aalbers, 2019). Volume housebuilders construct roughly 80% of all new housing stock in England (Gallent, 2019), with further figures from England in 2018 showing ten companies constructing 58% of all newbuilds, four companies 33% of the total. In Australia, the housing and construction sector holds a bigger share of the economy than in the UK (Gurran and Bramley, 2017), however the sector is less dominated by a small number of players, with volume builders constructing between 37 to 41% of homes in one account (Warren-Myers and McRae, 2017). Rather than the more speculative UK market where housing is often built for no known buyer, in Australia developers tend to focus on individual 'build-to-order' contracts, with land and housing packages a common option for new homeowners particularly in greenfield areas (Murray, 2021a). Moreover, the small-builder sector in Australia is not in a healthy state. They are increasingly being squeezed by the bigger players particularly those that can diversify into more formulaic options such as apartment construction (Troy et al., 2020), and post-pandemic are victim to growing supply chain issues. In the UK, small and medium-sized housebuilders have been crowded out over the last few decades, with an 80% decrease between 1988 and 2015, with some pointing to how bigger companies are able to deal with planning issues, economic shocks and labour supply problems more easily (Gallent, 2019).

## 2.6.2 The state's role in a financialised land and housing system

Various institutions and functions of the state exist in an uneasy relationship with groups aiming to constitute alternative housing developments. This is particularly the case in relation to community-led housing groups, who are often reliant on a complex infrastructure of local, regional and federal government regulations, state funding bodies, and other urban professionals (Bunce, 2016, Felstead et al., 2019). Yet, the need for cohousing groups to engage with the state cannot ignore the critiques which argue that governments are driving the financialisation of land and housing. Many consider the state as a key enabler of market actors at multiple points in the boom-and-bust cycles of propertied land (Aalbers, 2019, Christophers, 2018, Christophers, 2020, Madden and Marcuse, 2016). This includes accusations relating to the growth of housing finance (Ryan-Collins et al., 2017), through policies that cement housing investment, such as negative gearing, capital gains discounts or credit easing (Craig, 2020, Pawson et al., 2020). It is important to recognise the contributions that emphasise that the state is not a static, monolithic entity, for example Thompson (2020b) argues that there are many competing forces within 'a multi-scalar and far-reaching apparatus of central and local state institutions' (p.22). Meanwhile Robinson et al. (2022) argues for analysis that is averse to generalisation, and is instead attentive to the fractured nature of state interests in relation to property markets, the multiple and often contradictory positions taken, and the different expressions in specific local contexts.

Clearly governments have withdrawn from the direct provision of housing. In Australia, apart from sporadic efforts by select governments to build new public housing, the social housing sector has always been minimal, with it currently 5% of total housing stock nationally (Pawson et al., 2020). In Australia as Jones et al. (2007) have shown, the make-up of tenants in social housing has changed from the post-war era to today. Whereas government subsidised housing initially supported low-wage workers, it has shifted to a tenure for those most often outside the workforce, a supportive safety net for those in situations of complex and high need. Amid a clear

residualisation of an already small social housing system, this has led to Australian governments and public discourse lapsing into stereotypes over who a social housing tenant is, who is deserving of housing support, and for how long (Baumann, 2011). Meanwhile in the UK, the fall in direct state development has been starker. The ability of council tenants to buy their homes is key to that decline, with those sold not being replaced by new council housing on any meaningful scale (Boughton, 2018, Christophers, 2018, Madden and Marcuse, 2016). While a residualisation of the social housing sector occurred following the introduction of right-to-buy, Tunstall (2021) has compellingly argued that over the last 30 years there has been a 'deresidualisation' of social housing in England. This is not an indicator of government success. It instead points to a deterioration in circumstances particularly for those in private rented housing, to match those in social rentals. Dorling et al. (2023) show that today, private renters are paying more of their income on rent than social tenants (42.5% to 39%).

Evidence from housing charity Crisis (2025) showed that across the UK, 2.7% of all private rentals were affordable to people on Local Housing Allowance, down from 12% in 2022. The unaffordability in private rental is being mirrored in Australia, with Anglicare Australia (2025) reporting that of a survey of over 50,000 rental properties in Australia, 0.7% were affordable to a person on a minimum wage, and just 3 rentals nationwide, all share houses, were affordable to someone on the Federal unemployment benefit, Jobseeker. This speaks not only to the withdrawal from the state from public housing, but the growth of long-term investment in rental housing, (Christophers, 2020), including through institutional models like build-to-rent (Brill and Durrant, 2021, Nethercote, 2022).

While there has been some evidence of community-led models gaining currency amid the retreat of the state and noted market-failures (Mullins and Moore, 2018), as noted by Pauker and Hamiduddin (2024) the community-led housing model simultaneously responds as an alternative to the financialised land and housing system, yet is constrained by the same set of dynamics. A

number of studies have highlighted the difficulties faced by cohousing groups in finding land that is not only affordable, but suitable for their specific development needs (Cooper and Baer, 2019, Field, 2020, Hudson et al., 2019, Nelson, 2018). In many cases, cohousing groups are competing with conventional developers who can pay premium prices, with larger vertically integrated companies thus well-placed to control when land is developed on, and with enough capital to weather resident pre-sale periods, planning hurdles, or other financial risks (Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia, 2015). Before interrogating the alternative housing development model of cohousing further, it is intrinsic to examine the mainstream discourse around housing, most notably the dominant emphasis on housing supply.

### 2.6.3 Construction of the housing 'supply crisis' in Australia and the UK

The housing 'crisis' has been much discussed in Australia and the UK, in both media and academia (Bachelard, 2023, Brill and Raco, 2021, Foye, 2022, Gallent, 2019, Jericho, 2023, Martin et al., 2017). As Brill and Raco (2021) argue, given the extent of discussion evoking a 'crisis', it has now become a meaningless term. Yet, policy has tended to follow political efforts to ameliorate the favoured depiction of the crisis (Ibid), and in both Australia and the UK the pre-eminent fixation of leading stakeholders including in government has been that insufficient housing supply is the reason for housing unaffordability, and that overbearing regulation and planning regimes holds much of the blame (Francis, 2024, NHSAC, 2024). As Gallent (2019) argues, this is often a fallback for those politicians who want to provide 'achievable' solutions, and it is a 'more tangible housing crisis than one linked to finance, credit, pensions or other abstractions' (p.77).

Beyond the use of supply targets by governments in Australia (Treasury, 2024) and the UK (MHCLH, 2025b), political actors have coalesced around narratives of 'pro-housing growth' or housing 'abundance', the latter agenda amplified by a prominent book of the same name (Klein and Thompson, 2025). This discourse identifies the already well-defined adversary in the supposedly unwieldy planning system holding back housing supply, long evoked by the

developers and corporate interests connected to the bulk of house building (Pawson et al., 2020, Phibbs and Gurrán, 2021, Shaw and Lord, 2009). In particular, land-use restrictions have often been blamed for housing shortages (Barker 2004, Glaeser and Gyourko 2008). Yet in countering this, many scholars emphasise that planners often unlock the value of housing development, particularly through changes to land-uses (Gurrán and Bramley, 2017, Murray, 2021b). Rather than dampening speculation, planning approvals particularly the changes brought by land-use zoning, new infrastructures, amenities or upward-density amendments can be a driver for speculative house building (Sharam et al., 2015), often to the detriment of existing communities (Connolly, 2019, Ward, 2021).

Another noted enemy in the supply solution is the NIMBY. The 'Not-in-my-back-yard' pushback from existing residents is often cited as a key reason why particularly more affordable housing is not being built in established urban areas (Roberts-Hull, 2023, Robinson and Attuyer, 2020, Wheeler, 2023). In Australia, leading Ministers including the Treasurer (Grattan, 2025b) have lauded Klein and Thompson (2025) and the abundance frame. In a speech entitled 'The Abundance agenda for Australia', the Assistant Treasury Minister spoke of its core animating idea: 'that a rich society should be able to meet its people's basic needs – housing, transport, energy, education – quickly, affordably, and at scale' (Leigh, 2025). Meanwhile, in the UK, the Chancellor Rachel Reeves stated that Klein and Thompson (2025) would be her 'beach read' (The Times, 2025).

A number of analyses have argued that rather than pure supply of new houses being the problem, that there is a surplus of homes in both Australia and the UK (Mulheirn, 2019, Murray, 2021a).

Instead the argument suggests the key issue facing both countries is the deficit of affordable housing in areas where most employment opportunities exist and population increases are occurring (Gallent, 2019, Sharam et al., 2015). Moreover, the housing supply mantra is overwhelmingly targeted at an increase in for-profit, market-rate housing, rather than a sustained increase in social and or affordable housing (Chapple and Song, 2025). Under this argument, the

increase in new housing supply leads to existing, supposedly less desirable housing becoming available to those further down the income scale, a process called filtering. Yet, as shown by Nygaard et al. (2022), filtering is not a successful strategy to create new affordable housing opportunities.

In moving beyond the arguments and critiques of the supply emphasis, an important byproduct of this debate is the demand for increased speed and scale of development (Gurran and Ruming, 2016). The Australian Government recently announced 10 major economic reforms, of which one was 'building more homes, more quickly' (Grattan, 2025a). Similarly the Starmer Government in the UK has committed to: 'turbocharge [the] building of houses and infrastructure' (Francis, 2024). The language of scale and pace is aligned to the drive for deregulation of planning, environmental and building standards (Brill and Raco, 2021, Buxton and Mercer, 2024), with concerns over affordability or quality, let alone sustainability left wanting (Alves, 2020, Carmona et al., 2020, zu Ermgassen et al., 2022). Moreover, similar to the growth-focused approach to compactness and housing intensification, the constant drive for supply is representative of a housing and planning system divorced from environmental limits (Knuth et al., 2020, Xue, 2022). Crucially for this study, the demand for rapid, increased supply means that community-led development alternatives are seen through the prism of how fast they can be built (Archer and McCarthy, 2021). This has major implications for those forms of provision, like many cohousing schemes, which choose to involve the eventual residents in the design and development of their future homes.

#### 2.6.4 Cohousing and the deliberative alternative to development

In terms of alternatives to conventional development, this study sees cohousing as part of what in Australia is termed as a broader 'deliberative' approach to construction. While 'deliberative' development is inclusive of a wide variety of construction types, it generally denotes that many of the speculative elements of housing are limited if not excluded (Crabtree-Hayes, 2023).

Particularly when done as a collective this often entails the eventual purchasers of housing taking on many of the roles of the developer, which according to Sharam et al. (2015) allows them to:

‘internalise the developer margin, thus making significant cost savings and achieving other collective ambitions, such as higher environmental performance and tailored design’ (p.18).

Beyond better design outcomes and more affordability, a deliberative model might provide a more efficient way to ‘match’ housing to meet specific consumer demands (Sharam, 2020). By contrast, conventional multi-residential developments are built for no-known buyer and often rely on pre-sales, and with the boom in apartments in major cities this often produces surplus housing (White, 2025).

In locating cohousing within the broader literature on deliberative development, scholars identify that while many cohousing schemes may be collective self-build developments, not all building groups have the intentionality or commitment to shared social spaces that is inherent to the cohousing model (Hamiduddin and Gallent, 2016, Sharam, 2020). In the UK, rather than using ‘deliberative development’ many similar models are termed ‘collective self-builds’ (Benson and Hamiduddin, 2017, Palmer and Tummers, 2019). Deliberative or collective self-build constructions are underpinned by the wider self-build movement. Benson and Hamiduddin (2017) have formed a definition of self-build as: ‘a broad category of practice that involves households and groups who invest time and energy in the building of their own homes in various ways’ that allows for consideration of cohousing and other interrelated models (p.3).

In assessing the prospects for deliberative self-build underpinning cohousing, there is a notable history in both countries. Australia has a long lineage of self-build, fomented during the initial phases of the settler-colonial era and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly post WWII, which reached a highpoint in 1954 when an estimated 40% of homes were self-built (Crabtree, 2018a). Self-building including the use of ‘sweat-equity’ or actual involvement of residents in building their homes has been a major part of many established cohousing schemes in Australia (Cooper and

Baer, 2019, Crabtree, 2005). The UK too has a rich history of self-build from which to draw on (Brown, 2008), with attention in particular given to movements such as the plotlanders who developed their own housing in the between war period, particularly in areas of Southern England such as Jaywick Sands in Essex and Shoreham Beach and Peacehaven in Surrey (Hardy and Ward, 1984). This thriving alternative declined after the institution of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, with restrictions on existing plots and the initiation of new schemes amid an upturn in central planning (Vasudevan, 2014). Today an estimated 10% of new homes are completed through this form of development (Lloyd et al., 2015). There has been a renewed push including through government reviews (Bacon, 2021), and increased scholarship amidst some reforms (Obremski and Carter, 2019, Lloyd et al., 2015, Hamiduddin and Gallent, 2016, Field, 2020, Benson and Hamiduddin, 2017). The 2015 Self-Build and Custom Housebuilding Act mandates that local authorities produce registers of vacant land that could be available for those aspiring to self or custom-build. However, these reforms have been minimally enforced or utilized and exist with little to no funding attached (Field, 2020, Gallent et al., 2022), and the sector has failed to grow (DLUHC, 2023a).

As such, Australia and the UK are particularly lagging behind other countries in terms of group self-build schemes, with notable contexts including Germany and the 'Baugruppe' model (Benson and Hamiduddin, 2017, Hamiduddin and Gallent, 2016), and the Netherlands (Lloyd et al., 2015). In assessing the ability for more group self-build, let alone more deliberative options to break through, the literature presented here suggests that the financialised land and housing systems of the case study countries is the major obstacle for alternative models of provision. This returns the focus to the dominant property relations which cohousing groups must overcome. The supply agenda emphasises an approach to property where development is premised on market-facing requirements for scale and pace, rather than a community-led model that emphasises the social and environmental benefits of development. Yet as argued above, a heterodox understanding of property is possible, and as this survey has shown, there are many fractures within the

conventional expression of multi-residential living, including residents having responsibility without control over building governance, extractive compactness offering infill without amenity, and the façade of housing abundance 'filtered' down from for-profit development.

## 2.7 Conclusion

This literature review initially surveyed international scholarship around cohousing, before discussing the history and status of cohousing in both the UK and Australia. In building on the country-specific discussion, the latter half of this chapter has examined the barriers faced by the cohousing model. While recognising the importance of studies which have interrogated how groups obtain funding or finance, barriers from industry or government scepticism, this thesis argues for a focus on the difficulties faced by cohousing groups in sourcing affordable, suitable land. This chapter has outlined a relational understanding that enables a close interrogation of how property has become financialised, and how cohousing operates as an alternative model of multi-residential property.

In the empirical chapters that follow, this thesis highlights cohousing case studies that offer alternative understandings of property that tackle many of the problems faced by mainstream multi-residential development. This is in part through the alignment of a unique socio-architectural form with governance mechanisms that address key issues of affordability and sustainability in housing. In interrogating this potential through the empirical material gathered, the theoretical lens of property relations is used to analyse key issues in multi-residential housing development. In Chapter Five, the ways in which cohousing groups seek to govern their land and housing are considered, with a focus on two cohousing case studies that use a co-operative model, one in the UK and the other in Australia. Particularly for those that are co-operatives, the research probes whether the schemes can deliver new forms of governance that address the distinct faultlines in multi-residential housing, particularly marked by the defective leasehold and strata title models. This chapter also questions how the alliance of co-operative governance with

the cohousing socio-architectural form allows for the groups to negotiate both shared and private space. Within this, the research investigates whether the informal and formal structures of governance are generative of processes that steward land.

In Chapter Six, the research engages with a key driver behind the rise of both leasehold and strata, the delivery of 'compactness' and density in multi-residential housing. Cohousing is presented as an alternative, collective approach to the delivery of density, but one that eschews the alignment of value extraction to processes of infill or brownfield redevelopment. This aims to bring together discussion of property relations enacted by cohousing groups with planning theory. In particular, this study follows from Blomley's argument that rather than seeing densification as a technocratic land use calculation for planners (2004), debate around new development and compactness needs to engage directly with complex questions of the ownership and ongoing stewardship of our finite land. In following on from a diverse set of critiques of conventional planning (Blomley, 2004, Chatterton, 2013) and compactness (McFarlane, 2023), this research aims to provide a fresh focus on how alternative relationships to land and housing in this case manifested in the cohousing model, can serve as an intervention in planning regimes.

In Chapter Seven attention turns to how cohousing relates to debates around housing supply. Given the state and political actors are heavily implicated in the supply discourse, this discussion highlights the relationship between cohousing and the state. In agreeing with Bright (2023) that this is a moment where the state's role in shaping property should be a focus, this chapter looks at three cohousing case studies that have interacted with the state for support. This chapter contributes to the property relations literature again through a post-growth lens, firstly via considering the temporality of housing development. The logic of economic growth including of housing, sees all new projects through the prism of how fast it can be built, and by association how this matches up with overall discussions of 'supply'. This also locates models like cohousing

within critiques of housing 'abundance' (Alexander, 2010), given this discourse is now a major feature of the housing supply argument (Rinehart, 2022).

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This research interrogates cohousing's alternative form of property relations primarily through how it relates to the acquisition and governance of land, and subsequent planning and development of housing. The case studies of cohousing groups are used to both help understand local, specific issues in cohousing provision, and to make broader reflections on what the model offers as an alternative to the dominant, financialised housing systems in both countries. The methodological approach used to answer a series of interconnected questions is presented in this chapter. Firstly, these research aims are further outlined with reference to how they respond to core gaps in the literature. This includes discussion of how the theoretical framework of property relations will be operationalised throughout the analysis. The rationale of a qualitative case study framework is explored, with material primarily gathered from semi-structured interviews. The choice of case studies and the inclusion of cohousing projects from both the UK and Australia will be discussed, before reference to a pilot phase that tested out the interview process. The main portion of fieldwork that built on the pilot process is then examined, along with the methods used to analyse the interview material thematically. Lastly, the methodological challenges and ethical considerations are reviewed.

### 3.2 Research aims and questions

The main aim of the research is to understand cohousing as an alternative model of multi-residential property. In observing case studies of groups in Australia and the UK, the research aims to understand how groups engage in a series of relationships to land and housing, beginning first with the acquisition of a land site for development. A close focus on such plots enables consideration of the already discussed distortions in conventional housing and planning systems towards land, including through financialisation and environmental misuse. All housing models,

cohousing notwithstanding, must engage with this warped relationship to land, particularly those operating in the contested urban market. As discussed, several studies have canvassed the difficulties that cohousing groups have accessing affordable and available land. This has often featured as part of a review of the numerous challenges experienced by cohousing groups, either through specific case studies (Chatterton, 2013, Coates, 2011b, Hudson et al., 2019, Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia, 2015) or wider analyses (Field, 2020, Jarvis et al., 2016, McCamant and Durrett, 2011, Meltzer, 2005, Nelson, 2018). Yet, the granular detail of how groups came to acquire, then build, and finally dwell together on a plot is absent from the cohousing literature. This research argues that there is much to learn from the collision between aspiring cohousing communities and the dominant, financialised approach to land.

Other studies have focused on the role of governments, particularly in Northern Europe, in enabling collaborative or community-led housing including through support with land (Droste, 2015, Szemző et al., 2019). More recent studies have begun to apply this focus on the role of governments to contexts like the UK. For instance Pauker and Hamiduddin (2024) undertook a study of the 'systematic' land release scheme of Bristol City Council, the first of its kind in England to focus on community-led housing projects. It provided a close study of one local authority, with interviews of both housing group members, local authority officials, and other practitioners in enabling roles. This thesis aims to build on these strands with a close analysis of both the actions of groups and government actors in relation to the acquisition and subsequent development of land.

A number of studies of cohousing and adjacent models have drawn on the wider literature of socio-technical transitions (Helamaa, 2019, Huber, 2017, Lang et al., 2020, Moore and Doyon, 2018, Mullins and Moore, 2018, Pauker and Hamiduddin, 2024). This has helped to analyse the 'niche' of community-led housing as it interacts with multi-level state structures that make up the regime, and the landscape of values, demographics and wider macro-economic trends that acts in

a co-constitutive relationship with the latter. While recognising the ability of such research to track how small innovative housing projects are enabled or hindered by larger constructs, whether cultural or political, this study has eschewed such an approach. Particularly given the focus on financialised land markets, this thesis concurs with Chatterton's argument that the socio-technical transitions literature lacks a focus on the role of capitalist structures, and movements against commodification (2016). Instead, this study utilises the lens of property relations to negotiate the dominant land and housing system, state-backed and developer-led, that is sustained by an underlying valuation of land as an economic asset.

This focus on property relations provides the framework for an interrogation of intersecting questions that relate to the land of cohousing groups, around its collective governance, the shifting norms, planning agendas, and often fixed laws of property. The research aims to contribute to theoretical debate around property relations while simultaneously engaging with what Simons (2020) terms 'foreshadowed issues'. As highlighted in the literature review, the key issue that underpins consideration of cohousing is the recognised need for secure, affordable and sustainable housing. This reveals a working hypothesis which animated the research from its inception, that the pursuit and use of land by cohousing groups differs from conventional approaches to multi-residential property, and potentially offers an alternative understanding of housing governance. In unpacking the research questions, the first as highlighted earlier is:

- How do the cohousing case studies govern their land and housing, and how does this relate to the conventional management of multi-residential property?

This is structured to enable a close analysis of the process by which the studied cohousing groups acquired the land for their developments. It investigates their respective inception stories, how they found and purchased the land, and then crucially the methods by which groups govern their land and housing collectively. The next two questions look to interrogate cohousing's relationship with the land and housing system. As a model with an unusual architectural and social design,

based on groups of people wanting to build and live together, it is uniquely placed to respond to key debates around space and density, given its model of sharing. The second question is consequently:

- How have the cohousing developments approached their respective local planning regimes, and what is their relationship to the housing density and compactness agenda?

The third aim of the research situates cohousing within one of the most contentious housing topics in both the UK and Australia, the politics and practicalities of housing supply. This builds on the two preceding empirical chapters and the proposition that speed and scale of supply have been beckoned, if not delivered, by conventional developers and approaches to compact urban development. In looking at the case studies for a final time, this research asks whether:

- Amid the dominant focus on housing supply by governments in both Australia and the UK, what approach to housing development is offered by the cohousing case studies?

### 3.3 Research design – qualitative case study analysis

In answering these questions, this research has chosen to undertake a qualitative case study form of analysis. In focusing on a select number of case studies from which to garner empirical observations, this eschews a 'large-N' study, which for instance could have been supported by a survey of cohousing groups across the UK and Australia on their land acquisition, governance and use processes. While perhaps useful as an overview of the land struggles of cohousing groups, such a quantitative process would be unlikely to answer many of the questions posed above. The use of selected case studies allows an in-depth analysis (Flyvbjerg, 2006), that applies the lens of property relations to the cohousing groups. This aims to reveal the often lengthy processes that groups undertake to obtain land, how members explain their governance, and how they relate

their project to a range of concepts such as ownership, density or housing supply, all themes that came up in interviews.

This linking of the abstract with empirical material is well suited to 'small-N' case study research, with Blatter and Haverland (2012) outlining a range of methods. Of these, the congruence analysis approach is the most aligned to the development of theoretical work, particularly in aiding what Hall (2006) argues is the 'three-cornered fight' between empirical material and multiple, sometimes divergent theoretical perspectives. This can lead to a melding or revision of concepts, and in this study while beginning with the broad theoretical framework of property relations through which to view the case studies and their interactions with land and housing, additional theoretical propositions are included. This resulted in an initial investigation of key themes in the interviews that teased out the discussion of property relations. For the material garnered in Chapters Four and Five, this resulted often from direct questions about the land acquisition process and the governance model. These honed in on the intersection of the hard edge of property law such as land sales and titling regimes, and a more dynamic understanding of property relations in the informal rules and processes that define many cohousing communities. As discussed further below, while beginning with core areas of investigation, additional themes emerged from the initial discussions with cohousing case studies.

Yet in following Crang and Cook's prompt that research design should be reflexive (2007), the emergent housing debates in both Australia and the UK have influenced the direction of the study. While many aspects of these discourses are not new, in the early phase of the research there was a heightened focus on supply, as many politicians reached for this policy to address rising discontent with housing inequities (Foye, 2022, Gurrán, 2022). Particularly in Australia, but also in the UK, this has also been paired with a renewed focus on housing density and compactness (Easthope and Kerr, 2024, White and Madden, 2024). While considering the cohousing case studies and their specific stories of land acquisition, planning development and

use, this research sought to test what the model offered in the face of such orthodoxies. In providing a potential alternative proposition for multi-residential housing through cohousing, this thesis recognises the ability of theory-led research to make meaningful critiques of policy, while not being beholden to the policy process (Aalbers, 2018).

As such, for the two areas of focus in Chapters Six and Seven, this was about examining cohousing in relation to key housing issues while being informed by major theoretical debates. For instance, while compactness as a specific term did not explicitly feature in the interview questions, most of the case studies encountered challenges with their respective planning regimes and such tensions were often expressed in planning issues that feature heavily in debates around compactness. Meanwhile in investigating the interaction between the state and cohousing, the interviews revealed that much of the dynamic was driven by a government-led fixation with increased housing supply.

As part of the 'three-cornered fight' between the empirical materials and theoretical concepts, this study introduced post-growth theories into the discussion of property relations, utilising recent post-growth literature in housing (Nelson and Chatterton, 2022), planning (Durrant et al., 2023) and property law (Alexander, 2010). While post-growth was not explicitly discussed as a phrase in the interviews, as shown by Vandeventer et al. (2024) a politics of degrowth or post-growth can be discerned from the everyday activities and interactions of residents, particularly in housing that contains elements of sharing. In this case it begins with the deliberations by cohousing members over their incipient developments, and continues in the design and governance of their land and housing. In considering how this differs from most multi-residential housing in urban areas, this allows for a wider discussion of how land and housing is governed in cities, for both affordability, sustainability, and neighbourhood amenity. While speed, scale and financial imperatives are at the forefront of conventional legal, planning and governance

approaches to multi-residential housing, cohousing potentially offers a contrasting agenda, and post-growth theories can help illuminate its alterity.

### 3.3.1 Data collection methods

As part of the qualitative case study, the primary form of data collection was interviews with key stakeholders. In designing the interview process, there was a wealth of research from which to learn appropriate approaches to cohousing groups. Several studies of cohousing communities have used semi-structured interviews as key methodological tools (Fernández Arrigoitia and West, 2020, Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia, 2015, Helamaa, 2019, Tummers, 2017, Cooper and Baer, 2019, Ruiu, 2016). In this thesis, members of cohousing groups were the key interviewees, along with the architects that supported the design and build of schemes. Government stakeholders were also interviewed to further understand the specifics of certain cohousing projects, as well as for their perspectives on the model in general.

In building on the literature surrounding the cohousing case studies, policy and practitioner documents and further grey literature were analysed to understand the framework in which groups attempted to access land. This scrutinised the policy and institutional frameworks that impacted on the cohousing case studies. Policy documents included the laws and financial supports for community-led housing developments, procedures on government land disposal and use, and local and national planning policies. Practitioner material and any available textual accounts by selected cohousing groups of their attempts to access land was also analysed. This drew on websites and social media accounts such as Facebook or X.

## 3.4 Deployment of qualitative case study approach

In moving from the broad design of the qualitative case studies to deployment in the research, this section outlines the choices that were made. This begins with how case studies were selected, including the rationale for analysis of cohousing groups from both Australia and the UK,

before detailing how a pilot phase informed the later interviews. The approach to both interviews and analysis is then outlined.

### 3.4.1 Choosing case studies

A key criteria for case study selection was an intention to analyse cohousing groups from both Australia and the UK. Considering multiple cases alongside each other connects the project to other comparative cohousing studies (Czischke, 2018, Hagbert et al., 2020, Jarvis, 2015b, Tummers, 2016, Williams, 2005b). This research meets the demand for more international comparative study both in broader collaborative, community-led housing research (Mullins and Moore, 2018), and cohousing specifically (Nelson, 2018). Recent studies have interrogated cohousing in both the UK and Australia (Jarvis, 2015b), and this thesis builds on such contributions by joining together analysis of cohousing governance, as also covered by the aforementioned Jarvis, with an in-depth focus on the planning and development of cohousing schemes.

In informing the method there is a rich body of recent comparative housing studies analysing both the UK and Australian contexts (Berry et al., 2004, Pawson and Wiesel, 2014, Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2014, Pawson and Milligan, 2013). This also translates into the continued application of policies and ideas from one country to another, often via existing links between the political systems (Institute for Government, 2021, Legrand, 2016). In explaining the comparative approach, this research takes some inspiration from a comparative urbanism which ‘thinks through elsewhere’ in analysing both the interconnections between, and unique aspects of cases (Robinson, 2016). Aalbers (2022) meanwhile has extrapolated on this in arguing for more comparative, ‘relational’ housing studies. Both these contributions have helped build on the comparative literature across the social science disciplines. This includes typologies across environmental, housing, and urban studies which have long argued over trends that indicate divergence instead of convergence, or universalisation versus variation-finding (Tilly, 1984,

Kemeny and Lowe, 1998). Today, many housing and urban studies leave open the possibility for both links and deviations between cases and advocate for a less-Western centric focus to analysis (Hart, 2018, Robinson, 2016). In learning from these recent innovations in comparative theory, this research embraces the possibility for a complex range of interconnections across scales, while not losing sight of the importance of local or specific national contexts. For instance, in comparing Australia and the UK, while both are commonly thought of as 'property owning democracies', long influenced by 'liberal' welfare and housing policies (Kemeny, 2001, Esping-Andersen, 1990), there are divergences stemming from Australia's experience of continuing settler colonialism (Pickerill, 2021).

In setting out, Robinson (2016) argues that comparisons can take a number of starting points. One that traces the 'genetic' path from a certain event, emphasising any interconnections between comparative cases while recognising those features that create different outcomes. Alternatively, a 'generative' strategy begins with a conceptual lens from which the different cases can be compared. Aalbers (2022) argues that the two can be utilised together, and this research sees possibilities for use of both across the three broad points of comparison in the empirical chapters. The conceptual lens of property relations provides the opening, 'generative' possibility for comparison. Both settings have embraced an increasing financialisation of land and housing over time, albeit Australia has arguably sped up many of the processes of enclosure and financialisation as part of their colonial inheritance (Troy, 2012), and private ownership has tended to dominate more so than in the UK. This accords with Aalbers claim that the direction of housing can often be the same, 'but with different start and end positions and at different speeds' (2022, p.4). Both are common law countries that privilege a protection of private property and in the strata title system there is a 'genetic' link with Australia learning from perceived failures with the UK's leasehold system (Sherry, 2017b). But as discussed in Chapter Two and explored further in Chapter Five the end points have not diverged greatly, with for-profit players dominating multi-residential housing, in both development model and legal form.

Meanwhile, as shown by Chapter Six, while the planning system in Australia inherited a number of key regulatory practices from the UK, it has embraced a more hybrid approach that also borrows from the US zoning system (Gurran and Bramley, 2017). The role of discretionary planning, used differently in both contexts, figures as a key issue in a few of the case studies. Yet, in considering the supply-driven context of both countries for Chapter Seven, there are similarities in how governments have fixated on the supposed blockages in planning for increased housing delivery (Ferm et al., 2020).

In assessing what is gained from comparing cohousing groups in Australia and the UK, while responding to a gap in the research, the methods described here can also illuminate the contribution of the case studies both in of themselves and as a diverse collection. In examining the detail of each case, but thinking across multiple cohousing projects, this hopes to detect the subtleties of more wide-reaching ideas (Simons, 2020), however slow they may emerge. This takes from Robinson (2016) the proposal that insights from specific cases can be used to launch new lines of enquiry, a spark of thought discerned from one cohousing study applied to another community elsewhere. Simultaneously, in being open not only to shared processes and outcomes, but also identifiable differences, this can assist understanding of how innovations, policies, or governance practices may emerge, be replicated or indeed stifled (Hart, 2018, Ward, 2010). As suggested by Robinson (2016), this also applies to theoretical inquiry by testing the boundaries of emergent conceptualisations. In studying alternative property relations this gives license to comparisons across jurisdictions, to unearth the diverse and intersecting ways that cohousing communities operate heterodox to dominant property laws, multi-residential norms, or governance practices.

In finding cases in both the UK and Australia, this study had some additional guiding criteria. Rather than a randomised selection, as Flyvbjerg (2006) shows in discussing paradigmatic cases,

some early information indicated alignment to various questions. A key entry point was that most of the cases sought government support particularly around land acquisition and development. The variation was in whether assistance was obtained, if it was sustained, if it came from an ad hoc campaign or decision instead of a policy process, and importantly whether it led to a successful project. The study focused on 'urban' cohousing groups partly to highlight the most pronounced examples of how cohousing struggles against the dominant land and housing system. Yet despite the recent growth in urban groups as discussed in Chapter Two this necessarily limited the potential number of case studies, given that in both the UK and Australia cohousing has historically been concentrated in rural areas, or in smaller towns outside major cities. The research located case studies across the development spectrum, well-established, newly-built, in construction, and in formation. The groups identified represented a few different approaches to land acquisition and development, from the private market, private but with a government planning mechanism that created a viable development, former state land identified and bought through an ad hoc opportunity, and state land acquired as part of a broader government-led master planning process. Having groups across different phases of completion and processes of acquisition enables the research to view the provision of housing as an accrual of many stages (Ball, 2014).

When contacting cohousing communities this study was aware that many groups are experiencing research fatigue, with Fernández Arrigoitia and West (2020) noting that pioneering models may have particularly experienced extensive contact with researchers. This meant that a careful testing of the appetite of groups was needed in every instance. In many cases, there was a central email address for cohousing groups, and initial interviews were sourced through that. For cohousing groups that are regularly contacted for research approaches may differ, sometimes there may be a regular spokesperson or outward-facing contact. In other instances, there might be a rota of members available for interview. In sifting through the case studies, this research

took some inspiration from Flyvbjerg's advice (2006) that finding a paradigmatic case involves making an intuitive judgement from initial, somewhat limited information. This left open the possibility for failed case studies, but in following from studies like Parham and Jones (2021), a 'longlist' was created to provide some insurance. Overall, 12 cohousing groups undertook at least a preliminary interview. However, difficulties emerged in scaling-up case studies from initial interview to in-depth analysis. This was particularly for cohousing communities who were in formation or the construction phase of development. Groups who had multiple ongoing issues in developing their cohousing project were often understandably time-pressed. Whether this was delays due to construction costs or lengthy planning processes, a number of case studies fell by the wayside due to such pressures. As such, from the initial sourcing of case studies four primary cohousing communities emerged: Squeezed in London - a group in the planning stage, Stellulata in Kamberri/Canberra - a group just finishing construction, Chapeltown Cohousing in Leeds - a recently finished development, and Cohousing Co-operative in Nipaluna/Hobart - a community 25 years established. For three other case studies, they not only informed the interview design as discussed further below, but also provided supplementary data that can be seen in the empirical chapters.

The example of how ChaCo was found and scaled up to be a primary case study is representative of the experience with many of the groups. Initial information pointed to it being productive, with Leeds and the West Yorkshire region identified as an area with some prominent cohousing schemes (McKenna et al., 2024), but also where brownfield regeneration in aid of housing density was a political priority (DLUHC, 2024). In scoping it up to a full case study both relationship building and a snowballing of contacts was required to ensure that the correct people were reached to answer the key areas of focus (Valentine, 2005). ChaCo became a project of interest and contact was made with the group. Given significant attention towards ChaCo, the group filters the numerous interview requests by inviting members to respond to enquiries to which they may be interested and able to assist.

<i>Case study name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Development status</i>
<b>Chapeltown Cohousing</b>	Leeds, UK	Lived in since 2022
<b>Cohousing Co-operative</b>	Nipaluna/Hobart, Australia	Lived in since 2000
<b>Stellulata Cohousing</b>	Kamberri/Canberra, Australia	Lived in since 2025
<b>Squeezed London</b>	London, UK	Formed in 2017, disbanded 2023 while in planning
Cascade Cohousing	Nipaluna/Hobart, Australia	Lived in since 1993
New Ground, Older	London, UK	Lived in since 2016
Women's Cohousing		
Cohousing Canberra	Kamberri/Canberra, Australia	Applying for land since 2021 – awaiting status of request for tender

Figure 4: Case studies analysed in research, primary cases in bold

### 3.4.2 Pilot phase

It was possible to fine-tune the interview questions because of the close locality of a few case studies, enabling a pilot phase. As befits the flexible approach to research design outlined above, the use of a pilot period ensured that there was iterative movement between data collection and analysis. This allowed for the testing of initial theoretical concepts against the emergent data, as per the grounded theory method (Bryant, 2017). The first formal interview was conducted in September 2022 with a London-based cohousing group. Around the same time, an informal interview was undertaken with another cohousing group in East London at a community consultation event held in support of their development proposal. After that there was a period of leave from the DPhil with interviews resuming in April 2023 and continuing over the second half of 2023. In learning from the pilot phase, an initial ambition to analyse the discourse of groups in relation to their property proved superfluous, particularly when the governance of cohousing communities presented as a rich avenue of discussion with members. This close focus on the formal and informal norms created by cohousing groups enabled a broader

conceptualisation of property relations to emerge, evolving from the initial interactions between the state and cohousing groups in planning regulation or land disposal, to a more generative discussion of what the cohousing model suggested for multi-residential living in practice, in both architectural 'compact' form, and governance structures. In practical terms, what the initial interviews showed is the need for more in-depth discussions with members not only to build rapport but to also interrogate case studies beyond the core outline of their land acquisition process. Particularly for the Australian portion of the fieldwork this meant that several initial interviews were conducted firstly via Microsoft Teams, before later visits to many of these cohousing communities for follow-up interviews.

### 3.5 Approach to interviewees and key interview themes

As highlighted above, and shown more in Appendix 1, several scoping interviews were undertaken with cohousing groups, some of which led to more intensive interviews. Given the focus of interviews with cohousing groups included the acquisition of land this meant that certain members were more relevant contacts. These members tended to be more heavily involved with the project's search for land, as often cohousing communities delegate certain responsibilities to sub-groups. Particularly for well-established schemes, the number of members who have knowledge of the initial land acquisition and development story is often a select group. For example, in one longstanding cohousing group studied, of the 12 households only 3 people were founder members. The role of such founder members therefore became privileged in this study. To continue the example of the scaling up of the Chapeltown Cohousing case study, an initial interview took place with a ChaCo member. Following this an interview was undertaken with a regeneration officer from Leeds City Council who was responsible for supporting community-led housing projects. However, it transpired that they were not involved with ChaCo during the project development. As such, a former council regeneration officer who had assisted ChaCo closely was also interviewed. Other interviewees included an executive from Unity Housing

Association who managed the joint project for the registered provider, an architect contracted by Unity who worked on the technical designs of both the ChaCo and the Unity portions, and the architect who had assisted ChaCo from the inception of the design phase. Lastly, with further questions about the land acquisition and project development arising, a joint interview was conducted with two further members of ChaCo well versed in these issues. Given the challenge of distance, the Australian portion of the research was achieved in two ways. Several preliminary interviews were undertaken via Microsoft Teams to gauge the receptivity of groups to further interviews. This enabled the planning of a more concentrated fieldwork trip in October 2023. Due to child-caring responsibilities it was only possible for this trip to Australia to be three weeks in length to take in three different cities: Nipaluna/Hobart, Kamberri/Canberra and Naarm/Melbourne.

In most of the primary cohousing case studies, including in the ChaCo example, the discussions with cohousing members were combined with interviews with associated stakeholders such as architects and government officials. The interviews with architects in most cases proved useful in gaining extra insight into land acquisition histories, as they were often involved in the process from the beginning. However, it was important to ensure that these perspectives didn't trump the recollections of members, so in all cases architects were interviewed after first meeting the members, and often with the members knowledge. In many cases the interviews with government representatives helped to go beyond the often well-scripted policy documents to understand the choices by governments to take or not take specific actions (Dye, 2016). This included discussion of the rationale for supporting various cohousing groups, as well as other related policy issues. While dealing with the reticence of government officials to talk openly, representatives from relevant jurisdictions were spoken to in relation to each of the primary cases. To secure interviews with government actors, questions were pre-authorized in some specific instances. This changed the nature of one interview, with a government planner reading out prepared answers to most questions. A few discussions were also held with practitioners who

could provide additional perspectives on key questions. This included architects and developers who worked with community-led building groups in Australia (AndyFergus1 and PropCol1), as well as experts who provided further background on local housing contexts such as Palawa/Tasmania (SGS1 and TasHousing1).

The semi-structured interview technique was used throughout the fieldwork. This guided conversations loosely around a series of topics allowing for respondents to freely comment on the key research themes (Longhurst, 2010). This accorded with the proposal that the semi-structured interview through both open-ended and more focussed questions enables both detailed empirical inquiry, as well as theoretical discussion (Galletta, 2016). Furthermore, it offers the possibility for more ice-breaking questions that settle the interviewee into the discussion while ensuring that no details are missed (Galletta and Cross, 2013). In using this structure, interviews began with open-ended questions on introductory topics such as how the cohousing group was formed, and the members' personal reflections on cohousing, before clarification of specific details around land acquisition stories, governance mechanisms, planning, and development processes. The research then opened out to more theoretical discussions around cohousing and concepts of ownership, collective management of land and understanding how cohousing fitted into neighbourhood and broader urban development in respective cities.

### 3.6 Analysis

The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder, the data safely stored in accordance with the University of Oxford data protection principles, and then transcribed using Microsoft Word. NVivo was then used to clean up and analyse the interviews. In beginning the process of analysis, there were some broad themes from the research questions that generated some initial codes; for example: planning, land, housing development, but these alone could not capture the richness of the interview material. As such, the data was considered inductively in that additional themes and subsequent codes and sub-codes were derived from what the interviews unearthed. As per

the learnings from the pilot phase, both the collection and analysis of data was done simultaneously over the fieldwork period, as befits the grounded theory method raised earlier (Bryant, 2017).

As Galletta (2016) suggests, data analysis plans should leave open the possibility for unexpected meanings to emerge from the research, and by association research design must be flexible in order to incorporate such new or heightened themes. This led to the elevation of analysis of the governance mechanisms that cohousing groups revealed, the detail of which was not perceptible prior to the interviews. The micro-actions of cohousing members, in the way that they negotiated both private and shared space was able to be discerned from the in-depth focus. This helped to bolster the theoretical approach of property relations, which while outlined at the outset of the research design, was not fully developed until later into the process of analysis.

As highlighted above, grey literature, policy and practitioner material supported analysis of the respective case studies. The grey literature, along with policy documents from respective governments provided important contextual information, including understanding the emergence of innovative competitors to cohousing including build-to-rent, co-living and other 'compact' forms of housing development. This also bolstered understanding of land use issues in respective cities, including market analysis of brownfield land. Meanwhile, reports from state actors helped fill in gaps in understanding on government actions, such as the agreement-making processes recorded on specific land sales, the funding to cohousing groups, and wider planning initiatives. Practitioner material was also instructive whether this was 'how-to' guides from cohousing, co-operative or community-led housing peak bodies, or the material from cohousing bodies, whether this was their own rules, constitutions or published histories. Particularly for those groups still forming or developing, social media or websites helped to follow the progress of schemes, including in land acquisition, planning or construction phases.

### 3.7 Methodological challenges

A major methodological challenge resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to further issues when scoping out potential case studies. As discussed above, a key issue for many of the groups that were in formation or construction were the significant delays and cost overruns that they incurred, and this can be linked to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the building industry in both Australia (Rowley et al., 2023) and the UK (Archer and Cole, 2023). A few of the groups spoken to initially were deeply impacted by similar factors, and while attempting to address multiple issues with their project viability, their capacity became severely stretched. Patience was required with a number of groups, to wait until a time that was suitable for them to meet. This required flexibility particularly with the UK portion of the fieldwork, with some cases adjourned and others quickly initiated. In one instance, one case study was almost abandoned – Squeezed in London - after the local government support which they relied upon was withdrawn. Yet as Chapter Seven details, this case provided some important reflections despite the project's discontinuation.

In part, another impact of the pandemic was on the countries selected for the fieldwork. At the outset there was an ambition to include German case studies, however this proved logistically unworkable particularly given restrictions on movement to stop the spread of Covid-19. It was ultimately decided that the research should be kept to cases within Australia and the UK. Given that I was a resident in the UK, and a citizen of Australia, ease of access was more guaranteed than if I had continued with Germany. Moreover, as detailed above, the comparative potential of both Australia and the UK adds much to the research design.

Another research design consideration that proved difficult in practice was the ambition to engage meaningfully with Indigenous perspectives on many of the key questions, particularly given the focus on Australia and the settler-colonial cities of Kamberri/Canberra and Nipaluna/Hobart. Discussions of land cannot ignore the acts of dispossession that have been

inflicted on the First Nations of Australia, enshrined through the imperialist evocation of terra nullius and Western-generated concepts of titling (Crabtree, 2018b, Keenan, 2018). Planning systems in Australia, as in other settler colonial contexts (Dorries, 2022), are inseparable from their own complicity with First Nations erasure both then and now (Wensing and Porter, 2016). Meanwhile, all housing sectors must continue to acknowledge and address not only Indigenous claims to land, but the multiple inequities which have been inflicted on First Nations peoples in relation to housing. However, in those interviewed there are no First Nations viewpoints. Several of the Australian interviews however did discuss issues that related to First Nations knowledges or claims to land. The importance of Indigenous claims to, and understandings of land, were particularly pertinent given that during the fieldwork a major referendum was held on Indigenous constitutional recognition and therefore it was front of mind for many interviewees. In both Kamberri/Canberra and Nipaluna/Hobart representatives of the First Nations custodians of the land were contacted but neither organisation were able to participate in the research. The timing of the visit around the referendum possibly did not aid this venture.

### 3.8 Ethical considerations

In preparing for the interview process and applying for ethical approval several resources were used to ensure that all consideration was given to how interviewees would be treated with care and with their full consent. This included the University of Oxford Best Practice Guidance on: 'Conducting research interviews', 'Management and Protection of Data Collected for Research Purposes', 'Social science research conducted outside the UK', 'Internet-mediated research', and 'Elite and Expert Interviewing'. Additional direction on protocols for interviews came from the methodological literature. In particular Galletta and Cross (2013) recommends how to ensure that interviewees are comfortable throughout the interview, including through the structure of questions, and how consent can be built into the process throughout. While the semi-structured interview format provides an opportunity to uncover the understandings that interviewees hold

towards a certain subject, it does require researchers to be aware of their own position, assumptions and influence over how information is 'co-constructed' (Cloke et al., 2004, Galletta, 2016). This necessitates a recognition of the power relationships between the interview participant(s) and the researcher, and how the latter will be viewed by the variety of stakeholders; cohousing member, government official or other intermediary actor (Crang and Cook, 2007, Valentine, 2005). Throughout the research, I was aware that while sympathetic to the cohousing movement, I was an 'outsider' to it having never lived in a cohousing community or had much connection to the movement before starting research. As a former adviser to the Victorian Housing Minister in Australia, I was naturally more comfortable in the world of policymaking and the state. While this status could not be eradicated, it was imperative to acknowledge that many cohousing communities feel some scepticism to government actors, and are wary of the power dynamic between the state and cohousing groups. At the same time, over the period of the research I gained some degree of insider status, particularly in Australia, as a member of peak-body Cohousing Australia's researcher network.

A key issue that spoke to the power of the researcher was the issue of anonymity. As the participant information sheet (Appendix 2) and consent form (Appendix 3) outline, the level of anonymity could be chosen, including whether their name and or organisation could be revealed. In practice it was decided that even if interviewees gave approval to inclusion of their name, it was not necessary for the research to do so, and codes were used in most cases. The interview material still had maximum functionality. Despite the use of coding as both documents outlined, interviewees could still be indirectly identifiable in the published research even if names weren't used. For example particularly amongst the cohousing group itself, interviewees could be identified by those acquainted with the views and roles of group members. For government officials, it was important that the organisational profile be named: for example, regeneration officer from Leeds City Council. In the case of municipal officials this would potentially provide a suitable level of anonymisation. However some officials from select public authorities may be

distinguishable, particularly in the case of senior officials from unitary authorities. This proved a challenge in securing interviewees from government authorities, and in two cases senior government officials declined to conduct formal, recorded interviews primarily given issues with anonymity.

### 3.9 Conclusion

This chapter catalogued the methodological choices and challenges that the research grappled with, in answering key questions that surround consideration of cohousing as an alternative form of multi-residential property. In addressing these questions, the research advances a theoretical framework that builds on relational understandings of property (Blandy, 2023, Blomley, 2004). This allows analysis beyond the initial 'legal event' (Blandy et al., 2006) of the land acquisition, to the alternative processes created by the residents, both in planning and design, but also the governance of land and housing following development. The use of qualitative case studies through semi-structured interviews aids this approach, specifically the 'small-N' in-depth focus on four primary cases (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). In what can be described as a 'congruence analysis', the initial use of property relations opens a productive conversation with a range of disciplines across the empirical chapters.

Firstly as discussed in Chapter Two, with cohousing presented as an alternative to mainstream multi-residential housing, the formal and informal governance processes of selected case studies are discussed. In building on both legal and wider critiques of conventional multi-title structures, leasehold in the UK and strata title in Australia, the analysis in Chapter Five will concentrate on two co-operative cohousing communities, that express heterodox understandings of property. In Chapter Six the thesis contributes to discussions of how cohousing relates to planning norms, in this case compactness. This helps to interrogate how the groups related the housing design to the land plot and integrated their built form with the wider neighbourhood. But in going beyond these common planning challenges, the focus on cohousing as an alternative expression of

'compactness' helps tease out how the model differs to conventional multi-residential schemes. As befits the congruence analysis this introduces 'post-growth' understandings of housing and planning into discussion of cohousing as multi-residential property. Finally, in Chapter Seven, while considering how the cohousing cases engage with government actors, including over support with land, the research assesses how cohousing differs to dominant approaches to multi-residential housing development. It frames this collision through the supply focus of governments in Australia and the UK, to see what the deliberative form of housing development both offers and militates against.

## Chapter Four: Introduction to the case studies

This chapter introduces the case studies, before the primary empirical material. It allows for a review of the basic details of each scheme, including the number of households, their prospective or actual architectural design, alongside a short history of their initiation. This includes the process by which the land sites were acquired, given that the use of land forms a crucial frame through which the cohousing model is interrogated.

### 4.1 Chapeltown Cohousing, Leeds



Figure 5: The design for ChaCo (Chapeltown Cohousing, n.d).

Chapeltown Cohousing (ChaCo) in Leeds is a recently constructed development of 29 homes sitting alongside a common house that contains shared facilities including a kitchen and dining space, laundry room, games room and study space. The common house also has rooms that can be used for guests, thereby allowing all the dwellings to eschew spare bedrooms if desired.

Carparking is kept to the perimeter of the development. 21 of the homes are some form of shared ownership property, while a further eight are affordable rental with one of those being a five-bedroom share house. ChaCo was developed by a long-standing community-led housing group in partnership with Unity Housing Association, a Leeds-based registered provider. Leeds City Council and Homes England provided significant support. It has strong links to the diverse Chapeltown community and has a sector-leading approach to diversity targets that enables it to represent Chapeltown and provide stable and affordable housing to traditionally marginalised groups. ChaCo's targets were described by a member to make sure their membership matched the demographics of Chapeltown:

*The targets are at least 60% of members have to have a pre-existing connection to Chapeltown, meaning that they either have to be already living here, be born and raised here, be working here, a couple of people have got family ties here...15% of households have to have an under 18, 15%- 18 to 35, 15% 35 to 65 and 15% - 55 Plus. Similarly 15%, and these are the terms that we took from the census, So 15% Black Caribbean, 15% Asian, 15% other BME. 15% white. And then also 15% LGBTQ+, 15% disabled, 15% low income (CCM1).*

Adjacent to the 29 ChaCo homes, there are 30 Unity Housing Association homes across two buildings, and four 'self-build' plots which at the time of writing were largely empty. The interviews with residents highlighted how rooted the group felt in Chapeltown, and how this fundamentally shaped the land acquisition process. As one resident noted:

*Some cohousing projects are about an identity that they have in common or a particular way they want to live, but ours was very much rooted in Chapeltown. The sense of place was really important to us, which made things obviously a bit complicated because there's only so much land in Chapeltown... but also made things very clear and simple in terms of who we wanted to be as a community and where we were going to recruit from. And*

*where we were going to be looking for land to build a plot (CCM1).*

Another member highlighted that:

*There's something about the group that's actually very connected to the land because the whole point of Chapeltown cohousing was to build cohousing in Chapeltown, and there aren't a billion sites in Chapeltown. So the choice was already narrowed down to two options, basically maybe three so it's really hard to separate the group from the land (CCM3).*

The site in question was acquired from Leeds City Council. The details of the sale were later published in the land registry, with the final price being £328,166 (HM Land Registry, 2024). As discussed further in Chapters Six and Seven, the brownfield land site required significant remediation for which ChaCo received funding.



*Figure 6: Garden at Chapeltown Cohousing, with housing to the left and school site at the back of the garden (photo taken by the author).*

## 4.2 Cohousing Co-operative, Nipaluna/Hobart



*Figure 7: Pedestrianised street – Cohousing Co-operative, Nipaluna/Hobart, (photo taken by the author).*

Cohousing Co-operative is a group in Nipaluna/Hobart that was originally formed in 1991 and remains one of the longest-lasting cohousing communities in Australia. The development as it currently exists is made up of 12 households with a mixture of two, three and four bed homes. Carparking is kept to the perimeter of the development and there is a common house with kitchen and dining space, laundry and guest room. In a rare occurrence for Australian cohousing communities and linked to its funding from Federal and State Governments, it is only applicable to renters who are eligible for social housing in Australia. This means that tenants pay no more than 30% of their income in rent (Cohousing Co-op, n.d). As the name suggests, it is a rental or nominal-equity co-operative, the nature of which will be discussed further below in Chapter Five.

Like ChaCo it took a significant amount of time to find a site and then develop on it. Their original plans were to buy a rural camp site from the Tasmanian government. The bid was unsuccessful, with the government opting to retain the site. The cohousing group then divided between those

who wanted to pursue rural communities leaving the organisation, and others interested in living in Nipaluna/Hobart maintaining the incorporation (CCoop1). In these formative years they received funding from the Federal Department of Community Services and Health and the Tasmanian Development Authority. They turned to an inner-urban Nipaluna/Hobart site, again seeking to purchase from the government. This possibility offered easy access to inner city living – the site in question is 10 mins walk from Nipaluna/Hobart CBD. According to architectural tenders at the time: ‘development on this site will in turn add to the social diversity of the city by providing affordable housing close to the city centre’ (Morrison and Breytenbach, 1995). The brief to architects written by the group described:

*Housing that overcomes some of the problems of conventional suburban living and responds to contemporary changes in society such as the move away from the nuclear family towards more diverse social arrangements and the need to have access to the inner city for part time and self-employment opportunities (Cohousing Co-op, 1995).*

Again, the sale of this government land did not transpire. In 1995 they bought a site off the private market. This was further from the CBD of Nipaluna/Hobart but nonetheless still only 10 mins drive from the centre. It backs onto Kunaanyi/Mt Wellington and contains a significant landholding of around 1.2 hectares/3 acres. The build was completed in April of 2000, and as reported by Meltzer (2005) fifteen adults and sixteen children moved in. This make-up of this group was ‘mostly single mothers, couples with young children, people with disabilities and students’ (Meltzer, 2005, p.94). As discussed below, while there has been significant turnover in members, the commitment to providing affordable cohousing tenancies has not wavered. The group have strong processes of governance including the use of consensus agreement-making.



Figure 8: Back garden with trampolines - Cohousing Co-operative, Nipaluna/Hobart, (photo taken by the author).

#### 4.3 Stellulata Cohousing, Kamberri/Canberra

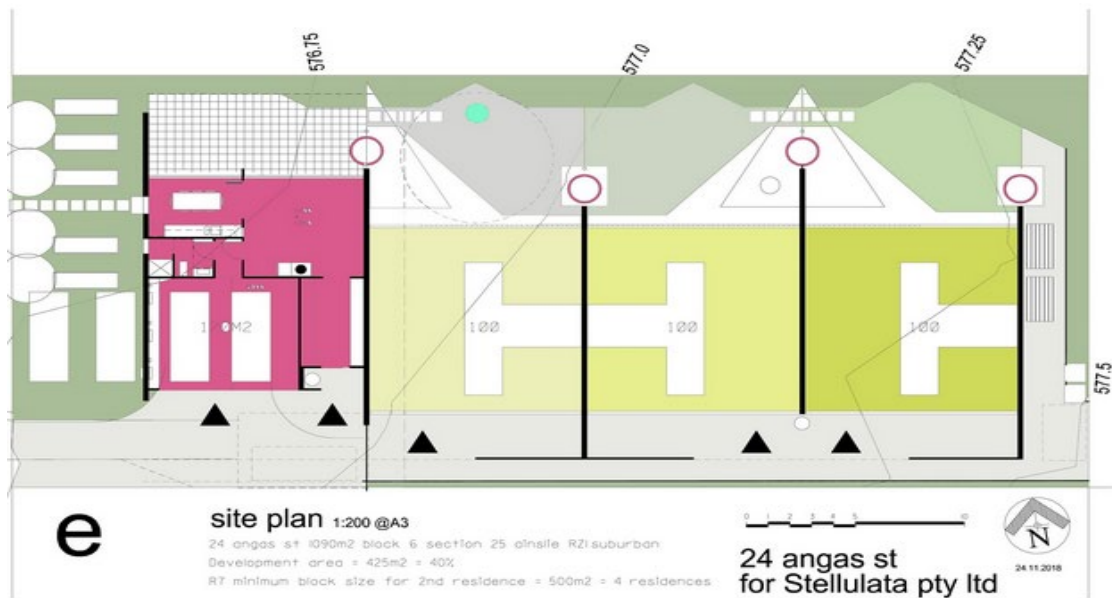


Figure 9: Conceptual site plan - Stellulata, showing the three homes and front common house in pink, (Stellulata Cohousing, 2019).

In Kamberri/Canberra, Ngunnawal country, a cohousing development called Stellulata is replacing one house on a large block with three homes with shared facilities. It is currently under construction. The front common house will contain a common space, shared laundry and guest accommodation. Stellulata was formed out of two households, who later invited a third household to join their development. It encompasses three single story 100 square metre (sqm) homes arranged side by side attached with shared internal walls. The houses will run down the length of a conventional 1090 sqm block in the Kamberri/Canberra suburb of Ainslie. Fronting onto the street with the main entrance is a two-storey, 148 sqm shared 'common house'. This will contain facilities such as a guest bedroom and ensuite toilet, large kitchen, and entertainment room. The process of acquiring the land was relatively commonplace. The group bought a house and land site off the private market. Stellulata has been initiated as part of an ACT Government programme, the Demonstration Housing Scheme, to encourage innovative housing and test and control reforms to planning codes. This initiative was split into two types: those projects with land, and those without. As a Demonstration Housing project 'with land' Stellulata was one of the first to get off the ground.



*Figure 10: The site that Stellulata are building on – shows the size of the RZ1 block, (Stellulata Cohousing, 2023).*

As the architect on the project outlined, the common house and the design in general 'has been developed to really cater for human creativity, involvement, connection' (ArchACT). A further key shared resource is that of the garden. To the founder member, the experience of gardening, growing food, and providing plantings to encourage biodiversity was crucial to all the community members. The large, shared garden space is made possible by a small plot ratio with the built footprint standing at roughly 43% of the total site with the rest reserved for garden space. The size of the block while not unusual by Kamberri/Canberra standards allows for such a generous garden. The architect explained how the design cohered well to the large block and to the 'Garden City' (Freestone, 1986) ethic in Kamberri/Canberra:

*I think if you have a smaller site, then you'll be forced to start going up. And therefore it changes a little bit the philosophy of this particular project because it's very connected to the garden. It's very connected to, and it very much reinforces the Garden City philosophy (ArchACT).*

The three couples that have joined together to build Stellulata were also united in their vision to downsize from their existing homes. For the founder member of Stellulata this was a fundamental contribution to the housing debate in the ACT. As they noted:

*One of our arguments was that the RZ1 zone in Canberra is full of ugly, huge houses. Which technically are no more than 50% of the block....and so our argument was we can increase the density.... we free up three houses for other purposes we take up just one block of land (Stel1).*

Beyond the question of densification, another aspect which appealed to the ACT government was Stellulata's commitment to demonstrate a housing type for ageing in place. The ACT official outlined Stellulata's submission on this:

*They're in their 50s and 60s and have been through or are going through the passing of our parents as their generations, sometimes in lonely, institutionalised setting far away from their beloved communities. So they believe the proposal provides a way for them and provides a model for many others in their situation to remain a part of their neighbourhood while having friends around them for companionship and support, enabling them to navigate old age more independently (ACT1).*

One further benefit of the project highlighted by the government was Stellulata's commitment to environmental sustainability, through passive design principles, solar PV panels with battery storage, heat pumps, rainwater harvesting, and shared electrical vehicles.

## 4.4 Squeezed, London

Squeezed were formed as a cohousing group of London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH) residents who had engaged with a council forum on self-build. The forum had been initiated alongside a register of individuals and groups interested in self-build housing collected by the local authority since 2016 in response to a Whitehall directive (LBTH, 2023). LBTH had then brought forward council-owned land, after receiving over £250,000 grant funding from both the Greater London Authority (GLA) and central government to offer small-sites that might be viable for community housing groups (LBTH, 2023). Four sites were initially proposed by the council as part of the programme. Squeezed bid on one of the sites – Lark Row in Bethnal Green, and were selected as part of a competitive process that judged proposals on several criteria (LBTH, 2021c). Squeezed were announced as the highest scoring bidder for the Lark Row site in August 2021. Yet a couple years after winning the bidding, and while the group was still in the planning stage, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets decided to withdraw their support for the Squeezed bid and cancelled the entire 'Affordable Self-Build Programme', a decision ratified at a council meeting in October 2023 (LBTH, 2023). As discussed further in Chapter Seven, this was a devastating blow to the cohousing group who had been working on the Lark Row scheme for nearly three years. The

site in question, of around 350sqm, was a brownfield site owned by the council that abutted the Regents Canal in Bethnal Green, London. When it was released it had mostly fallen into disrepair, with the council stating that it was currently a 'disused community garden' (LBTH 2021a). The design that Squeezed had been working on had fluctuated throughout the planning process, but at the time of its cancellation the group were aiming to deliver seven housing units with shared cohousing facilities, made up of three homes for existing members of Squeezed, along with four affordable discount market sale homes (SQM1b).



*Figure 11: Site at time of release by LBTH, (LBTH, 2021a).*



*Figure 12: Design drawing for Squeezed proposal, by architects Archio (2022)*

## 4.5 Supplementary case studies

### 4.5.1 Cascade Cohousing, Nipaluna/Hobart

Cascade Cohousing in Nipaluna/Hobart was the first example of cohousing in Australia (Meltzer, 2005). It is made up of 15 households, some of whom are renters, and a large common house. It is situated in South Hobart, around 300 metres from Cohousing Co-operative. As one of their founder members details, they had come across the cohousing concept while in the US in 1988 and learnt from North American practitioners including McCamant and Durrett (2011). After a further study tour of cohousing in Denmark (Meltzer, 2005), the founder member interviewed for this research returned to Nipaluna/Hobart with the books and insights garnered, which were shared with others interested in the possibilities of cohousing:

*That original group, which we called Cohousing Tasmania at the time, it was intended to promote cohousing rather than build a specific cohousing, but that then became Cascade Cohousing in one direction, and what became of Cohousing Co-op via another route came out of that original group...(CasCM3)*

With a group of six others drawn from the cohousing movement in Lutriwita/Tasmania they began to search for a land site. As this founder member detailed:

*Finding land was a challenge.... We didn't really know what we were doing, and we didn't have the resources to seek professional help from someone who knows about land. So we were limited to what was obvious (CasCM3).*

But eventually they found land that was part of a new neighbourhood in Nipaluna/Hobart, five plots of land next to each other which they bought and then amalgamated the title to undertake the build. As discussed further in Section 5.4, the group then re-subdivided the finished development to allow the creation of a strata titled community.

#### 4.5.2 New Ground, Older Women's Cohousing, London

New Ground Cohousing, formed out of the Older Women's Co-housing, is a development in Barnet, North London. As the name suggests, its membership are women over 50-years. It is made up of 25 homes sitting alongside a communal garden and facilities which include a guest room, shared laundry, and common room with a kitchen (Fernández Arrigoitia and West, 2020). There are 10 car spaces for the building, with council planners not permitting any on-street parking. There is some car sharing amongst the group. It is a mixed-tenure community, made up of 17 owners on 250-year leases, and 8 social renters whose landlord is a small housing association, Housing for Women (New Ground Cohousing, n.d). To provide these social units, the group received funds from a charitable trust. When interviewing a founder member, they argued that the desire for some social rented units led to delays:

*'Partly because we had mixed owners and renters right from the beginning and in order to have renters you had to have a housing association. And we went through eight of those [housing associations] (OWCH).*

OWCH were finally developed through a further partnership with Hanover Housing Association (now Anchor). As one of their first tasks, Hanover helped the group find the site, which was from a redundant school owned by a convent. After Hanover purchased the site, the incipient community had to prove to council planners that a rezoning of the site wouldn't impact on school place numbers. According to the founder member this took two years in planning delays, and over £25,000 in costs. Hanover provided the initial capital for the development, and managed the construction (Fernández Arrigoitia and West, 2020). To the founder member interviewed, this spoke to a fundamental need for most cohousing groups in the UK: 'you need a developer, unless you can be your own commissioner' (OWCH).

Beyond the age or gender requirements, members are expected to commit to the core values of the group, including the use of consensus agreement-making processes discussed further in

Section 2.4.3. Several non-resident members are part of OWCH, in the event of any vacancy.

Beyond the annual election of a management committee, there are 18 sub-groups that lead on a range of issues (Fernández Arrigoitia and West, 2020). The admittance of new members is deliberated on by the group, including for social tenants, who are also selected through criteria developed with the housing association freeholder and the trust funder. Leaseholders are reminded that the stipulations of membership might make transactions and mortgages difficult, with potential limitations on market value.

### 4.5.3 Cohousing Canberra

Cohousing Canberra is a group who have been advocating for the model for a few decades. They have a long-standing proposal for a development of 30 units, made up of buildings that would stand at four storeys. Cohousing Canberra's scheme has like Stellulata been part of the Demonstration Housing project, albeit on a different track of a proposal 'without land'. Cohousing Canberra have been attempting to secure a site for some time. Their preferred site is a government owned plot which has already been rezoned to allow a cohousing development, the only such zoning other than Stellulata. While there is further discussion of the potential 'market sale' of government land in Section 6.3.4, at the time of writing the group have reportedly been offered the chance to submit a request for tender to the ACT Government for a government owned site in Watson, Kamberri/Canberra (Bushnell, 2025). The group have recently appointed a development partner, and have issued an invitation to prospective members to join the tender process, through initial financial commitments (Cohousing Canberra, 2025). In anticipation the group had had a few discussions about what type of ownership model would be in place. As the founder member argued:

*It'll be strata title. We've had a few discussions about it. And I'm sure we'll have to have it again. But there is no other economic way we can do it (CohoCan1).*

In further outlining the implications of strata title, this founder member explained:

*Strata title at least has clear rules, which is you can't discriminate if someone turns up and you want to sell or you want to buy, same as anywhere else. There's pluses and minuses. Also means you can borrow money on it (CohoCan1).*



Figure 13: Rendering for Cohousing Canberra site, (Cohousing Canberra, 2025)

## 4.6 Discussion

These seven cohousing groups, made up of the four primary and three ancillary cases, show a few possible cohousing methods of formation, design and governance. The schemes range from groups accommodating 3 to 29 households. Each scheme is committed to the core principles of cohousing design, including the use of a common house and facilities, shared garden, and often with reduced car parking. In terms of land acquisition, the four primary cases offer distinctive processes, more of which will be examined in the coming chapters. Chapeltown Cohousing's sourcing of brownfield land from Leeds City Council is discussed further in Section 6.2 and speaks to one method many groups aspire to if not often successfully. This is shown by the travails of both Cohousing Canberra and Squeezed (Sections 6.3.4 and 7.1) in attempting to source land via sale from the state. Governments also play an enabling role in two other case studies, Stellulata

Cohousing and Cohousing Co-operative, through funding or planning intervention (Sections 6.3 and 7.3). What unites the groups, is that the process of land acquisition, with or without direct state input, private, or government-backed acquisition, is long and difficult. However, as discussed above and featured in other accounts of cohousing, this is not a unique occurrence. In the section that follows, the discussion turns to what selected groups do to structure their connection to both land and housing. In moving beyond the narrow terms of property ownership, the complexity of governance processes and the diversity of tenure arrangements showcase how multi-residential housing can be conceived of, beyond the mainstream bounds of for-profit delivery.

# Chapter Five: Urban cohousing communities in Australia and the UK – a collective approach to the governance of land and multi-residential housing

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the ongoing governance of the land and housing in the cohousing model.

These include the formal and informal structures that cohousing communities use to underpin their collective understanding of both private and shared space. It interrogates the alternative that cohousing as a socio-architectural model, allied to the co-operative legal form, provides in contrast to conventional multi-residential housing. As discussed above, the growth in new multi-residential housing has come alongside greater debate over multi-title ownership structures, such as leasehold in the UK or strata title in Australia (Bright, 2025, Sherry, 2018). Tenants and owners of properties under these forms of governance are incurring sharp rises in costs, whether that be in ground rents, service charges, or body corporate fees. These expenses can be linked in the first instance to the increasing financialisation of such multi-title developments, with investors seeking profits from freehold ownership or via a complex web of property management companies.

Moreover, with a decline in building standards and regulatory oversight, quality is losing out in many apartment constructions (Alves, 2020, Bright et al., 2025). This has been borne out in the crisis of flammable cladding on high-rise developments most glaringly in the case of Grenfell Tower, and leaseholders and strata owners are often left footing the bill for these major defects (Bright, 2023). This speaks to a wider lack of control for many residents in multi-title developments, both tenants and owner-occupiers, in managing how a building is designed, maintained, and lived in.

In the sections that follow, the chapter highlights the alliance between cohousing and the co-operative form in two case studies, Chapeltown Cohousing in Leeds and Cohousing Co-operative in Nipaluna/Hobart. It also briefly touches on a third supplementary case study, Cascade

Cohousing, as an example of a strata titled development. Following this, it will open the discussion out to what can be learnt from the cohousing groups in relation to the governance of multi-residential housing, as a direct riposte to some of the challenges faced by residents in leasehold and strata title. This aims to interrogate what these cohousing groups produce in terms of processes and structures in aid of resident control and security, regardless of tenure.

## 5.2 Chapeltown Cohousing, Leeds

### 5.2.1 A fully mutual cohousing co-operative for Chapeltown

Chapeltown Cohousing (ChaCo) is a fully-mutual co-op. As one of the members described:

*Everyone who lives here, every tenant is a member, every member is a tenant. There's no one making decisions about how ChaCo works, who doesn't have skin in the game and everyone who does live here is able to influence, and make decisions, and shape the community (CCM1).*

The member argued that, as a fully mutual model, the group: 'didn't want to have the committee and then a membership that follows what the committee says' (CCM1). In practice this means that the organisation that is ChaCo owns at least 1% of every home, and the common house in its entirety, while also owning the freehold to the land. As a mixed-tenure community, there are some fully rented homes with residents both a member and tenant of the co-op. The remaining households own between 25% and 99% of their homes. Like a lot of longstanding community-led housing groups, they morphed out of other groups and the co-operative structure was borrowed from that earlier iteration. Other models were considered, including a community land trust (CLT) however that was deemed not to fit onto the ultimate land site and development proposal.

As a group of close to 60 people, the community have some well-developed processes of management beyond the formal boundaries of the co-operative structure. They are run by consensus principles that are used in their general meetings and management sub-groups (Seeds

for Change, 2013). So rather than operating via a majority vote, the group discuss any issues including any suggested solutions before testing for an agreement. This would entail that there are no members blocking any agreement, and there may be only a few members not giving active support or holding reservations. In discussing the thinking behind the sub-groups, one member detailed that they take on: 'responsibility to specific areas and then coming together the general meetings are a bit more structured' (CCM1). Every member is expected to be involved in one of the sub-groups, but the sub-group structure is conceived as giving: 'everyone the ability to participate so that we can cover all of the work that needs to be done' (CCM1).

For this member in question, this structure provided an interesting point of contrast to a smaller co-operative that they had been previously involved in. In that 16-person co-operative: 'it's very, very obvious if one person is stepping back or disengaging' (CCM1). Whereas with ChaCo, the spread of sub-groups across the 29 households, meant to this member:

*There is a bit more slack, a bit more capacity in the group. If someone has for example got parenting stuff going on or health stuff or you know busy at work whatever or the time of your life whether you've got other demands on your time. There is capacity within the project to step back and then step forward as their lives dictate (CCM1).*

The group were also attuned to the fact that as a community, they would have to accommodate newer members joining, and in the ongoing governance of their community they needed to ensure coherence between the vision of original founding members and those who came in later.

Another member noted that:

*The community now is a mix of people who have come in recently or in the last year, and those of us who were in at the start, and inevitably some of that vision has sort of shifted - it's about finding the right balance there (CCM2).*

A member who was also part of their legal task sub-group, spoke to a fundamental part of what they saw as the vision of ChaCo, the integrity of their fully mutual, mixed-tenure co-operative model:

*I'm trying to make sure that we don't just create something and the first generation reflects Chapeltown, but then the people that move in after are just posh white people. We're trying to embed that into all of our processes and our structures... In legal task group we'd be, if someone was wanting to undermine Chaco, what and how could they do it? (CCM1).*

In wanting to reflect Chapeltown, the ability of the scheme to offer mixed tenures was crucial in allowing members to rent, part or near-fully own, as co-operative members. Rather than deferring to the binary of owning versus renting, the group were able to match their demographic targets with the mixed-tenure co-operative model. In doing so, the member suggested that the group sought to:

*Find a financial model that was going to be truly affordable for people on low incomes, and because of the nature of the Chapeltown community, most people don't have generational wealth, it's going to be very difficult for people to buy houses or pay expensive rent. [This situation ] ruled out some of the options that other cohousing projects use (CCM1).*

The concerted effort to protect the fully mutual nature of the co-operative was shown to be a crucial aspect of the community's governance. For the member it was informed by their experience of other community-led housing groups who had started out in collective ownership but who had been undermined over time from changes in rules, so-called 'carpet bagging' (CCM1). Given they owned the freehold of the land, this put the group into a strong position to determine their own future.

### 5.2.2 Holding back the tide of gentrification

Beyond the protections they gained from the mixed-tenure co-operative model, the group were aware of how cohousing projects could: ‘skyrocket the house prices because it’s so desirable and bougie compared to the houses across the street’ (CCM1). To counteract that possibility they expressed a desire to: ‘limit the house prices so that they are tied to the house prices of our neighbours (CCM1)’. However, this move was blocked by their central government funder according to another member:

*We did try and build in a thing about putting a cap on our house values, that specifically was verboten from the point of view of the Homes England grant funding that we got (the shared ownership affordable home programme). Yeah, all transactions have to take place at open market value. So we have to get an independent valuer to value the houses (CCM2).*

Despite the failure to ring-fence house prices, the co-operative model allowed the community to put some restrictions on onward sale, given that leases are structured so as co-operative membership is tied to access to parking, rubbish collection and common spaces (McKenna et al., 2024). The group’s efforts to ensure that the internal governance structures of their cohousing co-operative remained inclusive were marked, and contextualised by what the use of the land site might mean for the neighbourhood. The low value of the plot, given its need for remediation, was seen as part of the reason why the group was able to successfully move ahead with their scheme, because developers would be dissuaded from working with such a challenging brownfield site (CCM2). However despite the difficulties attached to the site, they considered the project as treading a tricky line in relation to gentrification, as described by one member:

*One thing we thought when we started was that ChaCo can kind of be part of the response of Chapeltown to gentrification because we’re going to provide affordable housing while the rest of Chapeltown is being a bit gentrified.... (CCM2).*

The members interviewed had deep consideration for the relationship of their project to gentrification. One interesting strand was the groups regular litter picks of the area, both in and around the site: ‘so neighbours could see that this community was looking after the neighbourhood’ (CCM3). Another member speculated that despite their best efforts that there could potentially be a gentrifying effect because of the scheme’s success and the role played by the group in assisting regeneration efforts:

*I suppose you can see litter picking as part of gentrification. And I think probably we’ve sadly, helped drive some of the gentrification. There certainly is people looking at the ChaCo and coming and visiting there, they tend to be bowled over by what we’ve done and that probably helps in making it feel like Chapelton is on the up. So it’s hard to have it both ways really. Actually we boast about reclaiming a bit of derelict land and making something good out of it. That’s another way of saying that’s gentrification really because you make it more attractive to others. So it’s difficult (CCM2).*

### 5.2.3 Collective governance – a different approach to property

What is apparent is that the experience of collaborative governance over such a large site offered a unique opportunity to members, to feel connected to the wider space beyond their own private household. As one of the members detailed:

*It’s really great to not feel like you’re boxed into your tiny little patio, that you’ve actually got this big shared space and you see your neighbours coming past and there’s constantly adorable toddlers crossing one way and, you know, people walking the dogs the other way and someone doing a bit of weeding and people coming and going and off to catch their laundry (CCM1).*

Yet this involved some adjustment for all the members of the cohousing community, as: ‘when we first moved in, I think people were very much in their houses, but particularly now that we’ve had

a summer together, people feel like this is this is all of our space' (CCM1). The 'fluidity' between the shared and private space as evoked by the member provided a stark point of comparison to their previous living arrangements, whether that was a block of flats or a shared-house co-operative. This included having children mixing and having a group of supportive adults on hand (CCM1). A key shared endeavour and space was the garden, and this symbolised the long-term connection that the member envisioned, as opposed to past tenures they had experienced, where their transience led to more limited engagement with these communal spaces (CCM1). The garden then served as an example of the connection the group had not only to what they'd built together, but what they wanted ChaCo to represent into the future. The questions of: 'what trees do we want, what perennials do we want' led to thoughts about: 'planning for our personal futures but also the people who come after us' (CCM1). To this member, there was an evident link between their collective long-term governance of what was a difficult brownfield site, and the co-operative's ability to exist for Chapeltown into the future:

*So I think for me, I'm really clear that I want this to be something that is owned by and for the community in perpetuity, and we want it to meet the needs of the community so we're trying to remediate the land, we're trying to fix the soil (CCM1).*

Moreover, to this member who had a shared ownership tenure, the ethos of ChaCo permeated across the communal gardens and spaces to the individual homes and offered a different conception of property grounded in ongoing, collective benefit. They noted that:

*Technically, 25% of this house is my private property, but the house very much feels like 100% my personal property, but also I'm conscious that it is part of a shared resource. Similarly with the gardens like technically I own the patio, but I feel personal ownership of some of it and shared ownership of the wider garden (CCM1).*

What the member evoked was a form of security, in their shared ownership tenure, that was encapsulated in the changes that they could affect not only to their home, but also to the broader

communal spaces. In challenging conventional, rigid approaches to tenure they expressed a sense of stability that went beyond the dominant economic framing of property. This was expressed in how they conceived of ownership:

*The sense of ownership, that gives me the freedom to like paint a mural on my bedroom wall and start planting in the garden, is what's important to me rather than the like, the technical ownership or the financial investment that people somehow view houses as being the basis for people to live not make money off (CCM1).*

The members of Chapeltown Cohousing interviewed evoked a cohesion between the socio-architectural model of cohousing, and the legal structure that the co-operative brought. In doing so it provides an alternative form of multi-residential governance that is responsive to both residents and local needs. Combined with their commitment to demographic targets and a tenure model that was inclusive of the broader Chapeltown community, the early signs from what they built were revelatory. Before discussing what further lessons can be discerned from the ChaCo case, the research turns to a more established cohousing community, Cohousing Co-op, in Nipaluna/Hobart.

## 5.3 Cohousing Co-op, Nipaluna/Hobart

### 5.3.1 The governance of a nominal-equity co-operative

Cohousing Co-operative in Nipaluna/Hobart was described by one of the founder members as a: 'nominal-equity co-operative - our shares are a dollar. So when I move out, I don't take anything with me' (CCoop1). Cohousing Co-operative Limited' owns the title to the land and housing, and members buy shares in this entity rather than titles. Beyond this share, members hold a 'Residential Subscription Agreement' with the co-operative that forms their payment to the entity, and along with a commitment to active membership, entitles them to housing. In order to pay maintenance costs, rates and insurance, the co-operative hold a bank account that the residency

subscriptions are paid into (Cohousing Co-op, n.d). While Cohousing Co-op's nominal-equity status mirrors most rental co-operatives in Australia, according to the founder member what differentiated their structure from others in Australia was the amount of autonomy they had to 'develop our agreements' (CCoop1). For the member this meant that:

*We don't have a lot of government program constraints around us... In some co-ops there's pressure to kick people out once they reach certain income levels. In other co-ops, they don't get to choose who moves in. So a lot of that autonomy of a co-operative is not there (CCoop1).*

The core principle at the heart of the community was that:

*We take people in who are eligible for public housing. So everybody when they move in is eligible for public housing. I moved in 23 years ago so that's not my situation now. And people don't have to leave when that changes.*

As their rules state, there is a board of directors, elected of five adult members of the co-operative (Cohousing Co-op, 2023). The board, in reporting to the general meeting, is responsible for much of the financial business of the co-operative. In addition to the board, there are site meetings attended by all members. There are also sub-committees, including a property committee which is responsible for liaising with all members over maintenance needs, in a manner described by Meltzer (2005) as 'fully documented, accessible and transparent' (p.96). Like ChaCo, consensus agreement-making was cited as a fundamental part of how the group had sustained the community, not only through the early design and build phase but over the subsequent decades. As highlighted by Meltzer (2005), the group held regular workshops about consensus agreement-making, meeting facilitation and non-violent conflict resolution. Within this, Cohousing Co-op had developed a set of consensus principles that were similar to what ChaCo had initiated. The member explained their process:

*Everything we do here is done by agreement. So we don't make decisions, we make agreements. And then we expect people to operate within those agreements. And there's a very strong social pressure to do that because it was done by agreement in the first place. That's not imposed (CCoop1).*

The sharing of information amongst the group was crucial in how agreements were reached, and through the exchange of views: 'the agreement becomes obvious, the more that you talk about it so there's the agreement. And then because we've all agreed to it you can refer back to it' (CCoop1).

### 5.3.2 The interrelationship between cohousing and the co-operative form

To this founding member, there was a clear link between the social and architectural design of cohousing and the supportive legal structure of the co-operative: 'I find the combination of co-operative and cohousing, it's absolutely profound because it gives you all of the tools that you need to learn to, negotiate with one another' (CCoop1). The relationship between that civic skill and the communal space, particularly as articulated within the architectural model of cohousing was clearly outlined by the member:

*If you get nonviolent communication, you grow because what we know, if I have a conflict with somebody at work, I can be a bit offhand about it and go home and not think about it. Here we are home and when we step outside our door, there's the person....When we want to go get our letters or go to the garden or take our compost out or visit our neighbour, we're answerable for that offhand thing we've just done (CCoop1).*

Nonetheless, there was a distinction drawn as to what needed to be understood and abided by as an agreement that underpinned the cohousing, and what was a legal structure as part of the co-operative. This was particularly relevant given that only three of the original founding members remained a part of the co-operative and there had been some turnover in members over the

years. This has led to work around educating and refreshing understandings of these structures so the group could clearly understand what the cohousing was about:

*The cohousing is a lot about how we share the common spaces. So the common house, the laundry, the guest flat, the gardens, the pathways in between the houses, issues that might crop up with children, conflicts that you have with your neighbours, that kind of thing (CCoop1).*

And in turn what the co-operative meant for their legal governance:

*The co-operative is really about the governance and the way that we make the agreements and how we codify them and what processes we have for keeping ourselves accountable to them and the things that might be back ended by legal processes that might come up against, the Tenancy Rights or the Co-operatives Act and that end of it. (CCoop1).*

The unity between the cohousing and co-operative structures was thus fundamental to how informal norms of interaction in shared space and facilities were backed up by more formal legal rules. This differed to the often dualistic division between residential homes and shared property evident in the governance of other multi-residential forms, including in some other cohousing groups, particularly those underpinned by strata title. As the member explained, in the more conventional expression of property:

*You've got a little cluster of houses and it's a strata title. The strata title is all about how you borrow money from the bank and how you buy and sell the unit. So it's about dealing with people outside of the group. It doesn't have a lot to offer when it comes to the relationships between the people in the group....So I like the model that we've got here, because it gives us a lot of tools for managing the kind of the grey space of property ownership, all of the overlap and the shared spaces (CCoop1).*

For the member, to govern their cohousing community collectively the co-operative model was essential, and wouldn't have been possible under strata title. Many strata owners are stuck with limited means to collectively control and manage the property they share with others, by contrast to the range of 'tools' afforded to Cohousing Co-op members.

### 5.3.3 Thinking beyond their boundaries

The member was observing some of the changes underway in Nipaluna/Hobart with a growth in multi-residential apartment living. They determined that these new housing types required what the member called 'invisible infrastructure' to deal with the changes brought by having people 'in close proximity to one another' (CCoop1). To the member, this led to musings about how a cohousing co-operative structure like theirs could work in a multi-storey apartment form. This consideration for how cohousing could apply to a shifting housing landscape in Lutriwita/Tasmania echoed their long-term vision to be an outward facing housing community. As encapsulated in their original design workshop in 1995 with their future architect, in answer to: 'how do you see the co-housing community operating within the broader community', the group responded that they wanted to: 'model a new way of living that provides an example to the broader community' (Morrison and Breytenbach, 1995). Moreover, the group at the time argued that 'resources could be available to surrounding residents on agreed basis' (Morrison and Breytenbach, 1995). Nearly 30 years later, the founding member echoed those sentiments when claiming:

*We bring something of value to the community, like most cohousings that I know have a sort of a porous boundary with the local community. So people from around the street come to common meals and events here and use the common house for community events (CCoop1).*

In comparison to Chapeltown Cohousing, Cohousing Co-operative had the benefit of decades of active collective governance of the community, which offered the potential for consideration of

what that meant for members in navigating the intricacies of maintaining the broader land and housing over a long period of time. To the founding member the nominal-equity tenure led to a different property relationship to the physical assets that made up the community:

*Just from the nature of the co-operative that, none of us are gonna buy and sell anything here. We're gonna come and go.... So it means while I'm here, I'm a custodian of the property, this house for the next person that's gonna be here. So we all have to, you know, look after the timber work and make sure it doesn't deteriorate. You know, keep the pipes in good condition, deal with the erosion down the back, because that's our quality of life while we're here. But we are, we're the custodians of this place for the next people that are gonna live here as well (CCoop1).*

This reflection illuminates how Cohousing Co-op challenges conventional norms of tenure and ownership. Rather than their lack of financial stake or status as long-term renters dictating their connection to the land and housing, their relational understandings of property were underpinned by collective efforts at housing security, binding their own immediate needs to the support afforded to future members. This formed part of a wider discussion of stewardship, and in particular how the member reflected on what could be learnt from First Nations people in their approach to land. To the member, the non-speculative relationship that they had to the land and housing, of ownership being 'not exclusive rights, but responsibility to care for' (CCoop1), was informed by the philosophies of Aboriginal Australia. Cohousing Co-operative's status as one of the oldest cohousing communities in Australia speaks to one of their key strengths, their governance. There are regular evocations of the ability of cohousing as a model to bring diversity in terms of their architecture, environmental sustainability and contribution to multi-generational living, alongside allied benefits in affordability (Clark, 2021, Hudson et al., 2019, Nelson, 2018). However, the diversity which Cohousing Co-operative adds includes their governance model,

uniting the cohousing and the co-operative. This provides learnings for the evolution of multi-residential living in Australia, as discussed further below.

## 5.4 Cascade Cohousing, Nipaluna/Hobart

Cascade Cohousing, a supplementary case study, was finished a few years before Cohousing Co-op. Given that they are situated a few blocks from each other they provide an instructive point of contrast, particularly as a strata titled community. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the group had secured several adjacent land sites which they had amalgamated for the construction phase. With a common mortgage for the development secured, helped by those with equity supporting those with no savings to draw from, they undertook the build. As detailed in Meltzer (2005), sweat equity was a major part of the build:

*'A fundamental strategy in achieving affordable cohousing. Members could decide themselves how much 'sweat' they would invest in their own dwellings, but the landscaping and common house were always going to be constructed by the residents' (p.101).*

However, as the founder member argued in interview for this research this commitment had meant: 'we almost tried to do it on too tight a budget, and therefore did too much sweat equity, the cost of that was less time doing the social process at the beginning' (CasCM3). This reflection offers insight into a case where the development of strong governance principles and processes of conflict resolution were not as robust as they needed to be. As the founder member suggested:

*My experience was when we got to strata title and we got to the point when it was done, as a real estate development...The whole focus had been building the dream house, and all the things that you'd swept under the carpet for five years because you really wanted to get this thing finished because you were scared to address it just in case you couldn't get agreement to strata title, all came out, and there were a lot of conflicts (CasCM3).*

The group had formed a proposal to strata title the development post-completion, so that each of the 15 houses would have their own title plus a share of the common house. However, in this member's account it was the pursuit of that final stage subdivision that drove the group, to the detriment of future harmony amongst the community. While the founder member detailed the intensive group work that was done after the build had been completed, and other current members attested to the success of the community, this case suggests a process of governance where many of the fundamentals came later, and often too late to diffuse disputes as they happened. One of the existing members spoken to, who was incidentally a renter not an owner of one of the strata titled properties, argued that having come to the community in the last few years: 'I've got the benefit of a lot of hard work and a lot of deep thought and a lot of research and probably a bit of blood, sweat and tears' (CasCM2). In living in Cascade Cohousing, they expressed that:

*I'm proud to be part of something that sets a really nice role model for a living.....I hope I get to stay as long as they'll have me. I've never had a landlord where I felt like they've got my back and they're gonna look after me if something goes wrong not just on a professional level, but on a personal level. I can't even tell you how beautiful that is*  
(CasCM2).



Figure 14: Common house, Cascade Cohousing, Nipaluna/Hobart (photo taken by author).

## 5.5 Discussion

While in different contexts, Chapeltown Cohousing in Leeds or Cohousing Co-operative in Nipaluna/Hobart, the unity between legal co-operative underpinning, processes of consensus and non-violent communication, and the socio-architectural design of shared space, facilities, and mutual support provide evidence of a viable alternative to mainstream methods of multi-residential governance. In the discussion that follows, how groups promote resident autonomy regardless of tenure will be further analysed. Furthermore it will be argued that ‘limited-equity’ co-operative models offer wider learnings for the evolution of cohousing co-operatives in both countries. Finally, the methods used by groups in maintaining their foundational principles will be emphasised, with a particular focus on how financial affordability can be sustained alongside strong diversity targets. The connection between legal structures and informal norms of governance allows an approach to multi-residential property that is secure, affordable, and inclusive.

### 5.5.1 Cohousing Co-operatives- a successful model of multi-residential governance

Dominant multi-residential models are under scrutiny for their inability to allow residents to take control of their homes and shared spaces, victim to the defective system of strata in Australia or leasehold in the UK. As Sherry (2018) shows, obligations on residents are necessary in all multi-residential developments, where members have a great deal of interdependence for the upkeep of their built form and quality of their living experience. Yet, in analysing the evolution of the strata system, Sherry argues that it has allowed 'developers to impose a wide range of self-serving monetary obligations on land in the form of developer-made contracts, or to allow private citizens unjustifiable powers to regulate their neighbours' lives' (2018, p.79). Meanwhile as Blandy (2012, 2013) has explained in relation to leasehold, the governance processes are usually set in train by developers long before residents move in, with management companies often set up alongside opaque freehold structures. Both these multi-title forms dominant in Australia and the UK have become increasingly financialised, with developers and other real estate investors seeing property management as a way to generate larger profits, long after construction is complete (Sherry, 2013). Generations of residents are exposed to rules and processes of governance that they have had very little say in initiating or indeed reforming.

By contrast, Cohousing Co-operative, and indeed Chapeltown Cohousing over time, are developing governance processes that can help steer a multi-residential housing model that is responsive to the needs of residents. The case studies suggest that the fundamental design of cohousing, with its emphasis on social contact, is well suited to engendering consensus and agreement-making, with common spaces well-used and incidental meetings encouraged.

Moreover, these cases echo those reflections which have pointed to the perhaps natural alignment between cohousing and cooperativism (Crabtree-Hayes et al., 2024). In describing their model as being good at managing the 'grey space of property ownership', the Cohousing Co-op

member points to the multitude of physical and social negotiations that are involved in multi-residential developments. This is suggestive of a different approach to property relations, where rather than treating both shared spaces and other tenants as marginal, inconvenient burdens like in conventional multi-residential developments, cohousing co-operatives center interdependence of form and relationship at the heart of the model. This changes the value proposition in such co-operatively governed property, with the collective security gained from their legal structure and cooperativism bolstered by the shared aspects of their community spaces, essential amenities and facilities.

The example of Cohousing Co-op and ChaCo echo the deliberations of other cohousing groups who have worked closely with architects and projects managers from the outset, which have tended to create more responsive architectural designs that are quality-controlled by the residents (Brysch, 2023, Palmer, 2019, Tummers, 2017). The founder member of OWCH argued that this differed from their time working with 'housing associations, construction firms, architects [who] don't really ever work with their end users, not even to find out what they want' (OWCH1).

Yet in discussing the promotion of resident-led design in cohousing, the founder member of Cascade Cohousing offered a caveat, arguing that:

*'A lot of cohousing talks about being resident developed and the paradox I find in that is that only works for the first generation...anyone buying in after or joining if it's a co-op anyone coming later, it's not resident developed. They're coming into an existing thing that is well-developed...'* (CasCM3).

While this may speak to the experience of many cohousing communities, observations from Cohousing Co-operative is evident of a different dynamic. Before beginning an interview with both the founder member (Coop1) and the architect (ArchCoop), we together conducted a small tour of the site. The architect had not visited the site for 15 years and was intrigued to see all the changes that had been made by the residents over the intervening period. As the founder

member detailed, this included the improvement to disability access and to the shared outdoor dining spaces. Moreover, the group had developed comprehensive bushfire management plans for their significant gardens to the rear of the building. This was all done by generations of residents over time, working collaboratively on the governance of their land and shared spaces, as examples of ongoing processes of commoning, and protection of mutual resources (Thompson, 2015). This further pushes back on the conventional value given to property, where residents who have no ongoing financial stake help to maintain and enhance the amenity of their communal spaces, recognising the importance of perpetuity in non-financial terms.



*Figure 15: Pizza oven with kunanyi/Mt Wellington in the background, (photo by the author).*

Both Cohousing Co-op and ChaCo are evidence of the importance of consensus processes and inclusive management structures. Beyond any rules made in formation, tenants are equipped with skills that allow them to negotiate potential difficulties with their built form, shared spaces or social relationships over time. The deliberate encouragement of resident interaction, supported by the work done on consensus and non-violent communication, has resulted in cohousing cooperative communities that are able to negotiate both social and built-form challenges successfully. Other examples attest to the importance of consensus agreement-making. In this

study's discussions with an Older Women's Cohousing founder member, they pointed to the importance of their 'social architecture' (OWCH1). In doing everything by consensus while actively involving all members, they had a comprehensive system of sub-groups that stewarded all aspects of OWCH's governance. This meant for instance that: 'the buildings group has a 20-year plan for maintenance, and they've learned a lot of skills' (OWCH1). In viewing the range of consensus mechanisms developed by OWCH to manage their development, the founder member argued that it allowed people to feel like 'they've got a stake in the place' (OWCH1). Conversely, the Cascade Cohousing founder attested to the difficulties that might arise in cohousing groups if the social building blocks of a community comes secondary to the physical construction of a development.

The role of consensus agreement-making and non-violent communication are examples of the 'glue' that can bind together articulations of the 'commons', even in a limited access form of commoning (Hodkinson, 2012b). When the battle to construct commons, for example in a campaign over land access is over, those civic skills are intrinsic to the harmonious maintenance of a community when dwelling and sharing together (Huron, 2015). Yet in protecting the commons that have been built, as this discussion continues to argue, a focus on the benefits of strong consensus principles in cohousing should not neglect the importance of what the co-operative structure does in maintaining diverse, affordable tenures.

### 5.5.2 Encouraging tenure diversity in cohousing

Both Chapeltown Cohousing and Cohousing Co-operative are examples of how cohousing can be inclusive of a range of tenures, an important consideration for the model in the property-owning systems of the UK and Australia. A number of studies have analysed tenure when it comes to collaborative housing types in both countries. For instance, Crabtree (2008) tracked cohousing, amid other Australian alternative housing models, in aligning the possibility of 'sustainable urban livelihoods' with the creation of diverse, equitable models of tenure, including mixed-income

models. Meanwhile Field (2004, 2011) has long argued that UK cohousing is able to sustain mixed tenures, and that while earlier iterations of the model had been dominated by private ownership, there were signs of new mutually owned models breaking through.

As Larsen (2019) argues, consideration of tenure is important for how cohousing schemes can match their foundational principles to actually existing communities, and particularly how access is maintained for potential members across the socio-economic spectrum. As discussed already, ChaCo's co-operative cohousing scheme supports a diverse tenure mix for the Chapeltown community, opening up the limited-access commons, expressed in shared amenities, facilities and supports, to those from lower incomes. As will be further unpacked, this offers a relational form of property, in responding to, rather than subverting, the needs of local Chapeltown residents.

Moreover, the 'property' interests of co-operative members are inextricably tied together, in an approach to tenure and ownership that emphasises mutual aid rather than individual agency as core to multi-residential housing security (Crabtree, 2018b). Instead of seeing property as an asset to sweat (Christophers, 2010), value is instead underpinned by the creation of affordable homes in a supportive community, and aided by the shared use of facilities and spaces.

Interrogating the diversity of tenures in these cohousing co-operatives in part necessitates analysing how members are formally and informally included whether they are an owner, part-owner or renter. And while the Chapeltown case is revelatory, given their relative newness as a community, reflections from the two established schemes in Nipaluna/Hobart further aid the discussion. During interviews with Cascade Cohousing, the strata-titled community in Nipaluna/Hobart, a member explained how their status as a rental tenant affected their role in the community. They appeared comfortable with how they were treated as compared to an owner:

*I like the way this is set up, particularly with someone like me, whereas an owner there's a little bit more obligation to be part of different committees, as a renter it's a little bit less.*

*So there's a little bit more autonomy to around choosing that. At least that's how I feel. And yet it's so joyful being involved in a lot of that I ended up doing it anyway, so I had to get XXXX to babysit me about cooking a bit before I felt game to take it on myself (CasCM2).*

In contrast to both Cohousing Co-operative and Chapeltown Cohousing, the dynamic presented in Cascade Cohousing requires a sharper delineation between the social and management aspects of cohousing community governance. In other strata cohousing communities, this distinction between renter and owner was also apparent, yet managed often through the inclusive practices of the owners. As Cooper and Baer (2019) argue in their analysis of the strata-titled cohousing community of Christie Walk:

*Even tenants living in the community are included in the decision-making process, at least to some extent. Renters, though having no formal power through the owners corporation, are able to attend meetings and have input in the decision-making process. The thoughts of those who are renting are generally canvassed and respected (2019, p.105).*

Yet, there appears a tenuous nature to how this functions, with renters included only at the behest of owners. The above Cascade member while clearly pleased with their part in the community, expressed later that: 'I'm just a renter, so I don't really have the same kind of say' (CasCM2), when how the common house was used came up in discussion. By contrast, it is instructive how the mix of tenures are included in Chapeltown Cohousing, with each member, regardless of tenure having an equal say in the running of the community, particularly given their decision to eschew a committee that would sit above the mutual membership. Moreover, as Cohousing Co-op showed, there was an intersection between the formal legal arenas in which all residents were included, and the more day-to-day informal structures that they all sustained, whether that be regular working bees that maintained the property, or weekly common meals.

Both cohousing co-operatives subvert traditional relations that are wrapped around the renting-owning binary, thereby steering multi-residential governance away from an individualising private form of property, to a more inclusive limited access commons, whereby inclusion in decision-making is not contingent on tenure. Yet, as Christophers argues, the dominant logic of private property ownership, in gaining rents from land and housing, is a difficult force to resist (2020). In this way, a challenge is thrown up by how member equity is included in the co-operative model, and what this means for how cohousing models can be developed inclusively, for the first generation and those that come after.

### 5.5.3 Skin in the game - cohousing groups and housing equity

The role of equity, and whether incipient developments can garner it from future members is a major issue for the cohousing model. Beyond the role in development, the presence or level of equity from potential cohousing members forms part of the backdrop to cohousing governance and ongoing, lived relations to property. In general terms, equity is required not only for the land purchase but also for the development of the housing. The mixture of debt and equity varies across developments, but as one guide, Daly and McGee (2023) has advised that for many cohousing land acquisitions, equity of 5-10% of the purchase price would be required upfront, before a later 20% upon settlement. For development, they advise that between 30-35% of the build cost would have to be sourced from cohousing members' equity. Beyond these initial equity contributions, participants would also be expected to service an ongoing mortgage. To practitioners who have worked with building groups and cohousing projects in Australia, the challenge of sourcing both debt and equity is critical. The founder of Australian company Property Collectives, who has acted as development manager on several such schemes, stated that 'the investment metrics for equity and debt, they're immutable laws' (PropCol1). In building a financial case for a collaborative housing development, Property Collectives had generally shied away from rental models, as they were unable to take a risk that conventional builders might on future

leases. They had concentrated on ownership structures in building groups, as: 'you've got a bit more to play with in terms of the capital stack and how you finance things at different points in the process' (PropCol1).

Cohousing Co-operative and Chapeltown Cohousing have taken different paths to building their respective developments, with contrasting equity profiles. Yet members are largely treated the same in both, included through processes of consensus that are incidentally like the leasehold dominated community of OWCH, and the company title structure of Stellulata. Yet, in viewing the case studies through this prism of such 'immutable laws', Cohousing Co-operative appears as an outlier. This is mostly due to the fact that they were supported with \$1 million in government funding, and they managed to build a project at the cost of \$1,142,000 (Meltzer, 2005). The titles for the cohousing properties are held by the co-operative, and they are not reliant on any external body for their ongoing maintenance. The co-operative model provides a formal underpinning that the group have been able to pair with more informal governance processes over time. As the founder member stated:

*It's this incredible experiment in how do humans structure things when they're given complete freedom to do it, about how to negotiate all those boundaries (CCoop1).*

While they have a freedom rarely found in the Australian co-operative sector, their situation would be hard to replicate today, not only in terms of inflated land and build costs, but also the government funding environment. Chapeltown Cohousing also offers a unique model, but one that could have wider application. The blend of equities across the ChaCo scheme, anywhere from 25-99%, allows a degree of cross-subsidisation. A model like ChaCo allows people to downsize and bring their equity with them, particularly those wanting to age in place. This can then support others at the opposite end of the equity spectrum while delivering a housing option with greater amenity and community than many conventional retirement options. Cohousing has long been identified as one that can support multi-generational communities through its development of

intentional cooperation and sharing of resources (Brenton, 2013, Hudson et al., 2019, McCamant and Durrett, 2011, Riedy et al., 2019, Wynne et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, OWCH had to partner with two housing associations to finance their scheme, one as the developer, the other as a landlord for a segment of the housing. As the founder member stated: the women 'were on low to mid medium incomes, pensions and whatnot....all they had was their own equity, and there was no way they could risk that equity to finance a huge great loan' (OWCH1). This speaks to the chronic issues that particularly face single older women, who with historical inequalities in pay, superannuation or pension contributions, generally have less savings later in life (Colenbrander, 2016, Gornick et al., 2009). Beyond the members who are full owners, in order to support women without housing equity, OWCH worked with a small housing association to sublet eight of the 25 homes (Fernández Arrigoitia and West, 2020).

Stellulata Cohousing, initially discussed in Section 4.3, has also been designed as a model for those later in life, with a few of the households aiming to downsize and age in place. It differs not only given its small scale of three households, but the significant equity that its members are bringing to the development. It offers an example that many others with similar equity profiles could replicate. It is not affordable and does not claim to be. As the founder member stated:

*In our case, it was two households who had enough money to be able to buy into this and be able to be patient for this many years (Stel1).*

The group was originally formed out of two households, who had set up a company structure to kick off the project. A third couple was then found to buy into the scheme prior to the build commencing. With a broader debate ongoing in Australia about housing affordability the group and architect suggested that Stellulata's contribution was more in planning terms, as discussed further in Chapter Six, than in affordability. Stellulata's architect concurred with this and emphasised that the model generated possibilities in terms of lifestyle changes, particularly for those wanting a supportive community (ArchACT). As part of a more general discussion around

whether cohousing could become an affordable housing model in Australia, the member posited that:

*You know, in theory you could imagine a group of people who are willing to pay different amounts to acquire the same resource because of the generosity of the people who've got the greater resources. But finding a way to do that in this society and in a way that won't lead to difficulties further down the track, it's hard to see (Stel1).*

In broad terms, this is describing the model that Chapeltown Cohousing has put together, that offers those with equity the ability to contribute to a project that could support affordable and secure housing to a broad spectrum. While there is complexity to ChaCo's financial structure, for both Australia and the UK such limited-equity cohousing co-operatives provide a compelling affordable option for those in the 'squeezed middle' (Parolek, 2022). Contrary to some nominal-equity rental co-operative models, a limited-equity version allows people to leave communities, if and when they want to, with some equity. While there are many successful examples of nominal-equity rental co-operatives in Australia (Crabtree-Hayes et al., 2024), as Ann Apps (AAPPS) has argued in interview for this project, co-operatives function best if members have some 'skin in the game', often in the form of equity, which can balance the social functions of the co-operative with commercial imperatives, and ensure that schemes can maintain a certain level of autonomy. While Cohousing Co-operative has managed to flourish despite members having nominal-equity and no ongoing stake, this perhaps operates as an anomaly given its seed funding from government, and the relative agency they have to make agreements and maintain control over the land and housing. Moreover, as has been shown by both Cohousing Co-op and ChaCo, the level of freedom they have achieved is perhaps unique to models of their affordability. Yet, as the next section discusses, this independence is hard-won.

#### 5.5.4 How do the cohousing co-operatives maintain the integrity of their models?

A theme that ran through the case studies was the consideration given to protecting the integrity of their respective models. This is not unique to these particular models, with Blandy (2013, 2023) showing how community-led models, both leasehold and co-operative, make attempts to enshrine commitments to core social principles. Members of a cohousing community with a leasehold structure regularly referred to the lease, but often ignored it, or adapted on written legalities. Blandy (2013) argued that the incorporation of covenants requiring each leaseholder to comply with the 'Principles of Cohousing' was 'likely to be unenforceable in law as it does not touch and concern the land' (p.164). Yet in treating them as such, particularly in long-running communities, groups of leaseholders crystallize a certain set of property relations, through informal understandings and relationships of trust. However, in sitting alongside, but not being solidified legally by their own leasehold agreements, a tension arises as to whether these agreements can hold over time, relying largely only on social understanding or sanction.

In the cohousing examples of this study, the role of informal processes in maintaining agreements appear to be crucial. Well-defined communication processes allow residents to raise problems or new perspectives while keeping the group focused on solutions and binding agreements. This can help navigate the inevitable issues that come with a multi-residential development, whether in maintenance of built form or understanding of spaces. As the founder of Cohousing Co-op stated, social agreements stick when all residents have helped form the agreement and have the consensus approaches to revisit agreements, large or small, if necessary. Having had significant turnover of residents since their inception, Cohousing Co-op are attuned to the task of incorporating the needs of future residents, including in helping them understand fundamental principles. Fernández Arrigoitia and West (2020) too observed in their study of OWCH the

importance of opportunities for incoming new members to: 'absorb and adjust to, or indeed challenge' the rules (p.10).

Yet, if a core principle of a cohousing group is to maintain some affordable tenures, accessible to often marginalised communities, then some durable legal structures are required to guard against the break-up of their community from the outset. In particular, schemes like ChaCo are required to resist the conventional treatment of housing and land as an asset in Australia and the UK.

Under what Watson (2010) calls 'House Price Keynesianism', housing norms in both countries expect homeowners and housebuilders to utilise property as equity in order to attract credit.

While the damaging role of credit liberalisation has been well documented in both countries (Craig, 2020, Ryan-Collins and Murray, 2021), where consumer demand is often stoked not by income but by money released from home equity, the multi-residential development model is implicated in the same logic. This raises a tricky dilemma for many cohousing developments that rely on equity being pooled to attract finance, acquire land and then initiate development, with groups often locked into the need for equity growth. Most banks borrow to community-led housing groups on the expectation that house prices will increase. Or in another scenario, the freehold or land title would be acquired by another entity whether that be philanthropic organization, housing association, or government body under the expectation that the land is an ongoing asset.

Yet, without adequate methods aimed at limiting the hasty, speculative sale of properties, cohousing groups, like ChaCo or Cohousing Co-op, risk the dilution of any foundational emphasis on affordability. As highlighted earlier in Section 2.4.2 there have been recent reforms that allow UK co-operatives to utilise asset locks to protect for instance land being sold from underneath members (Shepherd, 2023), a legislative change which is being advocated for in Australia (BCCM, 2025). Beyond such new initiatives, it is clear that ChaCo are attempting to create a de facto lock through their ownership structure, as found in other mutuals (Thompson, 2020b). So while

thwarted in their attempts to restrict house price increases, ChaCo have built some friction into the potential sale of properties by linking leases to co-operative membership (McKenna et al., 2024).

As also discussed above in Section 2.4.2, Cohousing Co-op have enshrined in their constitution provisions to protect the co-operative ethos in the event of the community being wound-up, with assets only being dispersed to a similar entity. Beyond such covenants, and the proposed legislative reforms highlighted above, other methods at protecting affordability include incorporation of a Community Land Trust (CLT) to hold land assets. With the CLT model having some renewed attention in Australia (Australian Community Land Trust Network, 2024), there are examples that could be deployed in Australia. This includes the more established US CLT sector, which includes CLT-Limited Equity Co-operative hybrids. As befits their relative size, this entails a CLT often supporting multiple, distinct housing co-operatives, including through technical assistance, financing, and development guidance, acting as an 'experienced back stop' (Ehlenz, 2014, p.13). As discussed in the literature review there are also some UK examples of CLT-co-operative hybrids, Bridport Cohousing (Hudson et al., 2019) and Lowfield Green Housing Co-op in York (Edwards, 2025). Meanwhile, in gesturing at another form, the Cohousing Co-op member, in discussing the delineations between cohousing and co-operative used in their internal education sessions, expressed a desire to assist the establishment of another cohousing group, to be supported by a co-operative entity sitting across multiple sites. This proposal is akin to the Mietschauser Syndikat model in Germany whereby an overarching cooperative organisation sits across a number of self-organized housing communities (Hurlin, 2018).

Yet the creation and maintenance of affordable tenures alone are not sufficient, with Arbell (2021) showing that cohousing and other community-led models must actively resist their predominance as 'White middle-class' spaces. The ability to know the constituency being supported through affordable options is crucial (Mullins and Moore, 2018). In targeting residents from Chapeltown

and wanting to reflect rather than disrupt the local community, ChaCo combine their demographic criteria with an offer of not only rental tenancies but shared ownership affordable housing, thus increasing the opportunities for residents from a variety of incomes. The collective of ChaCo have committed to a careful deliberation on how their community will change over time, rather than giving over to the possibility for more self-selection that could occur under a cohousing leasehold model (Blandy, 2023). The protection of their community, both in its social form and ownership rights provides a variation on the limited-access common property regime (Blandy, 2013). While being formed in part through government support, the mixture of informal and formal governance structures is a method of commoning of their own devising, rather than merely conforming to the dominant external legal environment (Dolsak and Ostrom, 2003). Whether these actions by ChaCo are enough to hold back the 'immutable laws' that mean housing equity growth is prioritised over community integrity, will be seen over time, but it offers at least a starting point for a wider conversation of how housing affordability and diversity can be sought in collaboration.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This first empirical chapter has detailed how the case studies operate as successful, heterodox models of multi-residential governance. The cohousing model of intentional community and emphasis towards shared space, essential goods and amenities appears to be a natural ally to the co-operative legal structure. Amid the deficiencies of many multi-residential, multi-titled properties, housing models that align the legal form with the architectural and social necessities of urban residential living offer a ready alternative. Principles of collectivism and consensus are vital to both the formal and informal structures of ChaCo and Cohousing Co-op. Both schemes are able to remain committed to their founding principles because of the unity between their governance and social processes. There is a self-reinforcing effect in place whereby their co-operative legal structure allows the groups to focus on the upkeep of their informal processes of

consensus agreement-making, which in turn allows all members to equally participate in their collective governance. This is an arrangement where the 'lived property relations' (Blandy, 2023), embodied in their inclusive cohousing principles sets the trend for how property rights are structured in legal form. Cohousing Co-operative and Chapeltown Cohousing have striven to make their models affordable. In the latter example, the shared ownership housing and affordable rental sits as an important part of the scheme. The mixture of tenures and equities, collectively managed by a group of people who are seeking housing security, provides an alternative to the solitary pursuit of housing that the property market offers, including the different level of control traditionally afforded to renters as opposed to owners. Meanwhile, Cohousing Co-operative could be seen somewhat as an outlier in its delivery of affordable rentals, given the government funding that it received. Yet it offers some important pointers for what longstanding, evolving processes of governance look like. In contrast to the deadening effect that strata title has on collaboration in multi-residential housing, it points to the freedom that can be gained from communities that elevate the shared aspects of dwelling together. In property relations terms, it attests to the possibility for groups to develop a more collective approach to property (Blandy, 2013), a version of limited-access commons negotiated and bound by its members over time. The monetary or exchangeable value of property for individual owners is de-prioritised, in favour of the mutual support and amenity delivered by the unity between cohousing socio-architectural form and co-operative governance.

The methods that groups use to protect their communities are not just aimed at housing security, as important as that may be, but also about what the 'value' of the cohousing model is for local neighbourhoods, both social and environmentally - in its built form. As will be further investigated in the subsequent chapters, the implications of the use of shared space in cohousing projects both small and large are great. In this chapter, the case of Chapeltown Cohousing particularly revealed what residents, regardless of tenure, gained from their collective governance and use of communal gardens and facilities. In the next section, the potential effect of multi-residential

cohousing schemes on the planning of cities will be discussed. Conventional multi-title developments, whether that be strata or leasehold in an apartment form, are the preferred method for the creation of 'compact' neighbourhoods (Sherry, 2017b). Given the deficiencies with both leasehold and strata there is an opening for alternative models of property that bring residents closer together, and which truly harness the inbuilt value of sharing. As will be discussed, the collaborative governance of shared spaces and facilities detailed in this chapter, opens new possibilities for urban environmental sustainability. In absence of coherent government action to shift land-use and transport policies into a post-fossil approach (Hajer and Versteeg, 2019), it falls to community-led efforts to imagine how neighbourhoods could deliver a form of 'compactness' that recognises environmental limits, including in finite land.

## Chapter Six: Cohousing - an alternative to the mainstream planning of compact cities in Australia and the UK

### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, two cohousing case studies will be analysed with a more granular focus on the planning systems of Leeds and Kamberri/Canberra. This locates the cohousing communities and their developments within their respective local housing and planning regimes and in particular their relationship to the urban intensification and compactness agenda. In the case of Leeds and Chapeltown Cohousing, a community now settled and established after a lengthy development process, the focus will be on how it relates to urban regeneration in the city. The prioritisation of new housing in or adjacent to existing residential areas brings with it debates over what is commonly called urban 'regeneration'. Chapeltown Cohousing is an instructive case study given that it is an inner-city project that utilised brownfield land. As Davison and Legacy (2014) note, 'the cornerstone of the compact city model is the sustainable reuse of previously developed and under-utilized land in established urban areas' (p.156), in other words brownfield sites like ChaCo. The second case is Stellulata Cohousing in Kamberri/Canberra, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). A project in the final stages of completion, it is being initiated under a special planning provision to test new housing models, particularly those that increase the density of housing in the ACT. This 'Demonstration Housing project' run by the Territory Government is aimed at supporting new housing types, particularly 'missing middle' models that intensify housing in existing suburbs. The Territory government has explicitly framed these housing innovations as being crucial to delivering a 'compact and efficient' city (ACT, 2012).

Through these case studies the research contributes to critiques of compactness. With the previous chapter showing how the cohousing cooperatives responded to the deficiencies of a financialised multi-residential housing, this chapter builds on scholarship which has revealed how

densification has become implicated in an extractive for-profit property development model (Blomley, 2004). It does so by interrogating whether the case studies are evidence of an alternative set of property relations that through the use of communal energy, and the sharing of space and facilities addresses the social and environmental effects of densification.

## 6.2 Chapeltown Cohousing, Leeds

### 6.2.1 Situating Chapeltown Cohousing in the Leeds urban regeneration agenda

Chapeltown is a suburb close to the centre of Leeds. It is a diverse community, a fact which ChaCo is very much attuned to, their website outlining the ethnic mix that surrounds their project using broad census descriptions: 35% White, 26% Asian/Asian British, 21% African-Caribbean/Black British and 18% Other BME. In conversation with both cohousing group members and stakeholders connected with the project, Chapeltown's status as an area of disadvantage was a recurring theme. In the current Leeds Local Plan, Chapeltown is referred to as a: 'rim neighbourhood with much regeneration potential' (LCC, 2019a, p.35). The city's inner core that includes Chapeltown is crucial to the growth of Leeds, particularly in new housing opportunities. A recent 10-year strategy from the central government Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), Leeds City Council (LCC), and the West Yorkshire Combined Authority outlines plans to: 'unlock' 20,000 homes 'created in attractive new central quarters even as the character of existing neighbourhoods is protected and enhanced' (DLUHC, 2024, p.5). The discussion of brownfield land by government stakeholders in Leeds echoes the familiar framings of such infill, including the green credentials of such projects (Dixon et al., 2007). The 10 Year vision argues that: 'utilising brownfield land, connecting and creating green spaces for nature recovery and healthier living' was crucial to delivering a 'Greener Leeds' (DLUHC, 2024, p.33). Beyond the national Marginal Viability Fund that as discussed further below supported ChaCo, the West Yorkshire Brownfield Fund and the Leeds Brownfield Land Programme are noted

sources of finance particularly for affordable housing in Leeds (LCC, 2022). ChaCo's project aligns with a LCC focus on the potential of 'small and unidentified' sites to contribute to new housing, aiming for 16% of all new projects on such lots (2019a).

The importance of developing the inner areas of Leeds is part of an imperative to 'maximise agglomeration effects' through a 'Denser Leeds, building new homes in line with the best urbanist principles of gentle densification' (DLUHC, 2024, p.33). The linking of housing growth with urban amenity and economic productivity is clear when they argue: 'The construction of additional homes across the city centre will not merely fulfil housing demand; it will foster the creation of vibrant, interconnected neighbourhoods, pulsating with life and opportunity' (Ibid p.35). Local councillors recognise that with development in the inner-core, 'many Leeds residents have yet to experience the benefits of these changes, including those that live in the neighbourhoods closest to the centre' (Ibid, p.7). The government partners outline an intent for an 'inclusive' form of regeneration that delivers mixed-tenure, affordable housing (Ibid, p.33).

While the vision for the city articulated by these three levels of government professes an ambition for a 'gentle density' transition that creates a diversity of housing types, including family appropriate housing, to date the regeneration agenda has been a boom of high-rise apartments in the inner-core (Canelas et al., 2022). A study of developments covered by the Leeds Local Plan showed that in an 11-year period from 2009 to 2020, 42% of builds had been apartments (Greenhalgh et al., 2021). Meanwhile, in the four years leading up to 2022, 48% of new homes in the city were flats, with apartments making up 68% of future development (McLaren and Bailey, 2023). This runs contrary to Local Plan policy, which targeted a preferred percentage of 25% flats for the city (LCC, 2019a). While select apartment developments in Chapeltown and surrounds deliver some affordable housing, such as the new scheme developing on a former leatherworks (Tague, 2024), they are often secondary concerns as part of large builds that predominantly focus on one and two-bed units. Moreover, similar to Manchester, Leeds has seen an influx of new

investment in build-to-rent housing (Goulding et al., 2023). Savills reported that in 2022, build-to-rent developments made up 17% of all new delivery in Leeds with a further 13,000 build-to-rent units in the pipeline (McLaren and Bailey, 2023). The growth in such tenures raise further concern for how families and those experiencing housing stress will be supported in the changing local housing market (Acheampong and Earl, 2020).

### 6.2.2 ChaCo's alternative approach to brownfield regeneration

This next section will discuss ChaCo's alternative approach to both brownfield regeneration and densification. As raised in Chapter Four, the land site for ChaCo was acquired from Leeds City Council (LCC). ChaCo had long identified the plot as a possible development option. Unity too had been separately interested. The site had been larger at around 6 acres, which initially prompted both groups to envisage larger plans than what transpired. Both groups then were told by the Council that the need for schools meant a reconsideration of their proposals. The wider site, which historically housed social services offices, a breakers yard, and a nursery was whittled down to one of six acres, the portion which had contained the social services offices until 2014. ChaCo were careful in negotiating the tensions associated with developing on a land site considered to be in a deprived area. The group has strong links to the Chapeltown community and as highlighted earlier it has diversity targets that enables it to represent Chapeltown and provide stable and affordable housing to traditionally marginalised groups. On top of ensuring that 60% of members have a pre-existing connection to Chapeltown, they have targets for LGBTQI+ members, multi-generational diversity, ethnic mix, those with low incomes, and people with disabilities.

The brownfield land plot was sold to ChaCo and Unity in March 2019. The details of the sale were published in the land registry, with the final price being £328,166 (HM Land Registry, 2024). Significant remediation work was completed with funding from the Housing Infrastructure Fund Marginal Viability (HIF-MV), with finance also unlocked from the Homes England Shared

Ownership and Affordable Housing Programme for the shared ownership properties in ChaCo and affordable rental homes in Unity. The majority of remediation work was linked to rubble from the demolished social services building, which was contaminated by hydrocarbons and asbestos necessitating the significant importation of topsoil (ArchL2).

Discussions with members and the architect revealed the difficulties resulting from the 'leftover' nature of the site, the 'worst' section of the broader 6 acres that were repurposed. The architect raised the issues that resulted from it abutting a major road and what that meant for the design, which was about:

*Pushing the block to the outside of the site to make a barrier. Because my concern was about air quality and particularly noise from the road... So that noise doesn't go over and it's quite a quiet space considering where it is when you go into that shared garden* (ArchL2).

It was put to the Unity Housing executive that some developers might be put off by a similarly contaminated, difficult plot. However, they argued that developers in the area could also find resources from the brownfield remediation funds. Instead, the determining factor for whether a developer would be interested was the size of the site and its potential economic value. Sites that failed to deliver a return on investment therefore became available opportunities for community groups and registered providers,

*'Because it's not about the bottom dollar for us in that same way. It's about how we support, regenerate neighbourhoods, communities. So that's the value that we'd be getting out'* (UnityHA).

The ability of Unity and ChaCo to successfully develop on a compromised site indicates an approach to site 'viability' where profit maximisation is not a driver. This is despite the broader trends in viability planning where uplift in land value, community benefits, and private development success become intertwined (Ferm and Raco, 2020). LCC echo this nationwide

imperative when they outline goals to: 'raise low land values through comprehensive placemaking that will make marginal sites more viable' (DLUHC 2024, p.32). While the state of local authority budgets in an age of austerity partially explains why LCC would follow such orthodoxy, it is left to ChaCo and Unity to push back against the conventional process of remediating land that depends on market performance (Dixon et al., 2007), often to the exclusion of harder to quantify community interests. Yet with the former LCC regeneration officer emphasising Whitehall's role in funding land remediation (LCC2), not-for-profit groups will struggle to break through on brownfield sites without support.

### 6.2.3 An integrated, dense development

Another aspect of ChaCo which touches on the compactness agenda in Leeds is its relative density. With the 10 Year vision outlining the need for a denser Leeds, particularly the 'gentle' variety, it is instructive to consider ChaCo in this context. Despite all buildings being between two and three storeys a LCC memo described ChaCo as a: 'high density urban community' (2019b, p.2). ChaCo members and their architect largely agreed with this assessment, particularly given the dominant architectural forms around Chapeltown, such as terraced housing. In discussing density, the members and architect emphasised terms such as 'human scale' (CCM3), or at a level to 'support buses' (ArchL2), and the kind of housing intensity their community offered in contrast to the recent high-rise developments in central Leeds. The layout ensures that ample space is left for gardens, rather than overcrowding the plot with housing. Meanwhile the architect and members emphasized that the houses conformed to space standards adopted by LCC in providing generous floor space per person. Rather than trimming space from the individual houses or from the communal areas, the residents pointed to the facilities in the common house, a shared garden with only small individual patios, and reduced parking as to what offered increased density.

The amount of car parking for the project was initially a point of dispute with the council planners. This disagreement echoed the parking requirements imposed by other local authorities (Rye and Koglin, 2014). As one ChaCo member explained:

*The most contentious thing was around our transport policy. At one point they wanted us to have two parking spaces per plot, which would have meant that we would be mostly car parking, and we'd have a lot fewer houses...And we had to really persuade them that we were a community that was going to genuinely be able to operate with one parking space for every two plots. One thing that helped was that we had a pre-existing car sharing arrangement, long before we moved in lots of us were already sharing cars....* (CCM1).

In reducing car parking, ChaCo was also able to identify benefits in maximising housing on the site. As the technical design architect for the project detailed:

*If you think that, there's 32 properties [including self-build plots] in that footprint if we'd had to employ all the usual space standards, parking standards, and everything else. I think we'd have been lucky to get 20 houses (ArchL1).*

The LCC regeneration officer, in turn, acknowledged that the planning requirements could be better integrated with the council's, Net Zero ambition:

*'Do you really need car parking for every property', they noted, 'especially if you're trying to encourage people to use sustainable transport and active travel?' (LCC1).*

The dwellings were built to high sustainability standards, including through insulation. The group also share a solar PV scheme that treats the entire housing mass as one. As a member outlined, they were then able to maximise solar gain, ' [O]ur house doesn't have solar panels because it's shaded. So if we weren't part of the community we wouldn't be able to benefit from solar (CCM1).'

Finally the project offers a community-centred approach to compact city targets for walkability and integration of housing with key infrastructures. A ChaCo resident described how a new thoroughfare was created:

*We've opened up the ginnel [a walkway]... from the bus stop you can now walk straight through past the school rather than having to go around and we designed the wall at a height so that you could see in but not climb in easily. We didn't want to feel like we were a gated community. And for the kids going past on the way to school or neighbours going past opening up that space, I think is helpful. Because before, this sort of end of Chapeltown you'd have to go quite a long way that way, or quite a long way that way but now you just get straight through (CCM1).*

Another resident agreed that this new connecting street was a positive addition to the pedestrianisation of Chapeltown, in contrast to the long-term local trend to cover over alleyways and ginnels (CCM2). The architect for ChaCo argued that the thoroughfare was driven by the cohousing group, rather than the council. Meanwhile, the former council regeneration officer agreed that the project 'properly transitioned into the existing environment' (LCC2). This contribution beyond the actual housing speaks to the consideration that ChaCo had for how the development fitted into the neighbourhood. If compactness and densification remains a priority for urban administrations like LCC, there is much to learn from the example of ChaCo. Not only does it deliver increased affordable housing, but it does so in a way that adds intensification while alleviating pressures brought by new development, both in facilitating local neighbourhood mobility and the deeper effects of gentrification. Moreover, with infill on brownfield land continuing to be prioritised, ChaCo offers an alternative approach to delivering 'value' from compromised land sites, grounded not in maximisation of market viability, but wider community benefit.

## 6.3 Stellulata Cohousing and Cohousing Canberra, Kamberri/Canberra



Figure 16: Architectural models for Stellulata Cohousing, Kamberri/Canberra, (photo taken by author).

### 6.3.1 Infill-trating the Garden City

Like most cities in Australia, Kamberri/Canberra is attempting to tackle the complexity of challenges related to its growth. While nowhere near the size of Naarm/Melbourne or Gadigal/Sydney, Kamberri/Canberra is growing in population at a steady rate. It is unique in relation to other Australian cities in the sense that it was planned to a granular level by Walter Burley Griffin following an international competition to build a capital for the newly federated nation. Griffin's vision for Kamberri/Canberra echoed the earlier Garden City movements of England in its design, with a focus on green, tree-lined boulevards, connecting nodes of neighbourhoods, with a low-density of housing and gardens spread out over the 800 square kilometres (Freestone, 1986). The Garden City legacy while treasured for its urban biodiversity and amenity, presents a problem for future growth of the city. With sprawl and low population

density being a dominant feature in most Australian cities, it is striking that there are 197 persons per square kilometre in Kamberri/Canberra, compared to 521 in Naarm/Melbourne and 440 in Gadigal/Sydney (Ledwith, 2024). However, compared to the two larger cities, Kamberri/Canberra arguably has a greater opportunity for urban infill. Across its 45 kilometre north to south expanse, it has largely continued to maintain sprawled suburban areas predominated by low-rise housing on large blocks, and car-dependence with minimal public transport options available (Alexandra and Norman, 2020). Within their zoning system, 79.7% of homes are currently sited on Residential Zone 1 (RZ1) blocks, which until recently was dominated by single detached homes with no allowances for multi-residential development (ACT Government, 2025b).

The ACT Government has sought to move to becoming a 'compact and efficient' city as its 2012 Planning Strategy outlined (ACT Government, 2012). As such, urban intensification and an increase in density is prioritized. As part of the drive for compactness, there is an ambition for 70% of all new housing to come from urban infill, with the remaining from greenfield development (Ibid). The government, looking at the intersecting issues of population growth, existing trends for sprawl, and opportunities for infill have focused on reforms to enable more 'missing middle housing' (ACT Government, 2025b). This includes more low-rise apartments, dual and tri-occupancies and townhouses and terrace homes. Before discussing how Stellulata relates to this missing middle agenda, the forerunner to this planning shift in the Demonstration Housing Project will be examined, including how it promoted this new cohousing model.

### 6.3.2 The Demonstration Housing project

The Demonstration Housing project resulted from a motion passed in the ACT Legislative Assembly in 2017. This was organised by then Green Party MLA Caroline Le Couteur, an interviewee for this study in her current role as convenor of Cohousing Canberra. Following the motion, the ACT Government developed some initial criteria for the Demonstration Housing project. The official responsible for overseeing the project explained it as an initiative to test and

deliver innovative housing types and development models not currently available in Kamberri/Canberra (ACTGov1). To further develop the criteria the ACT Government engaged in an ongoing deliberative democracy project called the Housing Choices Collaboration Hub. They used this to further define what the parameters of the Demonstration Housing project would be. These criteria that emerged from the deliberative process included issues such as build quality, heat island mitigation and adherence to ACT universal design principles where possible (ACT Housing Choices Collaboration Hub, 2018). Moreover, projects were to be rooted in the ACT Garden City character, with an emphasis on green, biodiverse landscapes.

Sitting behind these criteria, one key issue emerges as the driving focus of the project, the delivery of 'missing middle' housing options. As the ACT Government webpage for the Demonstration Housing project outlines: 'Canberra currently caters well to people wanting to buy a family home or an apartment. However, there are a lack of options for low rise, medium density housing types' (ACT Government, 2023a). Examples of missing middle housing noted by the government include cohousing along with the more familiar types outlined above. The housing forms identified within the project were tasked by the Housing Choices deliberators with demonstrating: 'how we can best deliver a compact, sustainable, and accessible city' (ACT Government, 2023a).

### 6.3.3 How Stellulata relates to the planning of missing middle densification

Stellulata meets several of the criteria outlined for the Demonstration Housing project. As already discussed in Section 4.3, its design and social structure offers possible benefits to housing diversity in Kamberri/Canberra through what it models in downsizing, ageing in place and environmental outcomes. Crucially, it also responds to the priority of developing new housing options for densification in the typical RZ1 neighbourhood. The centrality of the missing middle agenda was noted in conversation with a founder member of Stellulata cohousing. They remarked that because of the Demonstration Housing project and the deliberative process, missing middle

'became part of the vocabulary in a lot of ways' (Stel1). The ACT Government official noted an instructive passage of Stellulata's application which: 'aims to show that RZ1 land can be more densely occupied without sacrificing character and amenity, while improving social and environmental sustainability' (ACTGov1). The architect for Stellulata, in collaboration with the prospective residents, outlined the importance of the development 'reading as a normal house from the street', in order to emphasise its relatively subtle change to the neighbourhood (ArchACT). Furthermore, the cohousing group were attuned to the need to engage with the wider neighbourhood to allay any concerns:

*So as soon as we were approved as a Demonstration Housing project, we immediately ran seminars, we letterboxed 3 streets away. We spoke to the North Canberra Community Council which is the peak body for the local residents groups in this area (Stel1).*

Their ability to connect with their neighbours as long-term residents was also noted:

*Going into those first few community meetings and just showing we're just ordinary people. We've lived in this area for 30 years; we want to downsize. We can't do it, we've come up with this idea, you know this might apply to you one day (Stel1).*

The success of this neighbourhood consultation stands in contrast to another Demonstration Housing project, a proposal for a new manor house type, which received a negative response from the local community. A campaign group for more missing middle housing, Greater Canberra, described the backlash to the project as a revealing point in the debate around density in Kamberri/Canberra and indeed a foundational moment for their own advocacy:

*[The Griffith Manor House] was a fourplex, two up, two down on a RZ1 low density.... And the government approved that as part of the Demonstration housing project pushed through a planning change to allow a block specific variation to permit it to have 4 dwellings, a basement car park, and otherwise look like the footprint of a regular large*

*house. The Local Neighbourhood Association and the Griffith Narrabundah Community Association, got extraordinarily mad they went all out on a campaign where they I think they ended up getting about 800 signatures on the petition they organised (GreaterCan1).*

The ACT Government official noted that the backlash to the planning change allowing a manor house design as part of the Demonstration Housing project had caused the proponents to revisit the project's viability (ACTGov1). What distinguished the design of Stellulata was the shared aspects that allowed the built footprint to be lower than other housing types, including the manor house. Rather than increase the plot ratio to accommodate the three families the architect for Stellulata argued that shared car usage would allow the development to successfully challenge car parking regulations instead:

*We're permitted to have two car parks on this site, and they're two undercover car parks as well... And so that's where the plot ratio advantage for cohousing and sharing facilities has a lot of merit (ArchACT).*

If they had followed conventional multi-residential planning codes, the development would have 6 car spaces, rather than just the two they aimed for. The manor house by contrast proposed to build an underground car park for 9 vehicles. This perhaps points to a simple change, which ChaCo also undertook, the shrinking of car spaces, which can help to reduce the ultimate footprint of a building significantly. Stellulata's architect attested to the project's ability to reduce community concern around new housing intensity (ArchACT). The approach to planning reform represented by Stellulata's Demonstration Housing project is designed to be subtle, careful and controllable. The dynamic is instructive in the sense that the architect and the proponents were invited to break planning norms for which the project would be a test of. The architect described this as:

*It is an encouragement to really challenge the planning regulation. Really challenge the application of the current regulations and rules.... So I felt quite free actually in the design for this project (ArchACT).*

This process of being a test case did present planning hurdles to the cohousing group and their architect. This included the project being assessed to comply with a multi-unit code that wasn't specific to cohousing. This was corrected by the addition of a definition in the Territory Plan, which fits with most international characterizations of cohousing. It runs as such:

*Co-housing means a development with separate dwellings or private living areas, with some common/shared indoor components such as kitchens, living areas, bedrooms, and laundries. Private living areas must each contain a bedroom and a bathroom as a minimum and may contain a kitchenette. The common/shared indoor components may be provided in a separate building (ACT Government, 2023b), (p.3).*

Furthermore, the ACT Government undertook a variation to the Territory Plan which permitted cohousing to be built on two specific blocks of land only. In the case of Stellulata, it was outlined in the district strategy, which included the suburb of Ainslie (ACT Government, 2024). This controlled process can be described as a 'sandbox' approach to planning reform, where the resulting development can be isolated to a specific block without any immediate repercussions for the wider planning system. As the ACT Government official noted, this allowed the government to 'demonstrate the skies not going to fall in if you do some more density well done, in RZ1' (ACTGov1).

This abnormality of demonstrating certain housing designs on a single site nonetheless caused further planning difficulties for the project. The government initially suggested that the proponents submit the regular development application (DA) alongside the Territory Plan variation, only to later argue that they were worried about approving something before the law had been put in place. According to the architect: 'they asked us to withdraw the development application basically to cover themselves' (ArchACT). The architect argued that they detected the underlying reasoning for this somewhat haphazard approach to the process, as:

*I had a sense that because it was government promoting a housing model, a different model that they were extra cautious, were being extra protective of the government's position.... they are ticking every single box because they are fearful of potential for criticism or for some sort of challenge (ArchACT).*

This caution is instructive for how the ACT Government is considering the broader application of new housing types like cohousing, beyond what has been outlined for Stellulata.

### 6.3.4 What future place for cohousing in the ACT?

When asked if they felt they were part of creating an option for others to follow in the ACT, the founder member of Stellulata agreed, but with hesitation over whether it would automatically lead to a further granting of cohousing in the low-density RZ1 areas:

*Well that's the hope. I mean, you always wonder whether governments are renowned for having great little test projects that never actually turn into anything ongoing, and that there's a real danger that's true in this case as well. I'm pleased that just our existence led them to put cohousing into the Planning Act even before they brought in the new act (Stel1).*

The architect for Stellulata was slightly more optimistic about the possibilities for change brought by the project:

*I think it has a great positive ramification potentially for the city planning as a whole in terms of being able to increase the number of people happily living within the RZ1 traditional blocks because there's a lot more land of this size potentially. And the city is really based on that plot size and the fact that we can show that the Garden City is a real and thriving thing within this size of development (ArchACT).*

A regular theme in conversation with cohousing advocates in the ACT, planning reform campaigners like Greater Canberra and ACT Government officials was the societal change in

attitudes to housing density, in particular the shift in language around 'missing middle housing'. While the founder member of Stellulata was unclear about the future of cohousing beyond their project, they nonetheless held out hope for the longer term, with regard to the direction of travel in the debate around density, expressing that:

*Because of our existence and us being on the radio and being in the newspapers and being on the websites and the social media the increased density got a bit more discussion than it was going to get anyway and so I feel like we've had an impact even if we don't in the short or even medium term change the rules such that you can do precisely what we've done in RZ1 (Stel1).*

Stellulata certainly has contributed to the agenda of densification in the ACT, but embedding cohousing as an alternative model for compactness and missing middle housing requires more of the planning system. For more projects to follow the design of Stellulata in RZ1, a further planning variation was required. This may emerge with mooted draft reforms announced in May 2025 by the ACT Government to enable more missing middle housing (ACT Government, 2025b).

Amid projections of the population growth of Kamberri/Canberra, the government suggested that in planning for 30,000 more homes over the coming five years, missing middle designs could form the backbone of new construction. As part of the new draft planning policies, which are out for consultation at the time of writing, several changes are mooted for RZ1 and RZ2 blocks. While restrictions on height or site coverage will not be lifted in RZ1, on RZ1 lots there will be provisions for subdivisions, and a loosening of restrictions to allow duplexes and other designs on single blocks. There will remain some limits on block consolidations, generally aimed at 2000 square metres in RZ1, thereby keeping out bigger redevelopments. Meanwhile for RZ2 blocks close to arterial roads, shopping areas, and neighbourhood services, there will some loosening of height restrictions, and more allowances for multiple houses on small blocks.



Figure 17: Missing Middle Designs, (ACT Government, 2025b)

A Missing Middle Design Guide has been published, to offer direction to housing practitioners.

Moreover, as part of their advocacy for new missing middle models, Stellulata Cohousing was highlighted as one of 18 exemplars (ACT Government, 2025a). Such small-scale cohousing, such as the three households on the large 1000 square metre block appears clearly to meet the missing middle ambitions of the ACT Government.

Yet, the future growth of cohousing, particularly in supporting projects that could create affordable housing, remains unclear. While the insertion of a cohousing definition into ACT planning regulations in theory should aid projects that aim for land sites in higher density RZ2 and RZ3 areas, the ACT Government official acknowledged that difficulties in negotiating the land market would be present:

*RZ2 land will likely be more expensive because of the planning rules that higher density development and developers are able to get a better return out of other products. So securing other land in the territory, territory owned land would mean participating in a competitive process against developers (ACTGov1).*

The plans for another cohousing development in Kamberri/Canberra speak to this challenge.

Cohousing Canberra, the group outlined in section 4.5.3, have also been part of the Demonstration Project. Although as their designation of a proposal ‘without land’ suggests, they

have been attempting to secure a government owned site since 2018. The convenor of Cohousing Canberra explained the process:

*Cohousing Canberra are theoretically going to be given a request for tender to get the land. We put our expression of interest in in 2018. That's like five years ago. We have no idea what the price will be, and we have to convince them that we have the financial and technical expertise to do it. I totally understand the ACT government's predicament. They do not wish to be accused of selling the land to us cheap (CohoCan1).*

There would be no expected planning problems for the scheme. Securing the land is the primary hurdle as the convenor expressed: 'we will not buy the land without the government being basically happy with what we what we do with it' (CohoCan1). In future growth projections for Kamberri/Canberra, a few areas have been designated as zones where greater densification may be permitted. This largely will occur along transport routes and around key infrastructure projects, with a number of suburban areas also outlined. The site that Cohousing Kamberri/Canberra has identified is an area of future medium density development. The length of time taken by the ACT Government to release the request for tender to Cohousing Canberra has meant that such growth plans threaten to overshadow the transformative potential of the scheme. As the convenor suggested when they made their initial proposal: 'we were ahead of the curve, but the curve has caught up' (CohoCan1).

The fortunes of Cohousing Canberra show the difficulties that cohousing as a housing type continues to face, despite the interventions of the ACT Government through the Demonstration Housing project. While the ACT Government had long expressed that they would only sell the site at a 'market price', it was unclear to Cohousing Canberra what that might mean under the conditions of such a closed tender process, and with the plot already zoned for cohousing. As the convenor outlined:

*It's incredibly hard to work out what is the market value for a block of land that you have to build a 30-unit cohousing on, and it has to be bought by cohousing. I could argue the market value of that is about zero because we cannot use it as the security because we are the people that have to own it... I'd be happy to argue it's really not worth very much half a million max, then you argue, you know it's 5000 square metres you can build 30 units on, it's worth at least 5 million. Market value is always a very elastic concept for a one-off development' (CohoCan1).*

The 'elasticity' of the potential market value nonetheless can be seen as keeping the group interested in the site with a comparable private lot likely beyond their means. As will be discussed further, in Kamberri/Canberra the fate of the cohousing model, particularly that of larger developments, is in the government's hands.

## 6.4 Discussion

The previous chapter showed how cohousing groups, when underpinned by principles of mutuality, can offer an alternative approach to multi-residential property governance. This chapter, while highlighting the innovations in neighbourhood planning prompted by cohousing groups, particularly ChaCo, also revealed the restrictions brought by housing and planning systems dominated by market-led convention. This meets demand for researchers to further interrogate the country-specific context that influences how cohousing interacts with respective planning regimes (Tummers, 2015). In both Australia and the UK, the for-profit led treatment of land and housing underpins the collision between planning and cohousing. Just as the last chapter showed how cohousing militated against conventional multi-title forms like strata and leasehold; property pressed into transactional efficiency, this chapter has argued that cohousing struggles against a form of compactness constrained by market-led densification. In resisting this narrow conception of densification, the next section builds on alternative planning theories, which beckon a focus beyond the private, to what can be created through commoning, both within a housing

community and beyond (Durrant et al., 2023, Marcuse, 2009). After discussing what the cohousing model offers to the often vexed politics and practices of densification, the research questions what kind of 'planning culture' might facilitate further projects (Tummers, 2015). While acknowledging those who have evoked a 'participatory' planning in aid of cohousing, the case studies suggest the need for planning that recognises and addresses power relations. In moving on from developer-led densification, models like cohousing are generative of an alternative compactness, grounded not in extraction from property, but in an approach to social and environmental sustainability that addresses the impacts of housing intensification.

#### 6.4.1 An alternative form of compact urbanism

Compactness remains an ever-reached for formulation in planning, as highlighted earlier in Chapter Two and shown by the examples of both Leeds and Kamberri/Canberra. Yet, as befits the sclerotic approach to densification and urban consolidation in both the UK and Australia, the public while committed to the compactness goal, is uncertain about the means. For instance, Tewdwr-Jones (2012) showed while an overwhelming number of people in the UK approved with policies of urban containment, a similar percentage resisted higher density living. Preserving the 'green belt' outside major urban centres retains significant support, with 6 in 10 people favouring maintaining current restrictions (IPSOS, 2023). However, in the UK there still remains a strong preference for houses over flats, detached homes over semi-detached or terraced housing (Dunse et al., 2013). Meanwhile, amid some indications of changing preferences towards denser living in Australia (Bolleter et al., 2024), there is conjecture over the process of change. In a survey of respondents from Melbourne and Sydney, 45% suggested a willingness to live in a medium density 'dwelling with no garden, but close to public transport', with a similar percentage preferring a detached home with a garden but deficient public transport (Newton et al., 2022, p.125). Yet, less than 10% of the same survey expressed that the change to their neighbourhood through increased density was a good thing, and 45% argued they wanted less or no change in

housing density. Such discontent with the manner, if not goal, of densification aligns with critiques of housing intensification that decry how it has been inflicted on neighbourhoods through an extractive set of property relations (Blomley, 2004, McFarlane, 2020).

Cohousing offers an approach to compactness that cuts through the disenchantment with conventional attempts at densification. With planning systems struggling to create new norms, developers are setting the parameters for how densification will occur. In recent years, governments have prioritised different 'gentle' or 'missing middle' density (Bunce, 2023, Elborough, 2023), but such a strategic focus has largely failed to break through into development outcomes. As Australian practitioner Andy Fergus has commented: 'we are increasingly being positioned between a regulatory desire for fine grain and an investment tendency toward steroidal scale' (2020, p.1). Furthermore, while denser built forms are regularly touted for their environmental sustainability, large-scale developments are often found not to match the compactness rhetoric in relation to issues such as walkability or encouragement of active travel (Parham and Jones, 2021). Cohousing, particularly in its Scandinavian forerunners, has been termed 'dense-low' (Larsen, 2019), in both being dense for social interaction, and low to the ground for connection to urban and natural environment. As such it offers a compelling option as housing that is compact, yet responsive to social and environmental priorities.

Yet, despite the respective advances made in both Kamberri/Canberra and Leeds by cohousing groups in offering an alternative type of compactness, there is a danger that processes of densification will remain extractive and environmentally dubious. While Kamberri/Canberra is unlikely to experience the kind of high-rise boom found in Australia's major cities, so-called 'vertical sprawl' (Troy et al., 2020), the conservative reforms to compactness will not disrupt the conventional development model in Australia's capital city. Much could be learnt from the example of Chapeltown Cohousing, which attests to the ability of community-led housing projects to make demands of the planning system for change, particularly in aligning planning reforms to

opportunities for affordable housing. If compactness continues to be reached for as a planning norm, it is projects like ChaCo that offer the best chance for an alternative approach to densification.

Stellulata Cohousing have fully embraced the opportunity presented by the ACT Demonstration Housing project. While their true contribution can be better assessed over the medium to longer term, post-occupancy, their approach to missing middle housing provides a degree of nuance that would appear to deliver greater density in Kamberri/Canberra without significant contention. The three 100 sqm homes sharing a 148 sqm common house mark a departure from the constructions of increasing size in Australia, with the national average for a newly constructed freestanding house being 229 sqm and with developers in the ACT building Australia's biggest homes at an average of 259 sqm (Power, 2021). Moreover, given it presents as an average home to the street and maintains a 43% plot ratio, the scheme embraces the 'Garden City' ethic that the ACT continues to promote. The experience of more housing on residential blocks even at such low intensification further expands the parameters of the Australian public debate. Such small-scale cohousing developments help to move away from the very low density RZ1 neighbourhoods that dominate Kamberri/Canberra, but do so via a form of 'gentle' densification.

While Stellulata's proponents perhaps accurately detect their legacy as being through the promotion of density, rather than of affordable housing options, the stop-start evolution of cohousing in Kamberri/Canberra speaks to an Australia-wide dynamic. Stellulata provides an option for those Australians wishing to downsize, and given their model utilised the members' significant equity, it offers an exemplar for other middle-income households. However, projects of a larger scale, which provide further options for those wishing to deliver affordable cohousing in Australia, currently struggle to get off the ground. This is shown by the example of Cohousing Canberra, who would benefit from an affordable land purchase akin to what ChaCo accessed. If it fails after its long efforts to gain support from the ACT Government, it will destine cohousing in

the ACT to remain an overwhelmingly middle-class housing initiative. Moreover, it will typify the Missing Middle agenda as one that is rooted in conventional approaches to housing development, where larger, more ambitious projects are left to the private market. The example of ChaCo shows that transformative, neighbourhood scale projects are possible. This points to a role for the planning system to further recognise the benefits of a diverse range of cohousing projects. To see projects like Chapeltown Cohousing and indeed Cohousing Canberra succeed, it is apparent that the planning systems in both Australia and the UK need to be regularly responsive and reliable partners to community-led housing movements. At the same time, defined groups must be willing to step forward. To create the conditions for more community-led cohousing requires both different planning principles and a new focus for planning, as the next two sections discuss.

#### 6.4.2 A planning culture that supports community-led cohousing?

In terms of principles, practitioners have pointed to the links between cohousing and ‘participatory planning’ (Field, 2020, Horelli, 2002, Tummers, 2015, Williams, 2005b), including communities taking deliberative engagement on their own properties to a wider neighbourhood scale (Blomberg and Kärnekull, 2019, Chatterton, 2015a). This could gesture towards a move away from planning as a technical exercise to one enabling local networks of people to take part in what Horelli terms: the ‘planning and decision-making cycle’ (2002, p.611). Such participatory ideals point to a change in the role of the planner, with Williams (2005b) arguing that cohousing groups could be supported by planners taking a more ‘facilitative role’. There are ready initiatives which could offer participatory planning opportunities, with Tummers (2015) and Field (2004) reimagining national and local policies and institutions, legal frameworks, and the regulation and allocation of land and finance for cohousing. Furthermore, rather than present significant delays, as occurred with Chapeltown Cohousing and Stellulata, and which still face Cohousing Canberra, planning could shift to prioritise such community initiatives. Field and Layard (2017) argue that ambition needs to move from mere consultation on local plans to the creation of options for

community control of assets including land. Chapeltown Cohousing benefitted to a certain extent from such flexibility, and such an approach could unlock other similar schemes from within communities. Another potential part of a participatory environment is shown by the role of intermediary organisations and practitioners to support cohousing groups (Felstead et al., 2019, Fernández Arrigoitia and Tummers, 2019, Palmer and Tummers, 2019). Community-led housing hubs have been crucial supports to many projects in the UK context, including Leeds Community Homes for ChaCo. Peak bodies like the UK Cohousing Network, Cohousing Australia, and local advocacy organisations such as Cohousing Canberra also play important roles disseminating advice and connecting like-minded people together, alongside lobbying government.

Yet, despite the plethora of initiatives which could herald a participatory form of planning, such efforts have often been stymied by a broader approach to housing where the monotony of market-delivery has been prioritised. This speaks firstly to an uneasiness that conventional planning has with self-provision (Gleeson, 2004), evident from the case studies discussed here. As shown by the planning disputes that each case study group experienced, authorities remain cautious in dealing with outsider models like cohousing, and reform efforts such as the ACT Demonstration Housing programme are often contained. In part, this relates to municipal or regional planning functions being constrained by a housing development system dominated by market imperatives. This means that the potential for larger projects to test innovative models will largely be restricted to what conventional developers can deliver. To truly 'facilitate' more transformative projects, a circuit-break is required, which could come from planning theories that go beyond the encouragement of participation, to the redistribution of power (Horelli, 2002). This includes the work of Marcuse (2009) who has argued for a 'commons planning' which rather than remedying existing injustices, generates means for groups to develop alternative power relations, particularly in urban areas. In observing the outsider status of cohousing, this builds on advocacy for self-build movements from Ward (1994) and Turner (1976), who saw the potential for planning to emancipate those committed to the design, construction and governance of their own housing.

This resisted the modernist, top-down orthodoxy that saw the design of cities as a rarefied skill that should be left to experts, rather than citizens (Hall, 2014, Scott, 1998). Such a mentality goes further than just encouraging greater participation, but closer to a radical planning agenda that utilizes communal energy within local neighbourhoods that are generative of alternative modes of 'social reproduction' (Friedmann, 2011, Tummers and MacGregor, 2019, Sevilla-Buitrago, 2022). Allied to such a new planning culture, ambitious goals must be advanced. This research suggests that rather than shying away from compactness, the cohousing case studies could align with a 'post-growth' form of planning that offers a more environmentally and socially-attuned form of densification.

### 6.4.3 A (post-growth) planning system that supports alternative compactness?

ChaCo and Stellulata have benefitted from the support of planning, housing and regeneration officials at relevant government agencies, however each case has shown that participatory planning functions have often been tempered by other imperatives within each authority. Each cohousing development, no matter how innovative, still operates within the strictures of a housing development process and government funding model fixated on economic growth. This can be seen in the need for local authorities like Leeds City Council; in the example of ChaCo, or the ACT authority; in the case of Cohousing Canberra to only sell land at market value. As Rydin (2013) has shown, this setting, requiring local authorities to generate for their land the 'best consideration reasonably obtainable,' plays into a growth-dependent economic logic that inevitably favours private developers in land sales. Even if local authorities were to highlight environmental or social benefits for supporting projects, these get trumped by economic obligations.

Planning has become complicit in an approach to development whereby the benefits of new projects are seen foremost in the economic growth that they provide, whether that be in the receipts they bring in to state land owners, or to what can be skimmed off in terms of planning

gain from for-profit construction (Beswick and Penny, 2018, Ward, 2021). This is part of a distorted relationship to both property and land, whereby in order to provide public benefits through infrastructure or contributions to public housing, governments must fixate on the viability of speculative projects (Ferm and Raco, 2020). In turn, developers build this 'value capture' into their models, which necessitates squeezing the maximum value from housing projects. Particularly on inner-city land sites, this prioritises large scale developments, regardless of their need or demand (White, 2025). Just as multi-residential property, through strata and leasehold, is pressed into what fits financially, planning is increasingly party to a technocratic form of property relations and land use (Blomley, 2004). Despite the promotion, by multiple levels of governments, of gentle housing intensification and mixed-use neighbourhoods of close-knit services, facilities, and housing, the drive for densification and regeneration in Leeds continues to be dictated by largescale property developers investing in high-value projects like build-to-rent apartments that are designed to generate a financial return (Canelas et al., 2022, Goulding et al., 2023). Furthermore, this means that mainstream compactness, particularly in neoliberal contexts such as Australia and the UK, is unearthing outcomes such as micro-living (Harris and Nowicki, 2020). The façade of being smaller and denser speaks more to the extraction of economic value, than to any social or environmental benefits (Robinson and Attuyer, 2021).

ChaCo's project clearly offers a different set of compact urbanist credentials, including in its use of brownfield land, and a development model that brings relative, gentle densification to Chapeltown. In arguing that it aligns both social and environmental imperatives with housing intensification, it offers a route away from extractive, growth-dependent uses of urban land and housing. Rather than the for-profit micro-living developments proliferating in major cities of the UK (Hubbard, 2024), ChaCo economises where it can for example through car parking, without losing the amenity of large shared facilities, communal garden, and homes that go beyond existing space standards. This addresses the complexities offered by density that can often turn existing residents against new development (Haarstad et al., 2022). As Burton (2002) argues, the

quality of new development can allay concerns over compactness, and projects like ChaCo positively add to their neighbourhood through the alignment of the efficient, shared use of space to environmental and social goals. Viewed through the same relational frame that decries densification in service of for-profit property (McFarlane, 2020), value is instead delivered for local social and environmental benefit. This is expressed in the creation of a pedestrian thoroughfare that has opened a corner of Chapeltown and the continuation of a carsharing scheme that lowers their carbon footprint, prioritises active travel, and also allows more homes on less space.

As shown by the material discussed in Chapters Four and Five, ChaCo is also attuned to local needs as shown by their demographic targets and the provision of affordable homes both shared ownership and rental. As such they offer an approach to compact urbanism that aims to defray the gentrifying effect of redevelopment on brownfield land, a potential 'socially just density' (McFarlane, 2016). In meeting demands for property models that are more relationally grounded to their local environment, ChaCo delivers a diverse tenure structure that enfranchises Chapeltown residents, rather than displacing them via for-profit regeneration. Moreover, this suggests an alternative management of urban land, away from conventional approaches to property value. With urban infill continuing to be a major part of the UK housing debate, the type of small site which ChaCo have utilised deserves greater attention, as opposed to larger regeneration sites whether brownfield, greyfield, or greenfield. Small sites allow for a greater diversification in terms of housing type that is often illusory on more sizable sites. Bigger sites are attractive to conventional developers who are more likely to deliver standardised profit-maximising housing.

In learning from projects like ChaCo, compactness need not be eschewed as an aim (Xue, 2022), but through a post-growth framework refocused to understanding how new housing projects impact on their social and environmental contexts, both positively and negatively. This could

mean a shift away from the fixation on density simply as built form to a more relationally-formed engagement with how both new and existing housing impact on environmental limits, including in land. With urban land continually in demand for new housing, a fresh obligation for a post-growth planning framework could be to preserve 'finite natural resources' (Ruiz-Alejos and Prats, 2022). This could lead to a different approach to conventional government land sales and the prioritisation of sustainable, affordability-driven projects such as ChaCo on the limited land available. Meanwhile, what projects contribute beyond secure, affordable housing should be part of any planning criteria. The ability of cohousing developments like ChaCo and Stellulata to drive active transport, shrink use of car spaces and road infrastructure could be crucial post-growth forms of transport and land-use planning (Durrant et al., 2023). Lastly, in thinking at the neighbourhood level, rather than privileging private-sector developers for their role in boosting economic growth, a post-growth form of planning could elevate the importance of communal networks fulfilling local needs, also a key function of commons approaches (Pickerill, 2015). This could mean the provision of goods necessary for everyday existence, whether that be 'co-produced' urban food gardens, 'co-owned' housing or 'co-managed' community spaces (Chatterton and Pusey, 2019). These processes are articulated to varying degrees in cohousing communities, with all three in ChaCo. ChaCo's use of a brownfield site in an inner-urban suburb also makes it an instructive case for how we might as per Haarstad et al. (2022) begin to: create 'alter relations of reproduction in the compact city' (p.31). This further aligns the governance of land and housing in the last chapter to the generative possibilities of cohousing to support the daily care of commoning (Tummers and MacGregor, 2019). In speaking to this, one member of ChaCo expressed of their time to date:

*I mean, we're like just over a mile from the city centre and it's very much considered in the city and we're on the Chapeltown border here. But it feels different. It feels a lot more like a village. We recently had an afternoon tea picnicking in the garden to celebrate two of*

*our members getting pregnant. And everyone was making [comments] 'like you know how it takes village to raise a child'. Well, here's our village (CCM1).*

While its contribution will be better known over time, the building blocks are there in the diverse affordable cohousing of ChaCo, productive garden spaces, shared facilities and relationships that permeate outwards. Beyond the alternative forms of property governance discussed in the previous chapter, the scheme is generative of new approaches to neighbourhood planning and housing intensification and offers a compelling addition to debates over compact urbanism.

## 6.5 Conclusion

Chapelton Cohousing in Leeds and Stellulata Cohousing in Kamberri/Canberra are very different types of schemes, not only in their scale and ambition, but also in their approach to tenure and housing affordability. Both projects were formed in the context of a debate around brownfield regeneration, housing intensification, and compactness in aid of sustainability. Stellulata emerged through a programme designed to unearth housing innovations that responded to the ACT's desire to develop a more compact Kamberri/Canberra, while still respecting the Garden City ethic. It is the perfect kind of project for this goal and should lead the way for further developments of its type. It also an example of how small-scale cohousing can support downsizing away from large, detached homes towards sustainable options for ageing in place. Moreover, in utilising social sharing, including of cars, it aids the promotion of active travel and public transport, which meets many urban sustainability goals. Yet, other larger iterations of cohousing may still struggle in Kamberri/Canberra, restricted by the unaffordability of land. This has implications for how the ACT compactness agenda, with its Missing Middle framing, will play out. Without further intervention from Territory authorities, it is likely that cohousing will be restricted to groups with significant equity. This will not only limit the diversity of cohousing models on offer but also condition what housing intensification will deliver. The future for affordable cohousing models in Kamberri/Canberra remains uncertain.

Chapelton Cohousing meanwhile did not benefit from a bespoke programme of support, but through the perseverance of its group, and adroit use of local and central government funding, the cohousing members created a truly ground-breaking scheme. It is an instructive project in the context of the UK's own debate with compact urbanism, particularly amid an expected renewal of an often circular discussion over urban infill, brownfield, and greenfield land. Cities like Leeds, while professing a desire for gentle patterns of densification with mixed-use, walkable urban areas, are instead being filled by large-scale, often high-rise developments with questionable environmental credentials. By contrast, ChaCo's architectural model maximises the benefits of social sharing, including of gardens, facilities like laundries and guest rooms, and goods like cars. It utilises a challenging brownfield site, develops new affordable housing aimed at local need, and is an example of how housing developments can promote active transport and public transit, again through car sharing. In doing so, it not only provides solutions to the professed aims of compact urbanism, but addresses the meaningful critiques of extractive for-profit densification.

With compact housing projects largely following a limited formula of squeezing maximum profit from developable sites to the detriment of existing communities (Haarstad et al., 2022), this research has responded to those demanding alternative processes of densification, including an emergent post-growth approach to planning and housing. This builds on the previous chapter which outlined how cohousing co-operatives provided an alternative type of multi-residential governance, a set of property relations that means housing developments are connected to resident autonomy and security, regardless of tenure. In the next chapter, this argument is taken further through examination of another aspect of cohousing's alterity. In offering a deliberative form of housing provision that is about building community before even a brick has been laid, how can cohousing be contextualised within a housing development model that favours scale and pace? With governments in both Australia and the UK largely seeing housing innovations through the lens of whether they add to supply, how does this impact on models like cohousing?

## Chapter Seven: Urban cohousing schemes – what place in the land and housing system?

Cohousing has for the most part remained a niche in the much broader housing systems of Australia and the UK, with the model largely going unrecognised by many state actors. Groups form, struggle, and often fail while being paid minimal attention by government actors who are trying to remain 'busy' in the face of a much discussed housing 'crisis' (Gurran and Phibbs, 2015). Crisis-driven policies have tended to entrench neoliberal logics that demand market-based solutions which privilege private forms of development (Brill and Raco, 2021). In this context, the need for increased housing supply at pace is regularly touted as a policy proposal (Steele, 2012), despite critiques that decry how increased efforts at housing provision inevitably favour for-profit development (Chapple and Song, 2025). In the face of a deafening supply mantra, community-led housing groups often are unable to articulate their own alternate visions for building, let alone their heterodox property relations. In this last empirical chapter, a set of cohousing case studies are analysed for how they fit into the broader development of new housing. This includes how they interact with state actors, the government relationships that either support or undermine them, and what this can tell us about the development model of cohousing more broadly. Within this, it questions how such community-led models are situated against methods of direct state provision, namely social housing. Furthermore, in offering a different form of housing development, do these cohousing projects suggest a pathway beyond the confines of the supply agenda? Before turning to successfully developed cases of Chapeltown Cohousing, and the more established Cohousing Co-operative, this research casts light on a project that failed to be realised, Squeezed in Bethnal Green, London.

## 7.1 Squeezed, London

As discussed in the introduction in Chapter Four, Squeezed had formed in 2017 from like-minded individuals meeting each-other at a Tower Hamlets Self-Build Forum. The group had attempted to undertake a self-build development on two other sites, before the initiation of a specific London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH) programme to bring forward council-owned sites for self-build groups. The Greater London Authority (GLA) had acted to spur London-wide action by borough councils and other public landowners to bring forward nearly 60 sites across London, identifying that such 'small sites' could deliver: a 'quarter of housing capacity over the next 10 years' (GLA 2019, p.5). Furthermore, the GLA argued that with public landowners lacking the capacity to develop on such small sites, such a funded programme could support community groups to develop on these sites instead. Grant funding to individual boroughs was then initiated, with LBTH gaining £250,000 in support from the city-wide programme (LBTH, 2023). At the time, the GLA had argued that this initiative to bring forward council-owned sites for community groups was a better option than if sites were: 'sold via auction which [as described by the GLA] affords limited control over the quality and timing of development, as these sites can be land banked and traded several times before anything is built' (Ibid, p.7). The delivery of such sites also fulfilled a manifesto pledge by the then Tower Hamlets Labour Mayor John Biggs to: 'support up to 50 self-build homes during the period 2018 – 2022' (LBTH, 2021c, p.2).

### 7.1.1 A quality and affordability focussed self-build programme

In winning the bidding for one of the four sites offered, Lark Row, Squeezed had to negotiate a competitive process based on several criteria. This assessment prioritised six measures that focused on 'quality' with a weighting of 80%, as opposed to criteria relating to cost and financial models (LBTH, 2021a). In that remaining 20%, cost denoted the receipt that would be offered to the council, while the financial model was meant to be transparent, viable, and show a mix of tenures and levels of affordability. Meanwhile the bulk of the criteria concentrated on the

robustness of the governance model, and a defined community benefit that as well as affordability denoted whether groups were willing to engage with local needs including through the design phase. Groups needed to show a local connection either through family, employment, or involvement in community organisations. The scheme design was to be responsive to site constraints, whilst also showing innovation. Value for money had to be realised including through efficient use of the site to deliver affordable homes, and the scheme had to be 'deliverable', which involved prospective groups identifying the skills and capacity to implement what was being proposed, with a clear plan along a certain timescale with available finance.

Described by LBTH in their initial documentation as a 'pioneering affordable self-build housing programme', that had garnered interest from other local authorities (LBTH 2019c, p.7), the council was keen to highlight how the proposals would achieve that affordability objective. Beyond use of a section 106 agreement that would permit use of the land for self-build schemes only, covenants were also outlined for resale price caps (LBTH, 2019c). The price cap was designed to: 'reflect any reduction in value of the land sold for self-build, equivalent to a proportion of the prevailing open market value relative to the initial discounted gross development value' (Ibid, p.9). Allocation policies for any future sale or letting of the homes were required to ensure that: the homes 'must be occupied by individuals who are members of community-led groups and that future occupants live in the homes on the same basis' (Ibid, p.6). In assessing the bids the council declared that: Squeezed's proposal for Lark Row 'demonstrated a commitment to meeting local housing needs and delivering wider benefits to communities including public open spaces and community rooms/hubs' (Ibid, p.7). The panel made up of council, GLA and Community-Led Housing Hub officers determined that the winning proposals for the sites 'would deliver value for money and affordability' (Ibid, p.5). They even argued that the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> highest scoring applications would also achieve the same financial objectives (Ibid). The programme's integration with GLA funding streams for community housing was deemed crucial to: 'ensuring that the programme is inclusive

and prioritises affordability, particularly for those individuals and groups that would find it challenging to finance their projects otherwise' (Ibid, p.4).

### 7.1.2 Engaging with the community and council on the proposal

After contracting an architect, Squeezed worked on their initial vision for the land, which they presented to their prospective neighbours at a community meet and greet in September 2022. At that event they explained who Squeezed were, their ties to the local area, how they had obtained the site through a competitive process, and what community-led cohousing represented as a model. They also elicited community responses on: what is special about the area, what additional facilities might be needed, what the existing site meant to their neighbours, and their hopes and fears in relation to Squeezed's proposal.



Figure 18: Vision board, community meet and greet, Squeezed Cohousing, September 2022, (photo taken by the author).

They also explained the next steps for the project, and how further community engagement would be integrated into the proposal including through a forthcoming community design workshop. A member of Squeezed when interviewed in April 2023, after this initial phase of community consultation and amid the ongoing planning process, expressed how the co-design process thus far had dispelled perceptions that neighbours would be implacably against any new development: ‘obviously there are concerns that people have and I understand that, but actually a lot of people were really prepared to talk about trade-offs and benefits’ (SQM1a). They described how neighbours were surprised to be invited to be part of the ‘co-design process...as opposed to a development being just done to them’. As the member further observed: ‘I think people don’t believe that they can have a voice in that process, so there’s quite a lot of trust building and saying, “we genuinely do want to listen to you”’ (SQM1a).

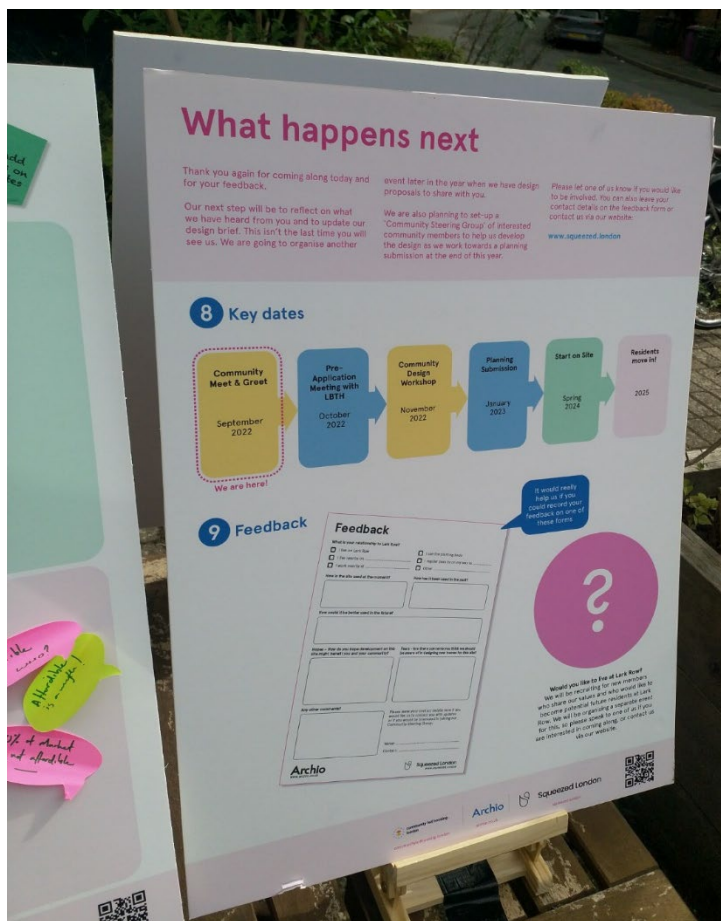


Figure 19: Next steps, community meet and greet, Squeezed, September 2022, (photo taken by the author).

Indeed, as a result of early feedback they were able to shift from their original priority of providing an indoor space accessible to the community, to a greater focus on outdoor space. This included discussions of designing part of the garden with the wider community, particularly given some of the site had recently been used for planting by existing neighbours. Such spaces beyond the private homes were an important aspect of their initial discussions. This meant broaching tensions around the delineations between private space, communal areas for the intentional community, and the public open space that the development would bring. While the housing was the primary focus, as the member expressed: 'we need a place to live and that's why we started the project', they were also enthused about what they termed the: 'opportunity in terms of the social and community aspect' (SQM1a).

During this interview in April 2023, while reticent to detail how ongoing discussions with council including over planning were progressing, there were some early concerns from the Squeezed member around aspects of how LBTH were dealing with their emergent scheme, post their preliminary acceptance for the site. A key issue was that despite the group's winning bid proposing to include social rented housing, there was no available mechanism to integrate this tenure. Becoming a registered provider themselves was deemed too complex and burdensome, and as such they approached the council. As described by the member:

*'We won the bid to buy the land and the very first thing that we did is we went to the social housing department and said, are you willing to take on the flats? And they said no. And then, because we then weren't able to find any other registered provider, we ended up having to remove all of the social housing from the scheme'* (SQM1a).

The member argued during this April 2023 interview that this rejection of a social housing partnership was the: 'reason why we're behind schedule. That's the only reason we've been delayed' (SQM1a). It meant they had to reconfigure their financial model so they, in the member's words: 'could afford to take on the debt to be able to rent out the rental unit'. Amid escalating

construction costs linked to the pandemic, the group couldn't afford the debt for a rental property, so they settled on: a 'combination of housing at discount to us as members [ three homes] and affordable discount market sale' [of four homes] (SQM1a). Squeezed had thought that council wanted social rented housing, given the criteria for mixed tenure and affordable housing, but this wasn't matched by council action. The member interviewed perceived a disjuncture, with the: 'Tower Hamlets regeneration department who led this programme they want to do something ambitious [...] I think they have struggled to bring on board the property department and the planning department' (SQM1a).

While undergoing negotiations with council planners, including through a 'pre-application' phase, the Squeezed member and the architect were not willing to outline the planning disagreement in detail. However, at an interview eighteen months later the main problem was explained. This revolved around whether the site advertised by the council constituted 'open space' in planning terms, which would bring into question whether it was appropriate for development at all. The group hadn't expected to be debating this point given that the council had previously deemed it suitable for development, but the local authority later suggested that their original determination that it was not open space might be incorrect. Squeezed were then presented with new requirements to either argue against the open space demarcation made by the council, or make the case that use would outweigh any loss of space. Simultaneously, the council were concerned about overshadowing existing neighbours, which meant that Squeezed had to negotiate often competing requirements around open space, while massing the built form in a way that didn't block sunlight. The member explained that to find a solution the group:

*'[H]ad a community engagement workshop which was very successful and got us to a point of actually having a scheme which we were really happy with, and the community were really happy with, but the council were not happy with because they said it was too tall' (SQM1b).*

In acting on their concerns, LBTH wanted to extend the planning pre-application process. The group at this point were frustrated that this would lead to further cost and potential delay, without any firm direction from the council as to how to effectively resolve the conundrum they themselves had presented over open space and overshadowing. Squeezed were intent to pursue a planning application timed for September 2023.

### 7.1.3 Cancellation of the Affordable Self-Build Programme

Yet before that, the group were informed that there had been a change in the council's position towards the Affordable Self-Build Programme. They received a letter from the local authority in July 2023 that in the member's words indicated: 'it was likely that the mayor was going to cancel the programme' (SQM1b). The group then put on hold any contracted work, and in September 2023 they received a further letter informing them that the council were intending to cancel the scheme, which was followed by a formal council decision in October.

A summary of that advertised decision declared that:

*After due consideration of all the implications the Mayor has asked officers to halt the Programme, and instead to prioritise use of the Sites for the direct delivery of Council homes for rent, or to pursue alternative delivery routes that will maximise affordable / social rented units on the sites (LBTH, 2023, p.1).*

In analysing LBTH's cancellation of the programme, a few points stand out. The first is its proposal for the direct delivery of council housing on the site. This appears as part of a strategic direction by the Mayor, elected a year earlier to: work 'with developers and housing associations to deliver a minimum of 1000 social homes for rent each year' (LBTH, 2023, p.1). Meanwhile, the council memo argues that the self-build programme, with its three schemes including Lark Row: 'would collectively deliver 13 mostly intermediate homes for discount market sale, with up to two social rented units' (Ibid, p.2). While the intent for council housing provision is clear from LBTH, no clear path to development on the site was presented. The council's Chief Finance Officer is recorded as

noting that the sites will be brought forward: 'for approval through the capital governance process for inclusion in the capital programme, subject to affordability and funding being available' (LBTH, 2023, p.5). This implies that LBTH might not be the delivery agent, with the decision leaving room for fallback development options including affordable rental. What constitutes 'affordable' isn't defined, although it appears that the council wishes to distinguish its version of affordable rental from the 'intermediate' homes it categorises the self-build schemes as providing. The pursuit of some form of social housing by LBTH jarred with the Squeezed member, given the original proposal the self-build group offered to the council's delivery partner Tower Hamlets Homes. As the member noted: it 'is ironic when you think that the whole excuse for why the project was then binned three years later was because we weren't providing any social housing' (SQM1b).

Underpinning the various scenarios and tenure models presented by both Squeezed and LBTH remains a significant debate over what could be delivered on the site, both technically and financially. The delineation over open space aside, throughout the Affordable Self-Build Programme the council openly acknowledged the difficulties associated with the sites they had put forward, including Lark Row. As part of the funding from the GLA, the Council were able to do due diligence on these sites which they provided to prospective bidders (LBTH, 2020). In cancelling the programme, LBTH appear to recognise the issues with the proposed self-build sites given they later argue the Mayor's priority: 'is to utilise Council-owned land, even on challenging sites, to pursue the development of new social housing for rent for local people in most need, i.e who are on the Council's Housing List' (LBTH, 2023, p.4). For the Squeezed member, in assessing the cancellation, they argued that:

*'The reality is, nothing will get built on that site, the reason why it went through this programme is because it had already sat empty for decades and had been looked at by*

*the housing department and the housing department had said we will not build on this site' (SQM1b).*

Community-Led Housing London, the GLA-funded body who had supported the council's initiation of the self-build programme, and provided subsequent advice to Squeezed, concurred with the member's observation, saying that: 'sites were selected for the Affordable Self-Build Programme precisely because they would be difficult for the council to develop itself' (Community Led Homes London, 2023). The type of challenging brownfield site put forward by LBTH is not unusual for London (Brill and Raco, 2021), requiring the significant due diligence offered by the programme. Furthermore, pointing to the 'very small' nature of the site, CLH London argued:

*It is unlikely that affordable homes will come forward on these complex sites without the work of self-builders. If the sites were auctioned, they may have been privately developed for market sale homes, with no planning obligations for any affordable housing in schemes smaller than 10 units (Community Led Homes London, 2023)*

This points to the exemptions from Section 106 obligations for the provision of affordable housing for those developments smaller than 10 homes (Heywood, 2016), which given the site's size and capacity would apply here if sold to a for-profit operator.

The Squeezed member, when interviewed after the cancellation of the programme, said that 'at the point at which the administration changed, we didn't expect support. [But] We didn't expect them to bin the whole programme' (SQM1b). They argued that the cancellation of the programme could be linked to the new Mayor's personal antipathy not only to community-led housing in general, but to a policy that could be clearly linked to the previous rival Labour administration (SQM1b). CLH London made a similar point identifying other larger reversals made by the new mayor, including the cancellation of a Low Traffic Neighbourhood scheme in the borough (Kelly, 2023). With LBTH not making any further public comment, including in interview for this research, it is hard to discern any further reasoning beyond their initial statement. In terms of where it

leaves community-led housing in Tower Hamlets, there is now no local authority support for the 433 individuals and groups interested in self-build as catalogued by the council (LBTH, 2023). For the Squeezed member interviewed after the cancellation, the loss of the scheme after seven years of work left them: ‘the closest to grieving I've ever been for something which isn't a person’ (SQM1b). While this speaks to the burnout experienced by many cohousing groups (Chatterton, 2015a, Daly and McGee, 2023), it also led the member to question the viability of community-led housing, believing that the UK development system was rigged against such schemes. To the member, there appeared to be no viable route for self-build development for non-practitioners, and this is despite the member in question having professional experience in the planning field. Before further interrogating what can be learnt from the Squeezed case, particularly in how cohousing as a development model interacts with government, the more successful project of Chapeltown Cohousing will be further analysed.

## 7.2 Chapeltown Cohousing, Leeds

### 7.2.1 A project driven by strong partnerships

Central to ChaCo’s successful development was their ability to build strong local relationships, not only with Unity Housing Association, but also with Leeds City Council (LCC), and relevant Whitehall departments. The partnership between Unity and ChaCo began with their mutual aspirations for the site. Chapeltown Cohousing had long identified the plot as a possible option for their development and Unity had been separately looking at the site. It had originally been larger, around 6 acres, which had prompted both groups to envisage bigger plans than what ultimately transpired. As one ChaCo member said,

*We had great visions for doing all sorts of stuff on the rest of the site. And including a moot hall and all sorts of stuff and other housing around too. But essentially, the Council*

*was saying woah, you're just a bunch of amateurs, stick to one thing, your cohousing project and we could maybe we can help you with that (CCM2).*

Unity also referenced the broader possibilities of the wider 6 acres , and as part of their original vision: 'we were talking about community orchards and all that kind of stuff' (UnityHA). Both groups then were told by LCC that the need for schools meant a reconsideration of the larger site. A member recollected that discussions changed once this became apparent to the Council:

*So we said alright well, we're still interested and eventually they said right, we're going to build a school. You can have this little bit of land here (CCM2).*

ChaCo sought out partners for the site. The Unity executive recalled the early interactions between themselves and representatives of ChaCo:

*CCM2 came to me,' they observed: 'to say, can you support us, what do you think?[.....]Once we started that conversation, we needed to get buy in from the Council. The Council at the time were very interested in community-like development. But again, didn't know how realistically to make it happen(UnityHA).*

CCM2 meanwhile, pointed to how: 'Unity are very well known as part of Chapeltown...they are properly embedded.' In particular, they pointed to the role of the Unity executive, who as a well-known figure in Chapeltown, was: 'very much seen by everybody as a safe pair of hands' (CCM2).

The rootedness of Unity, meant that they were:

*A real asset to ChaCo because from the Council's point of view, well, at least something is gonna happen, because even if the ChaCo thing falls over at least we'll have whatever Unity are doing (CCM2).*

The former LCC regeneration officer who led on the Leopold Rd project attested to the importance of this partnership, as a 'good balance' (LCC2). They too pointed to the role of the Unity executive:

*So you had someone [like UnityHA] in place that understood the council procedures, wanted to move things forward because obviously there was the affordable housing outcomes, and they were kind of a bit of a counterbalance I guess in terms of kind of being a good intermediary between all parties (LCC2).*

In discussing what their role consisted of, the Unity executive stated that: 'there is a lot of handholding because they haven't got that experience. They don't know the procedures...They don't know the time that decisions are going to take' (UnityHA). So Unity and ChaCo became partners and together rode out the various negotiations with the Council. In 2016, LCC executives approved entering into one-to-one negotiations. This led to the establishment of an exclusivity agreement with the buyers on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, which set provisional terms for the disposal of the site (LCC, 2018).

*Leeds City Council said they would only sell the land to both of us together. So we had a complicated three-part agreement between Unity, us and the Council that the development wouldn't go ahead if one of us dropped out. We then had to make sure that we and Unity both had the funds available to get going, which was quite tricky to negotiate (CCM2).*

This agreement allowed the partners to go away and develop the planning submission and funding proposal. ChaCo already had a loanstock offer underway which had provided some momentum according to one of the members:

*We had quite a boost fairly early on because we launched the loanstock offer and we said we would try and raise £600,000 this way through family and friends and people we know.... And we made it and that was quite a surprise that you could actually raise that amount of money in short to medium term loans and from a lot of people and particularly for an area like Chapeltown. It's not known to have money sloshing around (CCM2).*

The land was finally sold to ChaCo and Unity in March 2019, for a market value price as discussed earlier. Later in the build phase, the role of Unity again proved vital to ChaCo in negotiating the vagaries of procurement. This meant when dealing with contractors, in the words of one member: 'at least we had people who had done this many times before and were used to tricks' (CCM2).

### 7.2.2 A 'bonafide community group'

Beyond their partnership with Unity, the strength of ChaCo as a group was seen as vital to their approach to the Council. In managing the protracted negotiations and many hurdles, both those from ChaCo and the Unity executive referenced the strong commitment of a core group of future ChaCo residents, aligned to their vision of what they were aiming to build. In pitching their project to Council, the group were able to point to their connection to Chapeltown. As one of the members argued:

*Our partnership with the local council was really instrumental in us being able to make this project work and part of why we had such good relationship with the Council was because we were a bonafide community group and we were organised, and representative of the community and they could see that there was something that was going to be really worth supporting and investing in (CCM1).*

While there were many phases to the negotiations over the land, during that period ChaCo and Unity maintained contact with several key council officers and elected members. As the Unity executive noted: 'they were pretty consistent, so they didn't change throughout the period' (Unity HA). Despite the support from Council the land site nonetheless offered complications, which were not fully reflected in the sale price from the local council. According to one ChaCo member:

*They couldn't do us any favours on the price. It had to be essentially market value for the land. But in fact because there was contamination on the land and it's not particularly a desirable area, in fact you could argue the land was worth less than nothing because of*

*the cost of cleaning up contamination. We got some grant funding that paid for that bit (CCM2).*

The Housing Infrastructure Fund Marginal Viability stream referenced here appears as a crucial element in knitting the project together. Significant remediation work was completed with funding from the Housing Infrastructure Fund Marginal Viability (HIF-MV), with finance also unlocked from the Homes England Shared Ownership and Affordable Housing Programme for a portion of the shared ownership properties in ChaCo and the affordable rental homes in Unity. This central government buy-in and funding was noted by ChaCo members, particularly given that it was a project that could headline the government's regeneration agenda:

*Homes England, the government department that were providing some of the funding, they stepped in and set up a range of meetings with us, the Council, Ecology Building Society, who are our main funders and Unity... it felt that they had access at a higher level to get things moving. And if there were any bureaucratic hold ups with the funding or anything they would get their people onto it to get things moving and at one stage you've felt almost as though they weren't quite throwing money at us, but it did feel that they weren't going to let a small gap in the finances get in the way of this project (CCM2).*

Indeed, LCC documents identify that the Leopold Rd Project delivered by ChaCo and Unity as one of six projects nationally to be fast-tracked by Homes England (LCC, 2019b) .

### 7.2.3 Local and central government motivations for supporting ChaCo

Their understanding of why the council and central government supported their scheme was a key talking point with ChaCo members and the Unity HA executive. ChaCo members discerned that in terms of the sale of the land:

*The [LCC] asset management people would only do it on the basis of just the cash, the value, and weren't interested in any of this 'namby pamby' stuff about reducing the number of visits from the police or social services or interventions (CCM2).*

Meanwhile from early on in their land negotiations, the ChaCo member described how: 'other bits of the Council were talking about citizen-led development and had all these great ideas about involving citizens' (CCM2). This describes the asset management section of council being motivated by the capital receipts that can be gained from a site, while other departments were pushing projects for their 'social value' (CCM2). The former LCC regeneration officer who had worked closely with the group explained what the objectives were from council:

*Obviously, there's the much needed, affordable and social housing was required in that area...there's the best consideration for capital receipts to reinvest into council priorities. It's the right use for the site in context of the neighbourhood. I think that there was a number of different drivers that brought this together to conclude that this was the right use for that piece of land to bring forward the scheme. It wasn't a kind of one-dimensional look in terms right "tick the box" we're getting what we want from the capital receipt (LCC2).*

The competing imperatives from different parts of the local authority led to broader frustrations expressed by the architect for ChaCo as to the often conflicting requirements and agendas across the council:

*You think you're talking to the Council, you're not. You're talking to that Department in the Council. And they never talk to each other, and there's no sense of joined up policy. (ArchL2).*

Overall, however there was a feeling that LCC were receptive to cohousing as a model, with one ChaCo member noting how other community-led cohousing projects such as LILAC were

forerunners in Leeds (Chatterton, 2015a). Despite the context of significant pressure on local authority budgets, LCC was able to provide further support to the project including through a later development loan. The regeneration functions of council were particularly praised for their role by the ChaCo group. According to one member:

*It certainly helped having LCC2 as a council officer, who was a regeneration officer and was the one who actually located the funding from the Public Works Loan Board to make up the shortfall that was worth a million quid. So once you get to that stage where you've got experienced officers actually on your side and helping with their capacity (CCM2).*

Both ChaCo and Unity were fully aware of the various pressures faced by the authority, particularly when it came to their resources to support community-led initiatives in the face of central government driven austerity. As one member noted:

*I think local authorities are stuck in a situation where it's nice to have all these ideas, but they have such enormous cuts to their budgets that they have very little room for manoeuvre it's not fair almost to ask them to because... they have more power than us, but they actually don't have enough power to even keep their swimming pool running...(CCM3).*

In terms of the central government, from the recollection of ChaCo, LCC and Unity, the project aligned with their priorities for regeneration and the desire for a readymade successful scheme. The LCC regeneration officer who worked closely to find the funding described the criteria that made the project attractive to central government:

*It was linked to areas that needed some significant funding input around remediation to be able to open that up for placeshaping, community making and delivery of housing targets... But it was the remediation stuff that was the challenge to bring it forward and*

*ensure the scheme tipped over into viability. And I think if there wasn't that external funding input they wouldn't have been able to be delivered (LCC2).*

Unity argued that in contrast to a more explicit focus on social benefits from the council planning and regeneration team, for those like Homes England, 'I think for them it's much more around place shaping and place making' (UnityHA).

Leeds City Council appear to recognise the significance of Chapeltown Cohousing. In one document they argued that it 'combines both community-led and social housing in one location and provides a blueprint for future schemes' (LCC, 2019b, p.5). In considering how to follow such a 'blueprint', when asked whether the project was replicable and if there was a unique role played by LCC, one ChaCo member said:

*I don't think the Council did something very extraordinary to support this. They had generally said they wanted to support community-led housing. But eventually the site we got was not a very desirable site at market value (CCM3).*

While Chapter Six showed that the group were able to make the most of a difficult site, including through the remediation, it is apparent that the group didn't always receive clearcut support. In many respects they had to fight through each part of the process, beginning with the acquisition of the site with no below-market discount. Furthermore, as Chapter Five also demonstrated, the group constructed their tenure mix through a combination of limited central government support and their own funding, including members existing equity. With a prohibition on the use of restrictive covenants on speculative sale a stipulation of central government, the group was constrained in their ability to offer affordable housing. As the member went on to argue, another option open to the local council would be to:

*[F]und some of the affordable housing and coordinate with us the nominations which they chose not to do. So there are things they could do. But I think because they didn't, it makes*

*it more replicable because anyone can do what they did. I don't think they did a huge amount of extraordinary work (CCM3).*

Where the 'extraordinary work' does lie is in the ability of the community group ChaCo and their partner Unity to work within the strictures of central government funding and local government austerity and still make a meaningful contribution to affordable and innovative housing in Chapeltown. Making use of so-called 'derelict land' while resisting the general pull of the land and housing market towards speculation offers a different approach to urban housing development. While being frustrated by central government in their attempts to restrict house price rises, their integration not only of some affordable rental, but also shared ownership affordable housing offers some possibilities. The former LCC regeneration officer echoed this, pointing to its careful calibration to local conditions, arguing that this could be: 'a positive catalyst for further investment in the neighbourhood and improve the standards for people already living there' (LCC2).

To the other local council officer interviewed it offered a glimpse of a different type of development, they argued that ChaCo can:

*Set the example for the larger developers who are just doing what they can to get through planning. And they're not being very progressive in their views, in their approach, they're just thinking how much money can we make? These small schemes can say, actually, if you do things a little bit differently it can still work, and people still want to live there. It can still be successful (LCC1).*

#### 7.2.4 Relationship with immediate neighbours

With the community only in place at the site since the autumn of 2022, they are still forming relationships with their immediate neighbours. However, they outlined initiatives that both sought to utilise their physical spaces such as the common house, but also the role of their community in broader neighbourhood regeneration. One of the 'task groups' made up of ChaCo

members is aimed at fostering strong relationships with their neighbours, including those residents in the Unity development adjacent to theirs. There were 'existing ties' already, as a ChaCo resident described: 'a couple of people have got family members there' (CCM1). ChaCo was able to provide a community space to Unity members that didn't exist in their development, as one ChaCo member stated:

*So they [Unity residents] had their launch event relatively recently and we opened up the common house for them to come and have their refreshments here because they don't have any community space at all in their flats. Which I think it's a bit rubbish, but they've just got corridors or flat. And so we invited them to come here, and you know have a drink, have a snack, sit around in the garden and be sociable (CCM1).*

Beyond this initial launch event the member noted that: 'We've been inviting them to some of the community events that we run, they've asked if we can do a bingo night, so I think that's in the works' (CCM1). The role of the common house as such appears to be a valued piece of community building, not just between neighbours but for the Unity residents in themselves. This goes to a broader debate within cohousing over the availability of such shared space for outsiders (Fernández Arrigoitia and Scanlon, 2015, Hudson et al., 2019, Ruiu, 2015) and what the use of shared space offered in contrast to conventional housing, both private and publicly developed. The school adjacent to the site was another key relationship with a shared gardening group, and support for school events. Beyond that there were plans for a neighbourhood repair café and a conversation café in the common house. Taken together, Chapelton Cohousing has shown, despite its relative infancy, a deep-rootedness in the local area which allowed it to develop both relationships with partners and funders that have proved instrumental to the project's success.

## 7.3 Cohousing Co-op, Nipaluna/Hobart

### 7.3.1 Prevailing government impressions of Cohousing Co-op

While Chapeltown Cohousing appeared to be a project exalted by its funders and attracting many keen to learn lessons, Cohousing Co-operative was less appreciated by the governments that funded it, and members appeared to have been left to their own devices. This is somewhat understandable given the passing of twenty years, but it also seemed that there had long been scepticism about the nature of what was funded. According to one of the founders, the decision to fund Cohousing Co-op was related to the initiative of a particular Federal Minister in the 1980s to tie a portion of Commonwealth-State Housing agreement funding to housing co-ops. This Federal agreement carried onto into the 1990s before it later expired. But before this it meant that governments like the Tasmanian administration had to spend it on co-ops, as a Cohousing Co-op member outlined: 'it wasn't their choice' (CCoop1).

The architect working on the project revealed that:

*There was some discussions I had with the [Tasmanian] housing department because...within a few years of this having been completed, I could speak to people about this project, but you [the researcher] can't anymore because everybody we dealt with has moved on but they were kind of critical of the project in that they said it was social housing for middle class people and I was saying, well, no, it's not. There may be some people in there who could have probably afforded the house, but they're playing an important role in the co-op, generally in the housing. They were saying well basically we spent the money we didn't hit our target audience and now I was saying well I think you did because you still actually are helping people in housing distress (ArchCoop).*

Particularly given the impression that government officials gave of Cohousing Co-operative being 'social housing for middle class people', the co-op member spoke to how such models provided

long-term stable housing to people even when their circumstances change. By contrast the government position was seen as:

*That's wrong-headed people who think that government funding for housing should only go to people who are desperate and once they're not desperate, you should kick them out so they can become desperate again (CCoop1).*

This dynamic speaks to a broader issue with the residualisation of Australia's already minimal social housing system, and overriding, often stereotypical assumptions from government as to who a social housing tenant is, who is deserving of housing support and for how long (Baumann, 2011, Pawson et al., 2020). Cohousing Co-op fits uneasily into the traditional binary of public versus private provision, with its delivery of social housing by a community group. Yet it offers autonomy and self-governance for the residents that live there. And as the next section discusses, it also provides learnings for the broader system of housing provision in Lutriwita/Tasmania.

### 7.3.2 What Cohousing Co-operative offers beyond their boundaries

With the lack of credence that their funders gave to their model, it is instructive to consider what Cohousing Co-op believe they offered to the Tasmanian housing landscape. The founder member saw the set of skills that the group had developed through their agreement-making, something discussed already in depth in Chapter Five, as:

*Really important civic skills. They get carried out into the workplace and into the world. And we think that's a really important byproduct of the co-operative, which is a form of shared ownership and all of that negotiation that happens (CCoop1).*

The generational impact was front of mind to this member:

*I'm interested in what kind of impact, does that have on the kids that live here to grow up in an environment where agreement-making is the norm and that there's conflict resolution processes so there's an expectation that if you're having conflict with somebody that you deal with it in a healthy way (CCoop1).*

While recognised as a forerunner in the small Australian cohousing sector, Cohousing Co-op does not feature prominently as part of the state-wide housing discussion. It is instructive to consider how Cohousing Coop relates to the political priorities of the day. The State Government has identified a number of systemic issues including the lack of affordable housing, both rental and for ownership (Tasmanian Government, 2023b). A related problem is the inability of Tasmania to densify its urban areas. In the Tasmania Housing Strategy this is framed as a deficit in ‘missing middle housing’ designs, models such as low-rise residential apartments, terrace housing, duplexes and townhouses (Tasmanian Government, 2023b). As part of the solution to these interrelated problems, the Tasmanian Government identified the seeding of alternative models as part of the answer. The ‘Action Plan’ for the Tasmanian Housing Strategy outlines an ambition to:

*Identify ways in which the Tasmanian Government can encourage the development of sustainable, affordable, and innovative models for long-term rental housing and home ownership (including build-to-rent, co-housing, co-operative housing) (Tasmanian Government, 2023a).*



Figure 20: Trampolines pushed together, Cohousing Co-op, (photo taken by author).

However, in actuality, the main 'innovative' model that is being promoted by the Tasmanian Government is build-to-rent. Speaking in a personal capacity for this research, the CEO of Homes Tasmania argued that contrary to the rest of the country, there was a need for the State Government to play a lead role in stimulating build-to-rent, given it may not automatically be embraced in Tasmania as an investment-ready development. To this leading housing practitioner build-to-rent could span the rental spectrum, from those waiting for social housing to others who may be looking to transition to home-ownership in the medium-term. In short: 'targeting those for whom the private rental market isn't providing a solution' (MT1). With the government taking more of a development role, this housing sector leader also saw an opportunity for denser types of housing to be demonstrated and constructed, including in build-to-rent projects.

Cohousing Co-operative has been already, if reluctantly, supported by past governments. Despite the lack of attention given to what they had built, the founder member identified communities like theirs as a meaningful part of the local housing debate. This included framing co-operatives as an approach to the strand of 'missing middle housing' which relates to 'middle' income tenants or homeowners (Parolek, 2022). As the member outlined:

*There's a bottleneck because you go from, community housing to market rent which nobody wants to be in, and nobody can afford to be in home ownership. And there's not much flexibility between the different systems to allow much movement. So you've got a lot of people banked up in social housing that have got nowhere to go...there needs to be some attention to the missing middle to take the pressure off social housing (CCoop1).*

Indeed, the member referenced the new government direction, both Federal and State, on build-to-rent as crowding out other alternative models, saying: 'I don't want them to waste too much money on build-to-rent and building expensive housing that just sustains expensive prices' (CCoop1). Despite this entreaty, the direction of government not just in Tasmania but Australia

broadly appears set to drive for-profit models like build-to-rent, alongside some minimal delivery of social and affordable housing (NHSAC, 2024). Community-led housing models, including longstanding projects like Cohousing Co-op must continue to fight for appreciation of what it can deliver to new housing provision and the system as a whole.

## 7.4 Discussion

The absence or presence of government support for these three schemes is instructive to how cohousing relates to the broader housing system, and in particular what the model offers beyond mainstream provision. While other studies of cohousing have analysed how the model's 'structure of provision' runs contrary to speculative forms of multi-residential development (Palmer, 2016), this chapter has interrogated how such community-led developments can both succeed and fail in the face of orthodoxy. In both Australia and the UK, the dominant lens through which all models are viewed is their contribution to increased supply (Nethercote, 2019, Brill and Raco, 2021). Yet, with the political priority of supply so firmly set in both countries, this chapter has shown that cohousing offers a compelling set of alternative development principles. In discussing the findings further, this final section argues that housing provision can take stock of the feverish approach to speed and scale of development, and instead learn from deliberative, community-centred models. In doing so, a more measured, even slow model of development can further contribute to post-growth understandings of property, that demands each new housing unit respond not only to housing need but environmental limits.

### 7.4.1 How are the cohousing projects treated by government?

The interaction of each cohousing group with government actors helps to reveal the uncertain place of the sector in the broader housing system, with the state oscillating between support and scepticism. Chapeltown Cohousing was able to garner consistent backing from a range of state entities, both local and national. This included elected officials, executives and officers from within Leeds City Council and Whitehall departments such as Homes England. Their status as a 'bonafide

community group' sustained them not only in how they formed their prospective community, but through lengthy periods of negotiation, appeals for funding, and travails over planning. Squeezed in Bethnal Green meanwhile fell victim to a change in political administration. While the particularities of the borough of Tower Hamlets, and the much-noted turbulence in the administration may present as a unique case, this points to the fragile nature of many cohousing schemes, reliant as they are on government support. The Affordable Self-Build scheme in Tower Hamlets was identified as a Labour policy that was not reciprocated by a new administration. Cohousing Co-operative for its part was supported by a quirk in a vast Federal-State Housing Agreement and has not been replicated to any great degree since, aside from a few isolated examples like Pinakarri in Fremantle, Western Australia or Murundaka in Victoria (Crabtree, 2005, Crabtree, 2018a). Indeed, the funding stream that supported Cohousing Co-op, directed as it was at housing co-operatives, was cancelled in the years after its initiation. The funding was linked to a Minister in the Federal Government who championed co-operatives. This is not an unusual occurrence, with McKenna et al. (2024) detailing how the co-operative movement in the UK, including in Leeds, was boosted by the appointment of an advocate in Reg Freeson as Housing Minister in 1974. Like their Australian counterparts however, the UK co-operative sector experienced a downturn in the following decade when funding was cut as part of a new administration (Thompson, 2020b). Having consistent political support is helpful particularly to individual projects, with ChaCo likely aided by the fact that Leeds City Council has remained in majority Labour control since 2011 throughout the life of the project. Yet with many cohousing projects in both Australia and the UK falling to the wayside, out of political view, the question is how the model can remain embedded, resistant to the vagaries of political change.

Part of the answer is a need for the state to stop treating community-led housing groups as conventional developers, a point that reoccurred across many of the case studies. As the Squeezed member noted:

*They treated us exactly like any other developer... there was no sense whatsoever that we were trying to do anything different. And I think there was still this suspicion that we got from the planners through the whole process, that actually what we were trying to do was kind of make a profit (SQM1b).*

This sentiment was echoed by Australian architect and practitioner Andy Fergus, who has worked across both community-led and more conventional developments. In arguing that the system was stacked against innovative models, including community self-build groups, he offered that:

*Community groups are not cowboy [developers]. They can't take a punt on land value, they'll lose everything. Whereas the developer can take a loss on one and a win on three and it works for them (AndyFergus1).*

This begs the question as to how groups should be treated, if not like conventional developers.

Community-led housing groups whether they be mutuals, cohousing schemes or CLTs have had to overcome the false dawn of the localist turn in the UK. While some pointed to the early promise of community acquisition of assets (Moore and McKee, 2014), the premonitions of Jacobs and Manzi (2012) have largely been proved correct, with the project of devolution ultimately a façade for a continued retreat of the state, through a sustained period of austerity and local government collapse. The rhetoric of community control was never truly met with action, with the patchwork of support simply representing a form of 'new centralism' (Jacobs and Manzi, 2012, p.9).

## 7.4.2 Beyond the Big Society – a new relationship between state and community-led housing?

The continued and increasing levels of unaffordability and inequality in housing can be seen as a legitimacy crisis for governments (Brill and Raco, 2021), particularly those in Australia and the UK which have shaped their offering around the promise of property ownership (Pawson et al., 2020, Ryan-Collins et al., 2017). There has been an ever-diminishing role for the direct state provision of housing, with defective market delivery left unchallenged. This is a problem not just in housing terms, but for how cities will continue to evolve, challenged by the climate and biodiversity crisis. As the two previous chapters showed, the conventional, for-profit multi-residential model provides a flawed articulation of urban living - density without amenity or sustainability, communal responsibility over spaces without control. Community-led models including cohousing groups, act as exceptions trying and often failing to address what they see as the perceived gaps in urban housing provision. What Thompson (2020b) calls the 'collective alternative' remains as a latent, yet eternally frustrated model, an isolated resistance to the neoliberal logic to which the state has long succumbed.

Yet, this research has shown how minimal assistance from the state with the acquisition of land has supported a range of cohousing projects. However, these projects, particularly Chapeltown Cohousing, could arguably be seen as anomalies if not replicated through ongoing, and increased investment. As ChaCo members argued, the support they received wasn't 'extraordinary', and there were mechanisms open to the council in particular that weren't deployed, including direct support through their social housing allocation. McKenna et al. (2024) have argued that community-led schemes which actively target marginalised groups for housing require not only support from civil society, but also from the state. However, given the trend for housing policies to reduce public subsidy (Jacobs and Manzi, 2012), arguments for increased support including through land will continue to be vexed, often pitting competing agendas against each other. An

Australian developer who works with building collectives, including cohousing groups argued in interview that: 'I think land subsidies are always going to go to organisations with a more acute need' (PropCol1). However while these debates will be context specific, this research points to the need for a fresh understanding of subsidisation for community-led housing, and renewed discussion over where the line for support can be drawn.

For instance, can an argument be made for those groups like Squeezed who represent the 'squeezed middle' to receive public land, at a subsidised rate? While the Squeezed members were clearly aiming to meet their own housing needs, every iteration of the scheme included some element of affordable housing, either rented or owned. Arguably this was the most public benefit that could conceivably be achieved on such a site, contrary to the claims of the incoming administration. By way of comparison, Pauker and Hamiduddin reviewed what they termed as the first English example of: 'systematic release of land for community-led housing development' by a local authority, Bristol City Council (BCC) (2024, p.484). While recognising the importance of prioritising support to groups providing affordable housing in perpetuity, advisors to the BCC land release programme argued for a nuanced approach particularly in relation to 'small brownfield sites'. Like the case of Squeezed and the Bethnal Green plot, this advisor argued that many such small and difficult sites were only likely to be developed by providing an incentive to community-led housing groups who were intending to house themselves, thereby unlocking these sites through the voluntary labour of these future residents. While Paulker and Hamiduddin's analysis of Bristol ultimately showed the programme faltering under the pressure of continued austerity, they presented evidence of a productive 'tiered' framework for the release of land (2024). Under this, if the council couldn't build housing on the land with its own public developer, its viability for a housing association or community-led housing organisation would be assessed, with private development a third and final option.

### 7.4.3 Social housing and cohousing models can sit together

Discussion of these case studies also contributes to the literature surrounding the relationship between cohousing and social housing (Crabtree, 2005, Field, 2020, Ruiiu, 2015). As highlighted earlier, each of these cohousing groups were directly or indirectly implicated with the provision of social housing. In the case of ChaCo, the partnership with Unity Housing Association not only helped to attract both local and central government support, particularly for affordable housing, but the group also gained invaluable guidance during the land acquisition and construction phase. Today, the Unity homes sit alongside the ChaCo community, with early indications of an important and ongoing local relationship within the neighbourhood. ChaCo's example is not an exception, with a few partnerships between cohousing and housing associations. The Threshold Centre in Dorset worked with a local registered provider, attesting to some of the same benefits experienced by ChaCo, including faster approvals for projects when collaborating with a housing association (Ruiiu, 2015). Meanwhile, the case of OWCH in North London speaks both to the advantages of such a collaboration, along with the potential pitfalls to the cohousing model.

Despite the acclaim given to OWCH, the founder member suggested that: 'neither Hanover [housing association] nor them [OWCH's smaller housing association partner for the rental properties] see this place as major success...Hanover has not been here since it was built' (OWCH1). This member said that: 'I hear that they [Hanover] say they will never do another cohousing development' (OWCH1). When speculating why this might be, they said this might be perhaps because they had lost money on the scheme. However, in their words: 'that would have, in my view, been their mismanagement. Nothing to do with the group. Our architect has put it on record that nothing the group did slowed down anything' (OWCH1).

Interestingly, despite the ambivalence of their developer partner to what OWCH ultimately built, it is apparent that positives have been garnered from some within Hanover. As detailed by the founder member, the chief executive of Hanover who had initially supported OWCH through the

site acquisition and development phase had left before its completion to join the Birmingham-based housing association Housing 21. As they noted, Housing 21 are planning: '10 cohousing developments at the moment in deprived areas of Birmingham, with particularly ethnic minority groups' (OWCH1). Consultations were undertaken with potential residents for a first cohousing project developed by Housing 21 (Arbell and Archer, 2023), and as a result of that co-design period a development is being constructed of 25 apartments alongside a common house that contains a kitchen and open space for residents to meet and eat together (Housing 21, 2024). There will also be a multi-faith room, residents' lounge and communal garden with allotments. Amid such examples of new housing association support for cohousing, the founder member however did canvass a more general concern that registered providers would take on the language of cohousing but not their form, and will just continue doing their conventional model, which can tend to be 'big and bureaucratic' (OWCH1). Within this, they were keen to safeguard the brand of cohousing, that was already under threat from the advent of co-living.

Squeezed speaks to another dynamic, given they were directly pitted against the provision of social housing. This is despite their own attempts to collaborate with the London Borough of Tower Hamlets on the delivery of some homes for council tenants. As McKenna et al. (2024) have identified, this points to a broader trend whereby community-led housing is often seen as being in competition with public housing provision. In the UK, this tension was most pronounced amid the localist agenda of both New Labour and the 'Big Society' initiatives of the Coalition, with some wary of the potential for community-led housing to grow as a result of the dismantling of public housing (Hodkinson, 2012b, Jacobs and Manzi, 2012). However, cohousing and CLH advocates more broadly have emphasized that the growth of the sector should never be at the expense of public housing (Chatterton, 2015a, Moore and McKee, 2014).

While agreeing with the argument that cohousing and other community-led models are not competitors to social housing, each claim for the finite amount of state land by cohousing groups

must be set against the multiple housing priorities of governments, including their own use of land. There are some signs that local authorities in the UK are building again on land that they own (Pauker and Hamiduddin, 2024), including in Leeds. LCC have committed to building 1,200 'affordable homes' over five years, with some developments that would be 100% affordable rentals, accessible to those on the 'Leeds Housing Register for Affordable Rent' (Local Government Association, 2025). Yet such council-led and owned programmes remain exceptions, with governments in both Australia and the UK choosing instead to redevelop and intensify existing public housing estates, with a mixture of social and private housing (Beswick and Penny, 2018, Raynor et al., 2020). These schemes often seek to maintain existing numbers of redeveloped social housing and cross-subsidise the developments through inclusion of a significant portion of private for-sale or market rent housing. Some highly criticised redevelopments such as the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle capitalise on the land asset through almost entire private sale, with receipts supposedly used to buy or build public housing elsewhere (Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2020).

So far, this discussion has canvassed the ways in which cohousing schemes, like ChaCo and OWCH, have benefitted from collaboration particularly with housing associations. In analysing the inverse relationship, the longstanding example of Cohousing Co-op offers learnings that could be relevant to a broad spectrum of multi-residential housing, including social provision. Despite not being recognised by its government funders, it provides an alternative vision of what a social housing tenancy could look like. In contrast to the highly residualised Australian social housing system (Pawson et al., 2020), or rental co-operative sector (Crabtree et al., 2019a), the autonomy afforded to the Cohousing Co-op members is marked. While elements of the Cohousing Co-op case may be unique, the independence afforded to them has led to an exemplary model of both resident cooperation and stewardship. They have control not only over the governance of their homes and common spaces, but also over the functioning of their community, including new tenancies. In contributing their own sweat equity, including through regular working bees, they

have continued to shape and enhance the built form of their community. Simultaneously, as expressed by the founder member, through their well-developed processes of agreement-making, and regular communal activities, they have maintained a cohesion in the group despite the natural turnover of tenants. These 'civic skills' continue to be fostered through the deep introspection of the group in how the architectural and social model operates, particularly for new entrants.

In thinking how the model of Cohousing Co-op could be practically applied to the social housing sector, a few possibilities stand out. For example, as per the case of Housing 21, it has been suggested that cohousing could become part of the standing range of options for older persons social housing, but only as part of a meaningful consultation with future residents (Arbell and Archer, 2023). Meanwhile, stemming from their analysis of the mixed-tenure Threshold Centre, Ruiu (2015) has proposed an 'opt-in' model whereby those on the social housing register can choose a cohousing community in the event that the cohousing development has been supported by a registered housing provider or state housing authority. If autonomy can be provided to social housing tenants, akin to what has flourished in Cohousing Co-op, this offers a salutary lesson to both public housing providers and housing associations. Residents, regardless of ownership stake, can benefit from a housing model where control of their surroundings is entrusted with them. In this way, the founder member of OWCH, identified the New Ground project as one that would be mutually beneficial to both them and their partner in Hanover:

*I always viewed housing associations as the people who knew what to do, when we didn't. And that they should, as compared with the commercial world, have some kind of social conscience. I saw what I was doing as something that they would welcome as a return to their roots (OWCH1).*

This refers to the long history of the co-operative sector from which many housing associations in the UK have evolved (Birchall, 1988). Registered providers such as Peabody have grown into major

landlords across the country, and this growth has in part been linked to problems in management and tenant welfare (Murray, 2025, Wallace, 2023). In Australia the 'community housing' sector has remained a small sub-sector of the broader system, and with a reliance on diminishing state subsidies it has been pressured into greater embrace of so-called 'hybridity', including cross-subsidisation through market rental developments (Mullins et al., 2017).

While many advocates of cohousing have rightly argued that the sector should not impinge on any future growth of 'public housing', evidence from this research suggests that the broader housing system would benefit from considering models like cohousing as part of an integrated spectrum. In doing so, it aligns this thesis within relational analyses of cohousing and co-operatives, that reveal the complexity of tenures and approaches to property contained in these models, away from binaries of public and private housing (Larsen, 2019, Larsen, 2025). In aiming to describe the property relations in these communities, in models that include co-operative cohousing members who are renters, shared-equity or near full-owners, this reveals new articulations of 'social housing'. As Hill and Mazzucato offer, this 'third place' could include a: 'diverse array of co-operative housing associations, not-for-profit and limited profit organisations, and shared-self build ventures' (Ibid, 2024, p.12). Like this research, Hill and Mazzucato have argued that an expanded social housing sector requires: 'access to shared or municipal land, sophisticated co-design skills, and fine-tuned financial and legal structures' (Ibid, p.14). Evoking a broader social movement that is grounded in the collective design, use and ultimate decommodification of property links cohousing to articulations of the 'housing commons', that as McKenna et al. (2024) claim could involve: 'public housing tenants, home owners, private renters, squatters, [and the] homeless' (Ibid, p.614). ChaCo and Cohousing Co-op manage to appeal to a set of common interests, the former with their demographic targets and co-operative model, the latter with their continued eligibility to new social housing tenants.

Both these groups have been supported minimally or even reluctantly by a range of state actors, pointing to the potential for a: 'reformed, decentralised state that enables and protects commons'

(Thompson, 2020b, p.13). This could entail more partnerships between different levels of government to support affordable, sustainable cohousing. Without that backing, cohousing and other community-led models will likely be exclusive middle-class communities sustained by resident equity, or the sector will be subsumed into the broader for-profit multi-residential model that includes co-living. With all routes to a housing commons requiring some form of negotiation with the state (Nelson and Chatterton, 2022), this research argues that a key obstacle is the predominance of the drive to increase supply, which works in lockstep with housing financialisation, and blindly neglects the impacts of housing intensification on environments (zu Ermgassen et al., 2022), and existing local populations (Robinson and Attuyer, 2021, White and Madden, 2024). In both Australia and the UK, regional and national governments are coalescing around an unabashed top-down approach to housing, argued to break through 'NIMBYism' (Francis, 2024, Leigh, 2025). While for the Starmer government this has been paired with some fresh funding for community-led housing (MHCLG, 2025), there is the potential for small community-led schemes to be squeezed amidst the frenzied pursuit of housing supply.

#### 7.4.4 Cohousing schemes being squeezed by the housing supply debate

In both the UK and Australia, housing supply is depicted regularly by politicians and policymakers as the obvious solution to the 'housing crisis' (Gallent, 2019, Gurrán and Phibbs, 2015), to the point that every iteration of housing theory and practice is forced to respond, if not contort to this orthodoxy. Small models like cohousing are no exception. In the case of Squeezed, it emerged from a broader London-wide push for supply from small-sites, and small builders, including community groups. The Greater London Authority had set up the Community-Led Housing Hub to support groups alongside grant funding and the small sites scheme with the aim of delivering '500 homes' (Mayor of London, 2019). In reflecting on the ambition to deliver new supply at that scale the Director of the Hub argued, 'When we started, we didn't really question that, [how CLH has been included in supply debates] and perhaps we should have' (CLH1). This brought with it a

fundamental reconsideration of the notion that community-led housing should always be about delivering new housing. As the director wrote in a blog post:

*Community led housing has been presented as a “new source of housing supply”. Government funding has only been for “additional supply”. However expecting each start-up community led group to take on a development project, or be involved in one, is a big ask, and one which invites a range of challenges. Even the partnerships we’ve helped to create have been tenuous one-offs due to systemic issues in the London market (Kerimol, 2024).*

Community-led projects are judged by how they contribute to the supply drive, that often leaves them out of step with the wider policy discussion (McKenna et al., 2024). Indeed, through the recent £20 million of funding for community-led housing projects the Starmer government exclaimed: ‘thousands more homes [will] be unlocked’ (MHCLG, 2025). Whether or not such quantum of houses will be built is unknown, but the constant refrain of increased supply only continues to aid large developers, even in times of downturn in the sector. Currently, construction pressures are affecting all types of development, but community-led projects are often hardest hit, as argued by Director of the CLH London hub (CLH1). Bigger developers may be able to wait out this current moment in escalating building costs, as argued by Andy Fergus, an advisor to both community-based and medium-sized ‘for-purpose’ developers in Australia:

*The developers right now are not building because the value rates don't support the construction cost. Like it's not hard to find out they talk very openly about it. Yet they will create the supply when they need to (AndyFergus1).*

Governments, whether that be in small- to medium-size cities like Hobart or Leeds, or larger cities like London or Melbourne are looking to support new housing development to meet their supply agendas, yet this privileges the business model of large for-profit players, who can buffer any risk with steroidal, high-value scale. Build-to-rent is one such sub-sector which is benefitting (Brill and

Durrant, 2021, Nethercote, 2022), by simultaneously delivering what developers such as Lendlease identify as 'much needed supply', that is also catered to the luxury market (Lendlease, 2025). As Fergus further argues:

*Build-to-rent can't build for less than 15% above market and they need sites that are brownfield transformation scale. The average size of a build-to-rent project in Australia right now is like 352 dwellings (AndyFergus1).*

The cohousing ideal scale of 20-40 dwellings makes it incompatible with this dominant logic. In both the UK and Australia, some development models have emerged which can be considered cohousing-adjacent, elevating the importance of shared space and facilities including common houses, but at a larger volume to most traditional cohousing developments. Crucially they are developer-led and commissioned, rather than community-led. This includes the Assemble Communities (Maalsen et al., 2025) and Nightingale developments across Melbourne and Sydney (Moore and Doyon, 2018, Easthope et al., 2023b), and in England the Marmalade Lane development in Cambridge (Murphy, 2020). Both Australian models have garnered support from governments (Assemble Communities, 2023, Nightingale Housing, 2025, Victorian Government, 2018). Meanwhile, the success of Marmalade Lane has led its developer TOWN, to partner with the Hill Group, framed in a press release as: 'one of the UK's leading housebuilders' to 'form a new joint venture focused on scaling up cohousing and community-oriented development' (TOWN, 2025).

To many cohousing advocates in both Australia and the UK, there are inherent dangers in a process of 'scaling up', particularly when led by developers or governments (Chatterton et al., 2019, Crabtree, 2018a). The core risk foreseen is that this could lead cohousing to prioritise market viability above social and environmental values (Hill, 2025). Government co-option is also cited as a threat (Hagbert et al., 2020), with Nelson and Chatterton (2022) arguing that pioneering projects like LILAC in Leeds would not be replicable in a state-run process. Cohousing

developments need to remain community-led, and any 'scaling' of the model should be done horizontally 'out' at a grassroots level, rather than conforming to a logic of growth for viability's sake (Crabtree, 2018a, McKenna et al., 2024). By doing so, this allows each project to remain context-specific, rather than directly replicating a successful model in the hope that it will succeed elsewhere. Both ChaCo and Cohousing Co-op looked to other projects as inspirations and allies in their own journey, learning from the likes of LILAC or Cascade Cohousing respectively. Yet they ultimately forged their own path, particularly when it came to financial and governance models. As one member of ChaCo stated: 'I could not afford to live in LILAC. I thought about it, I tried but I could not afford it' (CCM1). This method of bespoke development may not 'scale' projects as quickly, but it brings into focus the relationality of each scheme, as an enactment of property development that is responsive to their local areas and the needs of future residents. Moreover, many of the cohousing cases, particularly ChaCo and Cohousing Co-op, sought out the community-led approach because it offered them an option that was elusive in the multi-residential housing market.

Rather than pigeonholing cohousing into the supply debate, the projects presented here are suggestive of a new set of principles for housing development that can be embraced by both government and community groups. In reflecting on government policymaking, both Federal and State, the Cohousing Co-op member argued that support was needed to stimulate:

*[D]iversity in the market and grow this non-speculative form of housing, where housing is infrastructure for people to live their lives in, not vehicles for investment (CCoop1).*

However, in recollecting their discussions with government actors, for the architect of Cohousing Co-op who had been intimately involved in a process of co-design and development, what the group was creating through the deliberative process was still an unknown quantity to their funders:

*I mean the department...they were kind of a bit nervous because they're "we just we just wanna get some housing on." They don't understand the whole consensus process and communities talking to each other and arguing and discussing and coming to an agreement eventually. It's too risky for them. They just want to get it all done (ArchCoop).*

This speaks to a disconnect between a core part of the 'deliberative' focus of cohousing development and what government funders often expect.

#### 7.4.5 Deliberative development principles for cohousing – out of time?

Fundamentally, both Cohousing Co-op and ChaCo are emblematic of the benefits of community deliberation, often to lengths that may be seen by conventional development or government actors as slow or inefficient. For ChaCo, prior to even having a site with which to plan, the group had a period during which as one member described:

*We'd have picnics in the park together and we had meetings in local community venues, for us to get to know each other and get used to working with each other....trying to really actively build community before we were housed (CCM1).*

During their formation period, the ChaCo group were able to tap into their roots in the local community, which supported recruitment of people from the neighbourhood. As one of the members detailed: 'there are people who've been living in Chapelton for like 60-odd years' (CCM1). This would have differed from a conventional 'pre-sales' approach used by for-profit multi-residential development, through a more organic word-of-mouth method:

*People were doing outreach in the places they were already spending time, so like I was talking to people at the school gates about ChaCo and about cohousing, and people were at a local church or local Caribbean takeaway (CCM1).*

Moreover, their desire for an inclusive cohousing model that catered to traditionally marginalised groups in the housing system meant working with people unfamiliar with the model, which necessarily took time. ChaCo's lengthy period of deliberation enabled them to:

*Make sure that we weren't just taking first come, first served because we'd end up with people who this was much familiar to and recruiting the same type of people all the time. So we wanted to put the structures in place to allow time for people to get to know ChaCo and for us to get to know them and to make sure that we were meeting our targets* (CCM1).

The long, deliberative and community-centred process used by ChaCo to recruit and develop a group helps to inform a key debate in the cohousing sector, characterised as between a group first or land first approach (McCamant and Durrett, 2011). Some advocate a land first formulation that was intrinsic to the aforementioned development of Marmalade Lane. This involved the developer working with a select group of people before populating the scheme around the site. To others, having a cohesive group of people, formed early enough to lead the process, helps to build the kind of communality that is seen as the bedrock of the cohousing model (McKenna et al., 2024). ChaCo's example, is a cohousing development where the land and group are inextricably linked, in that the group was able to recruit so successfully because they had ensured that their linkages to Chapelton were evident and formed the core of a clear campaign to obtain the land. For the member this meant that in speaking to potential new recruited residents, the rootedness of the group meant:

*The conversations are coming from a very different place versus a cohousing project that's like formed a group and then found a space and then it's moving there from outside* (CCM1).

Moreover, after obtaining the land, the long period of community development and co-design was useful during the rocky planning phase discussed in Chapter Six, something which was also

echoed in the experience of OWCH. As captured by Fernández Arrigoitia and West: ‘in the estimation of one longstanding member of OWCH, the fact that New Ground had taken so long is a feature of the group’s success’ (2020, p.9).

Yet for Community-Led Housing London, the advisors sponsored by the Greater London Authority and who had assisted Squeezed for their many years of development, while they could point to successful projects, they argued: ‘it takes at least 10 years, if not 15, and there’s a huge uncertainty about whether or not it [a project] will happen’ (CLH1). This led the organization to question whether they could instead match residents to already forming or formed developments, often led by professional developers. As the Director of CLH London noted in an interview:

*Most people aren’t interested in how the thing is built...actually we see that in a lot of the inquiries we get, some people actually say I want to live in community-led housing, how can I move in (CLH1).*

As the Director further articulated in a blog: ‘what if we started with clear repeatable project types and enabled interested people to form groups around those projects?’ (Kerimol, 2024). This perspective goes to another long-standing debate within cohousing, as to the role of developers and other practitioners in the development of projects, and questions of who would lead the design and development of a scheme (Ache and Fedrowitz, 2012, Palmer, 2019, Williams, 2008). For CLH London, the failure of schemes like Squeezed spoke to a need for a more focused approach on what groups, including cohousing, brought to the housing debate. They argued:

*We believe what is central to, and distinctive about, community-led housing is resident control and belonging – that people can shape what matters most to them in their housing within a supportive community (Kerimol, 2024)*

Yet the experience of ChaCo shows that resident control and belonging often emanates from the time and deliberation that grounds so many projects. Recruitment of their cohousing community was centred on existing local networks that directly fed into a building project that created affordable, secure housing for often marginalised people. This opened out the possibilities for control and belonging to people who might not traditionally be involved in community led-housing. This process necessarily takes time, but for cohousing to be relationally attuned to the impact that each project has on a community and deliver an inclusive model, it should be seen as important as any expertise in design or construction.

Building a community, and then a cohousing development, should not be a process that induces burnout, an occurrence for too many cohousing groups. Developing a project for 10 to 15 years is clearly unacceptable, and as Huron (2015) suggests the struggle of community-led housing should not be romanticised. Instead, as this study has argued, the deliberative model of cohousing groups should be backed, rather than slowed down by state authorities. Examples like ChaCo having to pause their bid for land while LCC revisited their educational facilities assessment, or London Borough of Tower Hamlets holding up Squeezed through planning are too common. Rather than erecting further hurdles cohousing groups instead could be supported through their development journeys by systems that recognise their strengths in community building.

#### 7.4.6 Slowness, supply and a new sustainable path forward for housing provision?

The deliberative development highlighted here, attentive use of prized urban land discussed in Chapter Six, and alternative multi-residential governance examined in Chapter Five, adds to the work of others who have categorised cohousing as part of a 'slow housing movement' (Crabtree, 2018a, Jarvis, 2015a), in themselves building on Steele (2012). The final section of this discussion will widen its focus and critique the supply imperative one last time, but in this instance through the lens of 'slowness'. In identifying a uniting set of principles across the chapters it is how

cohousing offers a more attentive, gentle approach to how new urban housing is conventionally framed. This contrasts to the fast yet rushed, construction of for-profit multi-residential housing (Crabtree, 2018a), where governance processes are set in train often without resident input (Sherry, 2018), and where density is pressed into the service of scale and value (Robinson and Attuyer, 2021).

Rather than seeing slowness inevitably as deleterious to housing provision, it could also denote important social and environmental qualities such as: 'balance, effort, measure, frugality and proportion' (Steele, 2012, p.183), all of which could apply to cohousing. For instance, these qualities could be seen in how cohousing, whether newbuild or existing, is attuned to 'informed material practices' in energy or other resource consumption (Schlosberg and Craven, 2019). Furthermore, being able to build cohesion as a group enables many cohousing groups to develop a strong core set of values, including for pro-sustainable behaviour (Jarvis, 2015b). Moreover, slowness can be seen as a vital component of anti-speculative, inclusive housing practice, with reflection given to how cohousing will be equitably accessed by a range of people, including traditionally marginalised groups, as per ChaCo's careful focus on targets. This recognises that given the relative unorthodoxy of cohousing, time needs to be allocated to broadening out the horizons of the model (Crabtree, 2018a).

Cohousing's own vision of building and dwelling can coexist with environmental and social imperatives, particularly as articulated through a post-growth agenda (Nelson and Chatterton, 2022). Highlighting the benefits of 'slowness' also necessitates countering supply orthodoxy not only for its failure to address rampant housing financialisation, but also for its denial of environmental limits. It has been argued that planning deregulation in both Australia and the UK will increase already existing threats to the natural environment, with an overturning of longstanding protections for wildlife habitats from development, particularly for residential use (Buxton and Mercer, 2024, Monbiot, 2025). To critics, such supply-driven policymaking is

emblematic of the lack of attention given to the environmental impact of housebuilding (Savini, 2022). As zu Ermgassen et al. (2022) show, the UK's carbon budget would be largely spent fulfilling much debated housebuilding targets. While there is a laudable emphasis on the retrofitting of existing housing stock in order to boost energy efficiency (Horne and Dalton, 2014, Martiskainen and Kivimaa, 2019), the impact of housing construction on local and global environments, whether that be in built form or supply chains, has only been a minor feature of housing policy (Serrenho et al., 2019, Hill and Mazzucato, 2024).

In recognising the impact of housing construction as well as housing use, all residential housing provision, including cohousing, needs to be responsive to climate and biodiversity realities. While some new-build housing will be required, as Hill and Mazzucato (2024) argue: there needs to be 'tighter direction on where, what, how and for whom' (p.12). Aligning to this vision unites both the intangible elements that can make multi-residential developments fulfilling communities with a focus on what Jarvis (2015a) calls the 'functional qualities' of cohousing architecture. Instead of blindly extracting value from density in the manner of micro- or co-living (White and Madden, 2024), each metre of space in cohousing projects like ChaCo or Cohousing Co-op is well-used, even frugally, a consideration of land and housing that is rooted in 'sufficiency' (Brysch, 2023, Monbiot et al., 2019). This adds to previous discussions of the relationality of housing (Vandeventer et al., 2024), in highlighting not only the social impact of each new unit, but how property can be directed at both human and non-human flourishing (Crabtree, 2018b), particularly in addressing finite land.

Beyond articulating what it is not, deliberative development models like cohousing need to articulate a positive vision of provision, to push back against boosterish visions of supply. For instance, the Yes-in-my-back-yard (YIMBY) movement has embraced a so-called new politics of 'abundance' (Klein and Thompson, 2025), that as discussed in Chapter Two has already garnered political support in both Australia and the UK. The narrative speaks of a scarcity of housing in

major cities and argues that creating 'housing abundance' through increased supply benefits the housing system, filtered through new opportunities for owners, as well as private and social renters. As per the discussion above, such an understanding of supply fails to address the root causes of housing inequality, as well as the aforementioned environmental limits of land and biodiversity which post-growth articulations of housing evoke (Nelson and Chatterton, 2022). In advocating for a more deliberative, perhaps slower approach to housing, there is an opportunity to offer a positive alternative to abundance. The increased shared spaces, productive gardens and facilities of cohousing, animated by the civic skills described in Cohousing Co-op can be seen as creating greater amenity through communality (Hill and Mazzucato, 2024). This is aptly depicted by a member of Chapeltown Cohousing:

*Being able to say hey, we need this kind of saw because this bowsaw doesn't fit in the gap. And then like 3 minutes later someone handing it over to you. It's just a much like richer way of living, but without needing lots of money (CCM1).*

This links cohousing to a post-growth form of property relations (Alexander, 2010), where dwelling is bolstered not by what is found in the private domain of a house that doubles as an asset, but communal, non-commodified 'value' in the shared spaces of gardens and dining areas, laundries, solar schemes and car clubs. This is opposed to environmentally destructive sprawl whether horizontal or vertical (Jarvis, 2015a), that is part of a supply-led discourse where 'housing abundance' only comes as a result of continued extraction from the natural environment.

Cohousing can bring further benefits to wider housing provision in addressing an oft-ignored challenge. Australia and the UK are both encountering significant demographic change, and a slow, proportional approach to new housing can help manage this shift. This includes the broader trends of slowing population growth (Dorling, 2020, Mburu et al., 2024), a longstanding decrease in average number of persons per household (Agarwal et al., 2023, Office for National Statistics, 2013) and an ageing population. Rather than remaining blinkered to these demographic

challenges, the cohousing cases point to how each new housing 'unit' can positively address these complex social transitions. This accords with the promise of 'deliberative' development, that matches new constructions more effectively to housing need (Sharam, 2020). For instance, cohousing can contribute to housing options for those wishing to downsize their housing and age in place. This was a major imperative for the group building Stellulata, as featured in Chapter Six. The example of OWCH in North London, is evidence of that on a larger scale. Both groups spoke of being attracted to cohousing after caring for elderly parents later in life, which provoked a desire for living arrangements that brought independence underpinned by a supportive community and amenities (Fernández Arrigoitia and West, 2020). For OWCH, this option was elusive in both social rented housing or the private housing market, and local authorities were often oblivious to what the cohousing model offered. According to the founder member the group:

*Spent a lot of time in meetings with the middle managers of social services and housing services explaining what we were doing and trying to get them to budge their ideas, and we talked for 40 minutes and then they'd wrap up and say, well, you know, we really don't need any more sheltered housing in the area. That category of older people we certainly were not (OWCH1).*

OWCH's scheme came about only after much persistence and deliberation. Both the design, and the length of time it took would have been seen as inefficient in many conventional developments. Yet, in interrogating many of the cohousing case studies, what is built and shared through the socio-architecture of each scheme are vital to thriving multi-residential communities, governed by alternative property relations, and shorn of the financialised pressing of finite land that are inherent to many of their for-profit counterparts.

## 7.5 Conclusion

In this final empirical chapter, three cohousing cases were interrogated primarily through how they related to broader issues of housing provision, and by association the role of the state. Squeezed, a cohousing group in London seemingly had crafted a promising proposal that was progressing through hurdles of community consultation and planning. Yet Squeezed's project and the entire Affordable Self-Build Programme which it was a part of was cancelled by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The reasoning given by the Mayor at the time was that they wanted to deliver social housing on the site, an argument which ignored not only Squeezed's social housing ambitions, but the complexity of the plot. This case attests to frustrations and delays to development for many community-led housing groups – in this case many years of work cancelled by an executive decision. Yet the pitting of the cohousing scheme against much-needed social housing speaks to another dynamic. While the sector has been careful to not crowd out state provision many schemes require some government support, particularly if they aim to provide affordable housing tenures. The case of Chapeltown Cohousing in Leeds attests to what cohousing groups can do when government funding and guidance is forthcoming. In partnering with a local housing association in a joint-bid for Leeds City Council land, and gaining both municipal and Whitehall funding for their project, they were able to provide a scheme that catered to the Chapeltown community, including through its provision of mixed-tenure affordable housing. While they experienced their own challenges, including during the negotiations with government funders and planners, ChaCo was able to transcend the different agendas from state backers to maintain a focus on their contribution to community-led design and development. Lastly, Cohousing Co-operative in Nipaluna/Hobart has long been a significant part of the Australian cohousing sector, an example of how cohousing can provide tenancies to those eligible for social housing. Yet, amid both a local and national debate over the role of new housing models in addressing the crisis in affordability, examples like Cohousing Co-operative seemingly go unnoticed by government actors. With social housing provision in Australia showing no sign of a

resurgence, and the unaffordability of housing for both private renters and prospective owners not abating, cases like Cohousing Co-op offer a compelling alternative.

These cases, as a collection, offer a few different angles from which to assess cohousing's interaction with the housing system, and particularly how it is treated by an often sceptical state. At a time when the preeminent political solution to the housing 'crisis' is the delivery of increased supply, community-led models can often appear out of step. Yet, as these cases show, cohousing can make an important contribution beyond the delivery of a new housing unit. In taking a step back from the churn of supply dogma, the deliberative, community-centred model can prove more attune to both local need and environmental limits. At a time when governments have lost sight of the unsustainability of rampant housebuilding, models like cohousing offer a new set of 'slow housing' principles for safe, secure and sustainable tenures beyond growth-focused calculations.

## Chapter Eight: Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

This research was focused on examining cohousing as an alternative model of multi-residential property, with case studies of groups from the UK and Australia. It interrogated how cohousing groups acquired and governed their land and housing, the planning regimes they encountered, and finally analysed their models of development. With the availability of suitable, affordable land a noted challenge for many cohousing groups, this thesis initially examined the process by which groups first secured land, and then the formal legal methods and informal norms used to underpin their mutual governance. In broadening out from this discussion of de jure and de facto understandings of cohousing property, the research interrogated cohousing in relation to two major points of mainstream thinking. Firstly, it explored how cohousing relates to urban planning orthodoxy that demands ‘compactness’ and density particularly in housing. This argues that cohousing, as a socio-architectural model where residents actively share space and goods, offers a compelling point of differentiation to conventional compactness. Secondly, it studied the place of cohousing within wider efforts to increase housing supply, an approach favoured by policymakers in Australia and the UK to alleviate issues with housing affordability. Cohousing, as a model where residents are actively part of deliberations over design and construction, presents as an alternative method of housing provision to the dominance of for-profit builders.

In this final concluding chapter, the research revisits the key research questions which framed this thesis. It summarises the methodology used, including the qualitative case study analysis of cohousing groups in the UK and Australia. It then outlines the key findings that emerged from the semi-structured interviews of cohousing group members and relevant adjacent stakeholders. In so doing, it draws out a series of contributions that extend and recentre the existing literature. Firstly the empirical significance of the project is examined, drawing on what was learnt from the

method of land acquisition and development, the models of governance that were delivered, and the processes of collaborative planning and deliberative development. The theoretical contribution of the research is, in turn, outlined, placing particular emphasis on new understandings of property relations in multi-residential housing and the development of a post-growth approach to cohousing property. In building on both these contributions, some further implications for policy towards cohousing are distilled. This provides recommendations on how cohousing co-operatives can be supported, how governments could utilise their land to back inclusive cohousing schemes, before discussing some more transformative changes in policy and discourse, particularly in moving away from a pro-growth, market-led housing system. Lastly, in expanding on the key findings, a few further research avenues are discussed. This includes comparisons of co-operatively structured cohousing to conventional multi-titled cohousing groups, more interrogation of how different types of urban cohousing relate to compactness and how the relationship of cohousing to government funded regeneration programmes can be understood.

## 8.2 Summary of research approach and key findings

The unique multi-residential alternative of cohousing was highlighted throughout the study, as a model that revolves around the development of private dwellings and shared spaces for 10-40 households, sometimes less or more. In an urban context it offers an important contrast to conventional multi-household developments. However, cohousing encounters many challenges too, and the availability of suitable, affordable land is a hurdle faced by most prospective cohousing groups. While the pursuit of land was seen as a clear obstacle for cohousing, in examining the model's potential to resist conventional approaches to land and housing the research considered how cohousing related to both urban planning norms, and dominant discourses of housing provision. As discussed in Chapter Two, property relations proved a useful theoretical lens to help understand the land and housing system. In this, the process of land

acquisition and use of a collectively constituted legal title, was discussed as an initial 'doing' of property (Blomley, 2004). While cohousing communities formalise their development with the limited set of rights defined by property law, this research aimed to show how, through informal collective processes of agreement-making and norm-building, groups offer an alternative to those property relations in multi-residential housing which are foremost defined by economic relationships. In hypothesising that cohousing represented an alternate form of land and housing governance, the first research question emerged:

- How do the cohousing case studies govern their land and housing, and how does this relate to the conventional management of multi-residential property?

In building out from this opening question, the research observed the collision between cohousing and the planning regimes in two contexts. In expanding on critiques of mainstream urban 'compactness', cohousing is well placed to act as a contrast to the delivery of density in an extractive manner, property dissociated from the lived experience of both residents, local communities, and the impact of housing on finite land. This led to the second question:

- How have the cohousing developments approached their respective local planning regimes, and what is their relationship to the housing density and compactness agenda?

With the first two questions focused on the governance and socio-architectural form of cohousing, the third question sought to clarify the model's relationship to housing provision norms. Given the conventional housing development model is aimed at scale and speed, cohousing can appear incompatible, not least with governments professing that increased supply is the route out of the housing 'crisis'. This led to the final question:

- Amid the dominant focus on housing supply by governments in both Australia and the UK, what approach to housing development is offered by the cohousing case studies?

As developed in Chapter Three, a qualitative case study method was used to answer these key questions. Rather than opting for a panoramic view of cohousing in both the UK and Australia, a 'small-N' case study approach (Blatter and Haverland, 2012) was used for an in-depth interrogation of selected cohousing groups. This elicited theoretical conceptualisations from the case studies, with the initial application of the relational lens to property in Chapter Five drawn from the semi-structured interviews. By going beyond the challenges around land acquisition and legal structures, this allowed for the melding of the established literature of property relations (Blomley, 2004), with scholarship on post-growth forms of both planning and housing (Durrant et al., 2023, Nelson and Chatterton, 2022). Yet, there remained complications in putting together the case studies. Sourcing interviewees, particularly from groups in the early stages of project initiation, proved arduous. Much relationship building was required, along with patience with members juggling cohousing development in their spare time. From initial discussions with 12 cohousing groups, four primary studies were selected, and these case studies were interwoven throughout the chapters, along with supplementary observations from some of the remaining groups. While it would have been preferable to dive into four fully formed case studies, the process of sifting and sorting cohousing groups, including through a pilot phase, provided an extra level of insight into the many challenges that are faced by such community-led projects.

Chapter Four introduced the four primary case studies and three supplementary cases, discussing the origin story of each group, how they found their land, before outlining their respective built and social form. Of these communities, each offered instructive viewpoints on how cohousing groups begin. Chapeltown Cohousing in Leeds was formed by a group rooted in their local area, with an inclusive approach to the demographic targeting of traditionally disadvantaged groups seldom found in the cohousing sector, both in the UK or Australia. Cohousing Co-operative in Nipaluna/Hobart was also a unique model as one of the few cohousing communities in Australia exclusively available to those eligible for social housing, and with a well-established set of governance structures formed from its earliest iteration. Stellulata Cohousing in

Kamberri/Canberra meanwhile was formed from a government-sponsored Demonstration Housing Project, an intervention aimed at seeding new housing types in the ACT. Lastly, Squeezed in London emerged from a joint initiative between the Greater London Authority and London borough councils to bring forward land for community-led groups.

Chapter Five built on this overview by zooming in on the governance structures of two of the groups, Chapeltown Cohousing (ChaCo) and Cohousing Co-operative. ChaCo is a fully mutual co-operative model, a mixed-tenure community made up of renters, shared-equity affordable housing, and members with 99% full equity. Each tenant is a member of the co-operative and the group aimed for non-hierarchical community governance. To this end, they relied on consensus agreement-making in a general meeting process, supported by several sub-groups. As a community who had started with a core team of members but then recruited from within Chapeltown they were attuned to the challenge of integrating new tenants, including those not familiar with cohousing. They were careful in ensuring that their founding ambition to target traditionally marginalised groups would not be eroded over time. Despite being frustrated in their attempts to limit house price rises by their funder Homes England, their lease structure meant that any new purchaser would need to sign up to the co-operative to access many of the basic amenities beyond their home. Despite having this co-operative structure in place, the group were aware of the risks of gentrification resulting from their project. This included the prospect for house prices to be swelled in the neighbouring area due to the cache of a successful cohousing scheme.

Cohousing Co-operative in Nipaluna/Hobart is a longstanding group who have developed a tenure and governance model that is distinctive to Australian cohousing. While they were a 'nominal-equity' co-operative like most Australian housing mutuals, the co-operative owned the title to the land and housing as opposed to a government entity or housing provider. With Federal and State government funding, they had managed to build their scheme and offer tenancies exclusively to

members eligible for social housing in Australia. While initially being supported by government, they had largely been left to their own devices, with no outside control over their co-operative structure and an ability to make their own formal and informal agreements. Like ChaCo, they had long operated under principles of consensus, with the agreements made as a group backing up the legal co-operative structure. This included a commitment to non-violent communication, which aligned well to the cohousing socio-architectural model. With cohousing engendering social contact particularly in shared spaces and facilities, the ability for members to make lasting agreements with minimal friction was seen as crucial. Overall, this chapter showed that while in different contexts both Chapeltown Cohousing and Cohousing Co-operative present viable alternatives to the mainstream governance of multi-residential housing. They do this through aligning the legal co-operative form with processes of consensus agreement-making, non-violent communication and, the use of shared space, facilities and mutual support in cohousing.

Chapter Six shifted attention to the planning regimes around cohousing, with a focus on how two of the case studies relate to the 'compactness' orthodoxy. It returned to the ChaCo case study, locating the Chapeltown neighbourhood as part of a citywide effort at densification. Yet, as a review of planning documents and secondary analyses showed, the government-led ambition for a gentle, inclusive intensification of housing in Leeds has not been realised. Instead, in recent years, double the number of targeted flats have been built and there has been a significant increase in build-to-rent developments (Greenhalgh et al., 2021, LCC, 2019a, McLaren and Bailey, 2023). Another highlighted aspect of the compactness agenda in Leeds was the prioritisation of development on brownfield land. ChaCo's own scheme, designed by its members, offered an important point of differentiation to many of the conventional attempts at compactness. Through a partnership with Unity Housing Association, they had obtained a land site owned by Leeds City Council (LCC), a brownfield plot that not only required significant remediation, but also an innovative design to deal with its position adjacent to a major road. In addressing these site challenges the ChaCo and Unity project showed evidence of a different approach to development

viability, rooted in community effort and connection to place rather than economic value. The scheme was highlighted by the local authority for being a 'high density urban community' (LCC, 2019b, p.2), and while not disagreeing, the members argued that ChaCo was more in keeping with principles of 'human-scale' densification. Moreover, in challenging planning regulation the group had a reduced car parking arrangement that kept the footprint of the development compact and encouraged car-sharing and active travel. The scheme contributed to the latter agenda further by creating a cut-through, that spoke to ChaCo's integration with the neighbourhood, both in design and social attitude.

In introducing the Stellulata Cohousing scheme, the compactness agenda of the ACT Government was highlighted. Even amid the sprawling, low-density forms of Australian cities, Kamberrri/Canberra presents a significant challenge to compactness efforts, with the predominance of single detached homes on large blocks. The Demonstration Housing project, developed by the ACT administration, is a programme to test and deliver innovative housing types. This includes so-called 'missing middle' options, that sit between the single detached home and the high-rise apartment (Parolek, 2022). It was in this context that Stellulata Cohousing was formed by a group of households who wished to downsize and develop a community for ageing in place. Once a part of the Demonstration Housing framework, Stellulata, along with their architect, had developed an urban form that kept the design footprint small. This included shared car parking, and a large, communal garden. Moreover, the prospective cohousing community noted their efforts at neighbourhood consultation with an emphasis on the creation of more options for downsizers like them. Aspects of the planning process proved a challenge, with some delays attributed to the risk averse nature of the ACT Government. Stellulata opens the door for more groups of a similar scale, and of like financial means. While the Demonstration Housing project has led to cohousing being officially defined in the ACT, a larger proposal from another group, Cohousing Canberra, has been frustrated to date. Part of the challenge has been their attempt to buy government land amid conjecture over what would constitute market value for the site. While

there was uncertainty about wider government support for the model in the ACT, the cases in this chapter showed that cohousing offers a community-centred housing type which disrupts planning orthodoxy, including over what constitutes 'compactness'. But in meeting that challenge, as the below theoretical discussion acknowledges, such community-led housing demands not simply participation, but a redistribution of power through planning and land use. This could not only seed 'compact' housing alternatives but align cohousing to a post-growth planning agenda for sustainable, non-profit approaches to land and housing.

Chapter Seven pivoted to discussions of housing development, particularly amid an emphasis by governments on increased supply. It began with the case of Squeezed Cohousing in London. The group, initially spoken to while in planning, had successfully bid for land from the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH). This was part of a citywide scheme backed by the Greater London Authority and the borough, for small council-owned sites to be brought forward for community-led housing. Squeezed had negotiated a competitive process that had beckoned quality and community need over the receipt to the council. Despite the group's efforts at working with the existing community, designing a scheme that would please council planners proved difficult. Furthermore the group had signalled a plan to include some social housing. While judging the initial bid the council had backed this ambition, yet support fell away with LBTH's housing provider later declining an invitation to partner on the scheme. This caused major problems for the scheme's financial structure. While in the final stages of their planning application, the Mayor of Tower Hamlets announced that the entire Affordable Self Build Programme would be cancelled, including the support for Squeezed. The LBTH argued that options would be brought forward by the council to build social housing on the site. Yet, their former advisers on the scheme, Community-Led Housing London, argue that council building had already been deemed as difficult on the site. While the political makeup of the Tower Hamlets administration may account in part for the scheme's cancellation, the collapse of Squeezed speaks to the febrile state of many

community-led housing projects. Cohousing is often pitted against other housing models, and in the case of social housing this is often unwarranted.

Chapelton Cohousing by contrast were able to keep their development on track in part through their ability to develop strong partnerships from the outset. They joined with Unity Housing Association to bid for the land from Leeds City Council and benefitted from the registered provider's understanding of housing development during the many hurdles in planning and construction. Their connections to the local area not only assisted their bids for both local and central government funding, but also in recruiting prospective members from Chapelton. In discussing the reasoning behind local authority backing, both council officers and ChaCo members spoke of a range of factors. While some parts of the administration prioritised the capital receipt that would be received for the land, others were focused on the social and affordable housing that would be delivered. On one level, this often led to conflicting messages from the council and some delays, but the support for the cohousing model from the local authority was noted, particularly given the recent history of community-led housing in the city (McKenna et al., 2024). While citing this support for community initiatives from elements of the council, the ChaCo members recognised the difficulties caused by municipal austerity. Meanwhile, the project received sustained backing from Whitehall in recognition of the 'placeshaping' potential of ChaCo by central government agencies. Once completed, the cohousing community were able to draw on their connections to immediate neighbours, in a further promotion of their community spaces and integration with the local area.

Cohousing Co-operative in Nipaluna/Hobart, while a longstanding and successful example of cohousing, had largely been forgotten by its government funders. As the architect and founder member expressed, they had detected a scepticism from their backers of the scheme's worthiness. Yet Cohousing Co-op has long offered stable tenancies for those eligible for state support, and allowed a level of autonomy not afforded to most social tenants. The doubtful

posture of the Tasmanian state spoke to the residualised Australian social housing sector, with governments focussed on a certain expected tenant. Moreover, it became apparent to the member and architect that state authorities did not recognise the importance of consensus agreement-making. The quantum of housing was the most important consideration to the government, and the deliberative process both in design and post-completion did not register as a reason for support. Yet to the member, the use of consensus agreement-making and non-violent communication were important civic skills. Viewing the housing debate in both Lutriwita/Tasmania and nationwide, the member saw a role for 'non-speculative' models like theirs, in adding not only diversity but affordable housing. Yet, the state government had chosen to prioritise build-to-rent as a model, seeing it as an alternative to conventional private rental. The promotion of development models such as build-to-rent at a time when successful examples of affordable, community-minded housing like Cohousing Co-operative remain underappreciated, is symptomatic of government prioritisation of supply over sustainable, non-speculative models. Overall, this Chapter showed that with the ideology of increased supply implicated in the demand for housing to stimulate economic growth, the example of cohousing offers a different approach to the housing system, away from state-led and developer-delivered orthodoxy. Cohousing provides a deliberative, resident-centred model of provision, that is attune to the environmental and social impact of new housing development.

### 8.3 Significance and application

In synthesizing the findings from these chapters, a number of distinct empirical contributions can be discerned, that add to literature that surrounds both cohousing and housing provision more broadly. These are contributions that recognise the wider value of what Pickerill (2021) sees in grassroots projects as 'open practical initiatives'. While community-led housing schemes like ChaCo or Cohousing Co-op could in Pickerill's words 'be born out of necessity, they might not start

from a particular radical politics, but instead through the process of becoming and making a radical politics emerge' (2021, p.250).

### 8.3.1 Empirical contribution

The first area of literature that the research contributed to was around the governance of multi-residential housing. The literature review in Chapter Two outlined the numerous challenges for residents in conventional multi-title developments, particularly in apartments in Australia and the UK. The cases of Chapeltown Cohousing and Cohousing Co-operative, in eschewing leasehold or strata title, show evidence of a different approach to multi-residential governance. For ChaCo, their ability to buy the freehold to the land and subsequently build the property subverted the usual development trajectory. They were then able to create their own co-operative model, with control by the members, whether renter, shared-owner or 'full'-ownership. Meanwhile, Cohousing Co-operative compellingly showed the limitations of strata title governance. With the title of the land and most of the homes being owned by 'Cohousing Co-operative Limited', they maintained their original ambition of providing cohousing tenures to residents eligible for state support, with a level of autonomy rarely seen across the social sector.

Within the broader discussion on governance, Chapter Five added to discussions of tenures in cohousing. A focus on tenure helped to interrogate the interaction between differing approaches to 'ownership' and how the cohousing cases were governed as compared to conventional multi-residential housing. Larsen (2019) argues that with tenure an important means to scrutinise access to cohousing, that more research is required to understand how 'property relations are worked out when establishing cohousing communities' (p.1365). As this thesis argues, particularly for those cohousing groups formed as member-controlled co-operatives, conventional ownership structures are subverted both before and after land is acquired. The ownership and management of housing and land is diverted away from the property trading relationship dictated by strata and leasehold, and instead centres the collective agreements vital for daily residential life, whether

this be the use and maintenance of shared space or the bonds of mutual support formed through communal activities. Moreover, rather than narrow property values of growing a housing asset for individual gain, this further emphasises core community principles, including over diverse tenures, whether that be providing a cohousing option for residents of Chapeltown or a social housing tenancy to prospective Cohousing Co-op members. For those in ChaCo and Cohousing Co-op, the continuing control and input of residents is not premised on ownership or tenure type, and whether their equity in the property was 0%, 25% or 99% all members felt a long-term connection to their communities.

While recognising those who point to the fragility of co-operative structures (Blandy, 2023, Bruun, 2018), the cases of Cohousing Co-op and ChaCo show how informal processes of consensus agreement-making and communication not only serve to solidify formal legalities, but make communities work better. Tension is taken out of disputes between residents by the ability of members to feel heard through clear, non-violent communication practices. Moreover, the interaction between the inclusive, mutual tenures and the informal mechanisms of consensus and redress have meant that Cohousing Co-op and ChaCo are both internally strong, yet outward facing. While not neglecting the importance of de jure structures to protect communities from housing financialisation, this argues that an ongoing collective commitment to affordable housing tenures is fostered by well-maintained de facto processes of consensus agreement-making. This is important given the warnings from accounts like Savini (2022) of the possibility for 'common housing projects [to] mutate into enclaves for their own survival, reproducing exclusive ownership relations' (p.6), a charge that cannot be levelled at either of the cohousing co-operative models. They both recognise broader housing dynamics, including the members they were founded to support. This means being attune to issues such as gentrification, and having both formal and informal structures to counteract such housing financialisation. Moreover, in having clear processes of neighbourhood engagement, including through use of their common houses, they offer supportive spaces to the wider local community.

While others have also identified how community-led models elevate the 'grey spaces' of property (Apps, 2021), the evidence from Chapter Five showed how ideas of stewardship are ingrained in day-to-day cohousing management, again regardless of tenure. Moreover, with shared spaces and common facilities in leasehold or strata title systems often victim to resident apathy or legal complexity, building adaptation in aid of sustainability can be frustrated (Bright and Weatherall, 2017). The same could be said of shared urban landholdings, increasingly at risk of fire and flood (Holmes et al., 2019, NHSAC, 2024). In this research, the benefits to land management can be seen from these successful multi-residential models. Rather than treating the land in property as a concern secondary to the built form, the bushfire protection of Cohousing Co-op, or the remediation of the soil in ChaCo's shared garden, are examples of how property management can prioritise both social and ecological outcomes (Alexander, 2010, Blandy et al., 2018).

As Chapter Five emphasised, the combination of co-operative legal structure and cohousing socio-architectural model appear mutually reinforcing. In drawing on the relational approach to densification (McFarlane, 2020), this has importance for how people live together in cities, in collaboration with others in a multi-residential development. Well-developed governance processes can underpin attentive, integrated new developments, at a time when urban infill is politically charged, and much contested. To this end, Chapter Six examined how ChaCo related to both its neighbourhood, and wider planning norms of compactness. The orthodoxy that urban areas need to intensify housing, allied to increased mixing of people, business and leisure opportunities is being deployed in a range of contexts (Floater et al., 2014, Kain et al., 2022), including in Leeds (DLUHC, 2024). Yet, as is often the case, the housing densification experienced by existing communities and new tenants in speculative high-rise developments is often driven by financial gain (Goulding et al., 2023, Nethercote, 2019), rather than the professed social and environmental ambitions of mainstream compactness (Haarstad et al., 2022). Particularly in the UK, this has been manifested in the growth of for-profit 'micro-living' (Harris and Nowicki, 2020,

Hubbard, 2024) and co-living (White and Madden, 2024), but also in new build-to-rent investments (Brill and Durrant, 2021, Goulding et al., 2023, Nethercote, 2022).

In this context, the example of ChaCo is telling. With Leeds City Council identifying it as a 'high-density urban community' (2019b, p.2), its members instead emphasised its human scale, and how it fitted into the local area, offering a new, yet relatable housing project. Like other cohousing developments its socio-architectural form created efficiencies in space, including through shared facilities, and importantly reduced car-parking. Moreover, the residents, in collaboration with their architect, developed a scheme that is responsive to the morphology of their surrounding area, including through a ginnel that provided permeability to their neighbourhood. In building on critiques of densification (McFarlane, 2023, Robinson and Attuyer, 2021), cases like ChaCo flip the conventional approach to density and compact urbanism away from an extractive form to one that is more collaborative and attune to the impacts of housing intensification.

Chapter Six also expanded understanding of how community-led projects, like ChaCo but also Stellulata in Kamberri/Canberra, can encourage sustainable forms of travel including through car-sharing. While active transport and public transit-oriented development is a key focus of compactness (Talen, 2012), conventional large-scale housing schemes often fail to deliver on the promise of neighbourhood walkability, and infrastructure is often slow to be delivered (Parham and Jones, 2021). In absence of government action to shift transport and land use planning away from a prioritisation of automobility (Hajer and Versteeg, 2019), community-led efforts can step into the breach. Lastly, particularly through discussion of ChaCo, this chapter contributed to the post-growth planning agenda that rejects the unsustainable housing development associated with mainstream compactness (Durrant et al., 2023). In agreeing with Xue (2022) that compactness needn't be rejected but transformed through a post-growth outlook, planning can be better deployed to prioritise new infill projects that address the finiteness of land (Haarstad et al., 2022, Ruiz-Alejos and Prats, 2022). Urban cohousing projects offer both true 'gentle density'

while addressing household environmental footprints through the sharing of space, facilities, gardens, and technologies.

The final area of literature that the research contributes to is discussion of the housing system, in particular how the model relates to mainstream approaches to new housing development. Amid a dominance of private, increasingly large house builders in both the UK and Australia (Gallent, 2019, Gurran and Bramley, 2017), there has been a renewed focus on so-called 'group self-build' or deliberative development processes (Benson and Hamiduddin, 2017, Sharam, 2020).

Cohousing, particularly in the case of relatively large developments like ChaCo or Cohousing Co-operative, builds on the history of community housing initiatives that sit outside conventional modes of provision (Crabtree, 2018a, Roling and Hackney, 1989, Ward, 1994). Yet, as this research found in examples like Squeezed Cohousing in London, too often community-led developers are treated like conventional players, with multiple hurdles often erected. In moving on from previous state scepticism to self-provision (Field, 2020, Gleeson, 2004), there are options available to governments to support cohousing-social housing schemes, more of which will be discussed in the forthcoming policy recommendations. These can build on cohousing cases which include social housing tenancies like Cohousing Co-operative, or those which work in partnership like ChaCo and Unity Housing Association. As shown by Housing 21 in Birmingham, registered providers are looking to cohousing as a community-centred housing design (Arbell and Archer, 2023).

In considering how community-led cohousing should be positioned in relation to conventional developers, this research contributes to a key debate in the field. In response to the significant challenges faced by cohousing groups in initiating their schemes, some have advocated an increasing role for developer-led cohousing (Williams, 2005b). This has recently been revived with some developers like TOWN (2025) embracing cohousing. Despite the success of schemes such as Marmalade Lane (Murphy, 2020), the learnings from this study would caution against developer-

led models becoming the predominant delivery method for cohousing. In particular, the diversity brought by cohousing schemes like ChaCo and Cohousing Co-op speaks to their rootedness in a community-led process. This suggests the importance of a 'group-first' approach. ChaCo proved so successful because they were able to build a strong, locally-connected group, that was essential to their bid for land and funding. This grounding will anchor the community for the years to come, driving their mutual purpose as a development which offers a new, affordable cohousing project for their area. This is not to say that partnerships should be avoided, and indeed ChaCo were an example of how group-led partnerships can work through their collaboration with Unity.

In contributing to the literature around housing provision, this thesis argued that a key impediment to cohousing is the dominant imperative of supply, driven by governments wanting to look 'busy' amid growing housing unaffordability (Gurran and Phibbs, 2015). With cohousing groups often relying on difficult land sites - as shown by both Squeezed and ChaCo, considering them as a part of a supply framework puts undue pressure on such community-led groups. This finding adds to critiques of discourses which evoke 'housing abundance' (Leigh, 2025, Rinehart, 2022). Particularly in cases like Klein and Thompson (2025), the abundance frame is attractive to governments who have identified the supposed crisis in housing supply as their primary narrative (Gallent, 2019). Yet, whether expressed in housebuilding targets or the deregulation of planning restrictions, this neglects the impacts on the natural environment, not only through embodied carbon but in displacing habitats and ecosystems (Buxton and Mercer, 2024, Hill and Mazzucato, 2024).

Cohousing, and its lineage of intentional communities, has long been identified with a culture of sufficiency, in providing means for residents to reduce their energy consumption or use of material resources, alongside the provision of productive spaces and gardens (Nelson, 2018). The model helps move away from sustainable household behaviour driven by individual agency (Jarvis, 2017), to one of 'collective sufficiency' (Alexander and Gleeson, 2018). Yet, it is crucial to

communicate that cohousing does not necessitate collective toil, but instead a form of ‘living better with less’ (Hausknost et al., 2018, p.372). This research provides evidence of an alternative form of ‘abundance’, where the increased shared spaces, facilities and productive gardens of schemes like Chapeltown Cohousing offer a ‘richness’ in lived experience not related to individual material gain, but instead an ethic of communality and collective benefit. Moreover, in creating an alternative compactness, cohousing as an ‘urban’ housing model can be viewed favourably when pitted against extractive forms of densification such as micro- or co-living.

Cohousing thus represents an alternative approach to the urban built environment, that addresses increased construction on finite urban land through the lens of ‘private sufficiency, public luxury’ (Monbiot et al., 2019). In providing means to share land efficiently, but also create more communal spaces and facilities, this resists feeding the ‘urban growth machine’ (Logan and Molotch, 2007). Cohousing can generate a bottom-up form of collective sufficiency that could assist municipal efforts at post-growth low-carbon transitions (Hausknost et al., 2018). Yet, as will be discussed further in the policy recommendations, the attitude to land offered by community-led housing often sits uneasily within ‘social value’ frameworks administered under municipal austerity, where public benefit discussions around land are often tied to conventional fiscal rules (Ferm and Raco, 2020, Pauker and Hamiduddin, 2024). While there are undoubtedly alternative expressions of abundance beyond growth (Hickel, 2019, Jackson, 2021), the translation of local action to wider municipal or regional programmes requires further elaboration.

### 8.3.2 Theoretical contribution

This thesis viewed cohousing through the theoretical lens of property relations, in arguing that the housing model offered a different approach to multi-residential housing from conventional understandings of property. While recognising the flaws of a term like property, the initial discussion of relational approaches to property was moulded to include heterodox conceptualisations from legal and urban studies. Moreover, this helped to zoom out from the day-

to-day workings of cohousing groups to generate new abstractions, thereby transferring learnings from practice to theory (Fennell, 2011).

Research has already shown that the lived property relations in cohousing communities, including in informal understandings of day-to-day issues such as shared space or more fundamental considerations of diverse tenures, were often more crucial than static, legal expressions of property rights (Blandy, 2013, Blandy et al., 2018). The cohousing cases discussed here, particularly ChaCo and Cohousing Co-op in Chapter Five, attested to this with their processes of consensus and non-violent communication practices leading their approach to co-operative governance, ensuring that social agreements bound their respective communities together. A shared set of values, or what Fitzpatrick (2018) calls a 'bundle of values', can be seen as more intrinsic than what might be conceived in the legal 'bundle of rights'. These principles can underpin a range of shared practices and actions that have a real impact on the built environment, through the 'adaptation of boundaries, placement of objects and physical occupation of space' (Felstead et al., 2019, p.8). While legal theorists like Blandy (2013) have identified how cohousing offers an alternative set of property relations, including in leasehold communities, this research marks its theoretical contribution by illuminating the alignment of cohousing to a co-operative structure. This builds on the work of others who have focused on the more general application of co-operative legal models across the housing sector. For example, Apps (2021) discussed how co-operatives deal with the land and housing in a unitary sense, as in contrast to the division of housing from common space in strata title. As Apps argues, the dualistic approach found in strata, and indeed leasehold can lead to the residents being disenfranchised from the management and maintenance of their collective spaces.

Models like Cohousing Co-operative and ChaCo offer a unique approach to property through the mutually reinforcing relationship between the socio-architectural form of cohousing and the member-controlled co-operative structure. Beginning with day-to-day relationship to shared

space and facilities in property, such cohousing and co-operative values adroitly deal with potential conflicts including over the 'grey space' of multi-residential housing (Crabtree-Hayes et al., 2024). An inclusive approach to member-involvement, regardless of tenure, encourages all residents to feel connected to the spaces beyond their private housing, and enfranchised to be a part of maintaining it over time, whether in small actions in shared gardens or improving accessibility for all residents. This shared 'culture' (Felstead et al., 2019), is underpinned in a co-operative legal structure where the community, rather than the individual is prioritised. This connects the everyday stewardship of land and housing to long-standing understandings of how such collective property schemes exist for a defined, often marginalised group of people in housing need— as represented by ChaCo's demographic targets and affordable tenure options. The unity between cohousing and co-operative helps move multi-residential housing governance away from the predominance of economic values of protecting and transferring housing assets, to one where co-operatives use their stability and good governance to make decisions that will be in the interests of future generations. This alternative approach to property can be contrasted to the financial imperatives that underpin strata and leasehold, that emphasise the property rights not only of individual owners, but outside investors, whether they be developers or property management companies (Blandy et al., 2018). As the history of strata title shows, the structure has come to be preferred for its transactional efficiency (Apps, 2021), rather than for being attune to housing need, both in access and use.

In offering an inclusive cohousing model, cases such as ChaCo add to discussions of 'commoning' in cohousing. Blandy (2013) has argued that cohousing could represent a form of 'limited-access commons'. Meanwhile a number of studies have pointed to how limited-equity co-operatives may represent examples of commons (Huron, 2015, Sevilla-Buitrago, 2022, Singer, 1996). In uniting these two strands of thinking, cohousing schemes like ChaCo can bring the socio-architectural focus on shared living in line with a limited-equity co-operative governance model that provides the 'basis of less commodified forms of life' (Huron, 2015, p.964). The values inherent to such

common property initiatives emphasise the importance not only of the cohousing culture of attentiveness to shared space, but how limited-equity co-operatives resist the distortive impact of rent-seeking from property. While stopped from limiting house price rises, ChaCo used the structures of their leases to support the collective commitment to the co-operative membership model and efforts at affordability (McKenna et al., 2024). As Huron (2015) shows, the commitment of co-operative groups to founding principles of limited-equity access can underpin processes of commoning over generations. This study also contributed to theorising over how commons develop over time, following the stages of a cohousing development from group formation to occupation (Felstead et al., 2019). Such often lengthy endeavours necessitate strong, inclusive governance processes, led by consensus agreement-making and practices of non-violent communication. With initial battles to secure commons often giving way to lived experiences of exhaustion or division (Huron, 2015), ongoing processes of group-building like in Cohousing Co-operative show how commons can be sustained.

A further contribution to commons theorising builds on discussions of how processes of commoning often operate in conflict with the state and rule of law (Jeffrey et al., 2012). This entails negotiating the tension of working in partnership with practitioners implicated in state-led activities including planning and legal frameworks (Felstead et al., 2019), without ceding too much control that may compromise, or co-opt articulations of the commons (Chatterton, 2016). Examples like ChaCo showed how cohousing groups can make demands of the state, and work in collaboration with institutional players, while maintaining their founding vision both in built form and legal structure. While recognising the implication of Sherry's argument that 'Western land law' is fundamentally capitalist (2017), rather than forgoing an alternative approach to multi-residential property, both formal and informal processes of commoning can be generated by such heterodox housing schemes. In doing so, law is removed from its narrow silo and put into conversation with the broader social and natural environment that animate alternative encapsulations of property (Blandy et al., 2018). Not only does this better reflect the diversity of

social understandings of property, such as through diverse tenures, but a relationally-informed approach also aligns commons theorising with a post-growth agenda that includes what Nelson and Chatterton (2022) see as both 'the concept and practice of sharing land and other resources such as housing on the basis of use rights and co-governance' (p.58). Moreover, the contribution of this thesis is situated within the broader discussion of the post-growth potential of cohousing (Hagbert et al., 2020) and housing co-operatives (Gerber and Gerber, 2017). As such, the research has shown evidence of how the informal and formal structures of cohousing, co-operative governance are generative of processes that steward, rather than exploit land - a key aspect of commoning (Thompson, 2015). From the efforts at bushfire prevention at Cohousing Co-op, to the ongoing remediation of soil in ChaCo, along with the small plot ratio of schemes like Stellulata, the cohousing cases showed how groups lived lightly on land, and in harmony with it.

The conventional discourse of property views land simply as another commodity to be traded, but this fails to recognize its characteristics, most fundamentally that it is finite, and the source of all life. In rejecting this distortion, legal scholar Varner (1994) has offered an alternative, 'ecological' theory of land, that treats 'it as a public resource that individuals hold only in a stewardship (or trust) capacity' (p.143). In building on such reconceptualisations, this research has argued that cohousing can align the sharing of space and mutual amenity to a positive post-growth approach to multi-residential housing. This actively pushes back against discourses of increased housing supply, that offers an untrammelled 'abundance' (Klein and Thompson, 2025). Such evocations of abundance can often be seen as treating 'nature as a limitless resource to be exploited for human gratification' (Alexander, 2010, p.3). While arguing for an alternative discourse of 'sufficiency' in housing and land use (Monbiot et al., 2019), including in relation to models like cohousing, this research emphasised the related social benefits of collective land and housing stewardship.

Whether this was the 'richness' of sharing material goods, the amenity gained from a communal garden, or the conviviality and support that came with living in a cohousing community, the cases contrasted to a vision of abundance divorced from environmental limits. In doing so, this reveals

the counter-hegemonic potential of common property values that prioritises environmental and social benefits ahead of economic outcomes (McCarthy, 2006).

Another theoretical contribution of this research relates to wider discourses around urban planning. This built on existing engagement between cohousing advocates and articulations of 'participatory planning' (McCamant and Durrett, 2011, Ruiu, 2017, Tummers, 2015). However, the promise of a participatory planning culture facilitating residents wanting to co-design their own houses, and shape their neighbourhoods, has largely not eventuated (Hall, 2014). This study argued that in order to overturn an urban planning system tied to market imperatives that a clear focus on redistributing power to communities is required. In further drawing on the potential contribution of cohousing to commoning, this learnt from scholarship around 'commons planning' (Marcuse, 2009). This sees value not just in what the cohousing cases deliver beyond narrow conceptions of private property, but what such housing creates in terms of durable forms of alternative living in the city. Such visions resist market orthodoxy and create communities of mutual support, the 'village' of adults and kids, intentionally bound together by shared facilities and activities. As such, a new 'commons' planning agenda could recognise what cohousing offers to heterodox approaches to social reproduction, through the productive spaces, gardens and facilities of cohousing developed for local need (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2022, Tummers and MacGregor, 2019). In further learning from radical planning, this links the 'intentional neighbourhoods' of cohousing (Field, 2004), to the lineage of self-build 'neighbourhoods' in the UK, catalogued by Hardy and Ward (1984).

Conventional urban planning, in both Australia and the UK, has for too long remained wilfully blind to the impacts of development and land-use changes. As Tewdwr-Jones (2012) argues, a fresh agenda for planning could 'take the environment and the earth as a starting point, to take account of the earth's limits to growth and change' (p.19). In associating cohousing case studies with post-growth planning (Durrant et al., 2023), this makes a twofold claim, that housing should

both recognise the threats to biodiverse environments and finite land, and have socio-spatial strategies to address them. In identifying that conventional planning is locked into growth dependence (Rydin, 2013, Xue, 2022), this research has argued that new post-growth theories of planning must generate alternative relationships between housing development and finite land, both spatially and socially. One proposal is expressed here is via critique of the mainstream compactness agenda. This built on other scholarship that identified densification as the primary focus of mainstream compact cities. Density continues to be wielded ideologically (Chen et al., 2020), driven by commercial imperatives while ignorant to the relational effects of for-profit housing intensification (Haarstad et al., 2022). Moreover, the automatic equation of density with positive environmental outcomes must be viewed sceptically (McFarlane, 2020), particularly in the 'anti-urban' high-rise tower form (Dovey, 2016). While recognising those who argue that urban planning should de-emphasise density as measure of success (Dodson and Gleeson, 2007), this research agrees with those who identify the potential of a compactness in aid of post-growth (Xue, 2022). In advancing an alternative compactness, this research has drawn from the cohousing cases. One learning, particularly from the so-called 'high-density urban community' (LCC, 2019b, p.2) of ChaCo, is that the social impacts of housing intensification, particularly in relation to gentrification can be defrayed. In delivering a housing scheme that targeted locals from Chapeltown, and offered both affordable shared ownership and rental opportunities, it is an example of 'socially just density' (McFarlane, 2016). Moreover, through the governance practices articulated in Chapter Five, the group was ready to address the challenges of living closer together, negotiating the grey areas in what Huron (2015) calls the 'saturated space' of the city.

The post-growth conceptualisation of planning links to the last theoretical contribution made by this thesis, consideration of the state's role in either supporting or undermining the cohousing model. Negotiating the tensions between community-led groups and government planning functions has been much debated. For example, in advancing the commons, Sevilla-Buitrago (2022) argues that grassroots movements must engage with state planning as a potential

mechanism to 'protect and amplify the circulation of the commons' (p.215). This includes beckoning planners to recognise their own role in supporting alternative methods of social reproduction, including in heterodox housing schemes. Cucca and Friesenecker's study of Vienna probes the potential for bottom-up, autonomous efforts at cohousing to be supported by 'top-down planning' (2021). While recognising the possibility of local authorities to 'upscale' housing innovations like cohousing, the supportive context of Vienna tempers a clear replication to cities like Leeds, Kamberri/Canberra or London. Given the already discussed distortions from the dominance of for-profit development, backed by a state eager to stoke increased market supply, cohousing groups in the UK or Australia face a different proposition to schemes in Vienna.

With many challenges for multi-residential housing, coalescing around the inability of residents to manage their often costly, defective buildings, an inflection point has been reached. Given strata title and leasehold appears unable to deliver the requisite tools for residents to govern their residential communities effectively, an alternative more relationally-informed approach to property is required. This research has outlined, through the cases of Cohousing Co-op and ChaCo, the successful integration of the socio-architectural model of cohousing with the legal structure of a mutual co-operative. This form of multi-residential governance is suggestive of a set of common property values where consensus, communality and collective security, rather than financialisation, are central to its function. Yet as this research has argued, despite the revelatory examples of the cohousing communities, the future of such models will in part depend on the role of the state in shaping property relations. As Dolsak and Ostrom (2003) show, the history of the commons has been tethered uneasily to the role of external actors either shaping or legitimating the governance practices of heterodox groups. Legal scholars have built on this through analysis of cohousing groups, with Blandy (2013) suggesting that 'that collective rights in property are in need of legal recognition, and provide[s] an alternative to the legal positivist approach that can only produce normative property statements from existing statute and case law' (p.172). Yet seen

another way, while there may be possibilities for deep change or revision in how property is treated in law, there are multiple opportunities for developers, aided by the state and the courts to tame any alterity. The example of ChaCo speaks to this tension. While owning the freehold to the land, a situation of relative freedom in contrast to many multi-residential communities, restrictions have been put on them, chiefly by their Whitehall funder in vetoing any attempt to restrict property price rises. Despite demands that the state should boost social inclusion in community-led housing (Lang and Mullins, 2019), ChaCo's dynamic with government funders is often the outcome.

With the housing system in both Australia and the UK remaining wedded to the treatment of property as an asset, alternative housing models must advance a new set of values. As discussed in Chapter Seven, part of the response necessitates rejecting the constant drive for increased supply. In this research, projects such as ChaCo and Cohousing Co-op showed how community-led deliberation advanced a successful model of housing intensification that was also resistant to gentrification, so often the unwelcome partner to new housing developments. In aligning community-led cohousing to a theory of 'slow housing' (Steele, 2012), this does not entail accepting the many frustrations that come with cohousing development, whether state-induced through planning hurdles or construction delays. Instead, speed and scale of new housing provision should be responsive to environmental and social, rather than financial priorities. In tying new development to environmental imperatives, this can position cohousing as part of a post-growth approach to property (Alexander, 2010) and housing provision (Nelson and Chatterton, 2022). Furthermore, in observing the cohousing cases, this would mean embracing the often painstaking work that community-led groups do in building a community, both before and after a development. Given the relative unfamiliarity of cohousing, the effort taken to advertise, discuss and structure a potential project, such as in the case of Chapelton Cohousing, can prove invaluable. This also ensures that the community-led model, with its set of alternative

property relations, ties its theoretical underpinnings to the lived existence of residents (Huron, 2015), and the multitude of challenges in multi-residential housing.

## 8.4 Policy recommendations

The case studies have pointed to some policy recommendations. This includes what might be considered quick wins, along with more transformatory directions.

### **Cohousing and co-operatives – a mutually supportive housing partnership**

As this study argues, the co-operative model can underpin a more inclusive version of cohousing. If governments want to seed further cohousing communities, then supporting a new generation of co-operative could be a good place to begin. ChaCo has shown that while unable to ring-fence house prices, the co-operative structure can be used to constrain onward sale, with leases formulated to ensure that co-operative membership is tied to parking access, rubbish collection and common spaces (McKenna et al., 2024). Further initiatives as discussed in Chapter Two could be the MHOS model used in the LILAC cohousing community in Leeds, or hybrid CLT-Limited-Equity Co-operatives as used in the US, and in some cohousing communities already in the UK (Edwards, 2025, Hudson et al., 2019, Ehlenz, 2014).

With both the Australian and UK housing systems long favouring some form of ownership (Austin et al., 2014), the limited-equity structure could dampen scepticism over the wider application of co-operative models (Blandy, 2013). There has recently been a new emphasis on co-operative housing from Australian practitioners, with a coalition of housing organisations, including Cohousing Australia, pitching a new model that would sit below market rent and above the social housing sector – a so-called ‘Missing Middle Housing Co-operative’ (Kalagas et al., 2023). A limited-equity form, while not able to provide the same returns on investment as a conventional market sale home, could still allow residents to leave a community, if and when they want to, with some level of equity. Moreover, as Apps (2021) argues, in a housing system with ‘normal price inflation’ limited-equity housing can sustain some growth of investment, even with a capping of

capital gain to constrain speculation. However, limited-equity models would still face some resistance from lending institutions and banks (Sherry, 2017b), and as such support is needed from government and progressive financial institutions to deliver schemes that are truly affordable over the longer term.

### **Policies to support cohousing groups bidding for state land**

#### *1) Reforming 'best consideration'*

While Chapeltown Cohousing successfully acquired council-owned land, cohousing would benefit from more predictable processes for land release from public land authorities. There is a reoccurring demand, particularly in the UK, for reforms to how public land is disposed alongside opportunities for community groups to bid for land that could facilitate affordable housing development. A key constraint to disposals of this type in the UK is the requirement for public bodies like local authorities to attain 'best consideration' that is 'reasonably obtainable', which is taken as achieving the highest value (Hill, 2015, Layard, 2019). This means that many non-profit housing associations, charities or community-led housing groups are excluded from a potentially viable option for land acquisition, given that they must compete at, or close to the market rate for land. There have been recent efforts to reform best consideration to allow local authorities to include a range of social and environmental goals when disposing of land (Lord Best, 2023).

#### *2) Support for 'social-public partnerships' on land sites*

Rather than the now conventional redevelopment mixture of private-for sale, market rent and social housing (Beswick and Penny, 2018, Raynor et al., 2020), ChaCo's experience points to a different type of cross-subsidisation. Land sites such as Leopold Rd in Leeds could bring together social housing and community-led models, what Conaty and Large (2013) term 'social-public partnerships' (p.7). While ChaCo does include properties that are for private sale, their co-operative member structures helps restrict onward sale to speculative owners, along with their demographic targets. While there are potential risks that housing associations could be the

dominant partner in the collaboration, the case of ChaCo showed how community groups with strong links to existing local areas can contribute and have an equal role in regeneration schemes, including in joining a ready group of advocates to the development expertise of housing associations. Another possibility for state land assets is a ground lease model. Cohousing Australia is supportive of its potential for co-operatively owned cohousing developments (Kalagas et al., 2023). As a ready example of a programme that promotes ground leases, the Small Sites Small Builders scheme from the GLA that unearthed the Squeezed site included the option for participating local authorities (Kulas, 2022).

### **Cohousing can be done on small sites**

A number of the projects, Stellulata in Kamberri/Canberra and Squeezed in London were schemes that utilised small sites. If infill is truly considered a priority in urban areas including in fostering compactness (Newton and Glackin, 2018, Brill and Raco, 2021), then proportionate backing should be provided to those community-led groups willing to take on difficult brownfield sites left by commercial developers and registered providers. While many cohousing groups may eschew the traditional approach to self-building of historical intentional communities, the time taken by groups to consult neighbours and design a scheme on a challenging plot needs to be better recognised by funders and planning authorities. While ChaCo received further support that was commensurate to their offering and the difficulty of the site, this is not always the case as the example of Squeezed attests to.

### **Transformatory changes in policy and discourse**

In part, what the cohousing case studies have shown is an ability to tackle a number of the contradictions in the dominant approach to housing in both Australia and the UK. Increasingly unaffordable housing, and a lack of resident control in managing issues in multi-residential housing can be addressed by a unity between the cohousing socio-architectural model and co-operative legal structure. Relatedly, the unsustainability of many multiple occupancy buildings,

substituting traditional low-density sprawl with a 'high-rise' iteration, has a response in the human-scale 'dense-low' of cohousing schemes (Larsen, 2019). Moreover, the use of social sharing in cohousing has multiple benefits, environmental, economically and socially in reducing social isolation and providing a supportive urban community (Jarvis et al., 2016, Nelson, 2018, Vestbro, 2010).

Yet, given the cost pressures not only of construction but for groups purchasing land, in absence of further state action, community-led cohousing schemes will continue to proliferate but only for people with significant equity. The unequal, financialised system of land ownership and housing development is a major obstacle, which cannot be remediated, only transformed. In learning from Hall and Massey's conjunctural analysis, many of the contradictions highlighted above need to be challenged with a new 'common sense' (2010, p.70). The post-growth alternative represents a compelling logic that cohousing can be framed within.

This research has suggested that rather than deferring to a supply-driven programme for housing, that a post-growth vision could elevate models like cohousing that offer credentials not in scale or speed but in post-consumerist attention to shared dwelling and living. By underlining these qualities, cohousing could redirect housing and urban planning away from growth-dependence in three distinct ways (Rydin, 2013). Firstly, it would allow for an understanding of land grounded not in economic value, whether local authority capital receipts or maximising returns from private development, but what land use decisions mean for the 'common welfare of the city as a whole' (Marcuse, 2009, p.97). Secondly, in meeting environmental resource constraints, cohousing could provide allied benefits through a 'sufficient', light tread on land (Monbiot et al., 2019), in communally-informed housing. This includes a compactness that utilises the bottom-up capacity of housing communities to share space, thus shrinking the built footprint, and shared goods such as cars that help usher in modes of sustainable travel. Lastly, new housing in the form of cohousing co-operative schemes might provide a route away from continued market inflation. In

learning from macro-economic approaches to post-growth, more housing models that reduce rent-seeking from housing even in a limited-equity form, can assist the transformation away from the inflationary, unsustainable and growth-dependent housing system (Stratford, 2020).

## 8.5 Building on the research findings

The aim of this research was to understand what cohousing represents as an alternative model of multi-residential property, through case studies from Australia and the UK. The first area that the research contributed to was how cohousing related to the governance of multi-residential land and housing. In building on critiques of conventional multi-title structures, leasehold in the UK and strata title in Australia, the analysis in Chapter Five concentrated on two co-operative cohousing communities. In adding to this research, further work could be undertaken to compare the application of cohousing in a co-operative structure to cohousing communities with a leasehold or strata title. This could inform ongoing debate as to whether there is something fundamental about the cohousing form of multi-residential governance in isolation, or whether the unity between co-operative and cohousing provides the optimum approach. Blandy (2023) studied cohousing in a leasehold context and compared it to a non-cohousing co-operative, but a cohousing-only comparison across multiple legal models could draw out any distinctions or areas of overlap. Blandy's work also gestures at another possible future strand of study, in questioning what may be 'inherited' in a co-operative cohousing scheme, as opposed to the more usual passing on of a lease. Addressing how cohousing founder-members consider the issues with developing a legal model that might provide complications for their inheritors is an important discussion worth exploring further.

Secondly, the thesis fills a gap in discussions of how cohousing relates to planning norms, in this case compactness. With the cohousing case studies offering community-centred forms of brownfield regeneration and gentle density, noted tenets of compactness policy, the research adds to advocacy for 'socially just density' (McFarlane, 2016). Cohousing's contribution to the

compactness discussion could also be analysed through an evaluation of different architectural types of cohousing. In this research, all the cohousing schemes were low-rise, no more than two storeys. However, there are compelling examples of medium-rise projects, both in new examples Australia (Palmer, 2019), and in contexts where collaborative housing is established (Nelson, 2018)..

The last area of research that the study added to was how cohousing fitted into the broader housing system, amid ongoing debate as to how to address the lack of affordable, sustainable housing. Rather than the blind ignorance to environmental limits embodied in the political drive for new supply, through its deliberative method the cohousing cases are attuned to both local communities and the natural world. To further understand the difference offered by cohousing, specific community-led projects could also be counterposed to conventional developments that have been funded through the same government program. As discussed, the Leopold Rd project that ChaCo was a part of was one of six schemes nationally to be fast-tracked by Homes England (LCC, 2019b) under the Housing Infrastructure Fund Marginal Viability stream (DLUHC, 2021). Within that program, the first tranche funded 10 projects at a similar level (£2 million pounds and under). It would be instructive to further analyse how the Leopold Rd development compared to those other projects. This would help interrogate the progression of brownfield regeneration in the UK, and how cohousing as a model fits not only into that imperative, but into the broader 'viability' demand in planning (Ferm and Raco, 2020). This is particularly important given the renewed focus on 'New Towns' in the UK, which the UK Cohousing Network has identified as an opportunity for the sector (UKCN and CLH, 2025). Yet, as Sennett (2024) argues, there needs to be an alternative to the two regular refrains of new urban housing development in the UK - the high-rise mega-build on a brownfield site generated for investor-grade housing, or the attempt to create a series of new towns 'with the stroke of a pen'. While cohousing will never compete with these in scale, this may be its virtue, in instead providing the environmental and social benefits that are illusory in many conventional forms of multi-residential development.

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## Appendix 1: Interviews with codes

Interview subject	Name code	Date
Older Women's Cohousing (London) founder	OWCH1	2 <sup>nd</sup> September 2022
Squeezed (London) member – first interview	SQM1a	13 <sup>th</sup> April 2023
Cohousing Co-op (Nipaluna/Hobart), member – first interview	CCoop1a	15 <sup>th</sup> May 2023
Property Collectives (Australia) developer	PropCol1	29 <sup>th</sup> June 2023
On the Brink (Sheffield) member	OTB1	13 <sup>th</sup> July 2023
Chapelton Cohousing (Leeds) member 1	CCM1	14 <sup>th</sup> August 2023
Housing Advocate (Nipaluna/Hobart)	TasHousing1	9 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
Cohousing Co-op (Nipaluna/Hobart), member second interview	CCoop1b	9 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
Cohousing Co-op (Nipaluna/Hobart) architect	ArchCoop	9 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
The Commons (Nipaluna/Hobart) member	COMMONS1	10 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
Cascade Cohousing (Nipaluna/Hobart) member 1	CasCM1	10 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
Cascade Cohousing (Nipaluna/Hobart) member 2	CasCM2	10 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
SGS Economics and Planning Executive Director	SGS1	12 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
Cohousing Canberra member	CohoCan1	16 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
ACT Government official, Demonstration Housing Project	ACT1	17 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
Stellulata Cohousing (Kamberri/Canberra), member	Stel1	17 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
Architect – Stellulata Cohousing (Kamberri/Canberra)	ArchACT	18 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
Cascade Cohousing (Nipaluna/Hobart), member – interview undertaken in Melbourne	CasCM3	19 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
Victoria St Property Collectives (Naarm/Melbourne), member	PropCol2	20 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
Andy Fergus, architect and advisor to deliberative developers and community-led housing groups	AndyFergus1	25 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
Five Rivers Cohousing (Sheffield) member	FRM1	16 <sup>th</sup> November 2023
Greater Canberra, member	GreaterCan1	22 <sup>nd</sup> November 2023
Leeds City Council regeneration officer	LCC1	18 <sup>th</sup> December 2023
Unity Housing Association executive	UHA1	18 <sup>th</sup> December 2023
CEO, Homes Tasmania (speaking in a personal capacity)	MT1	22 <sup>nd</sup> February 2024
Chapelton Cohousing (Leeds) member 2	CCM2	29 <sup>th</sup> February 2024
Chapelton Cohousing (Leeds) member 3	CCM3	29 <sup>th</sup> February 2024
Former Leeds City Council regeneration officer	LCC2	22 <sup>nd</sup> March 2024
Architect – Unity Housing association (Leeds)	ARCHL1	22 <sup>nd</sup> March 2024
Architect – Chapelton Cohousing (Leeds)	ARCHL2	7 <sup>th</sup> May 2024
Ann Apps – University of Newcastle, Australia - lecturer	AAPPS	16 <sup>th</sup> May 2024
Squeezed London member, second interview	SQM1b	31 <sup>st</sup> January 2025
Community Led Housing London, Director	CLH1	19 <sup>th</sup> March 2025

## Appendix 2: Participant information sheet

Bruno Friedel, School of Geography and the Environment, Oxford University Centre for the Environment University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford, OX1 3QY United Kingdom

University email: bruno.friedel@ouce.ox.ac.uk

### Participant information sheet for research on the cohousing model

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: SOGE1A2021-038

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

#### Why is this research being conducted?

This research is focused on the cohousing model. It is primarily interested in exploring the issues that cohousing groups undergo in attempting to secure developable land and in the relationships of cohousing groups to the land that they're situated on. The research aims to investigate how cohousing groups interact with the existing planning and housing system, and what this may suggest about the strengths, weaknesses, obstacles, opportunities and tensions surrounding the model.

#### Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been identified because you're a member of a cohousing group, or a stakeholder or practitioner connected to a cohousing group, or part of the regulatory environment that is under examination as part of the study. This study aims to look at distinct case studies of cohousing groups in both the UK and Australia, with a possible 10-15 interviews per case study.

#### Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the study, without giving a reason, by advising us of this decision. As a research participant you can withdraw from the study by informing the researcher. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed is before the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 2025.

If you decide to withdraw any information not corroborated by another interview or information source will be withdrawn from the study. Any direct quotes used will be taken out of the finalised research.

#### What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

Your participation in the research will follow the below steps, with clear guidance and points for you to ask questions along the way, along with opportunities for you to withdraw from the study if you so choose.

1. The consent form attached to this information sheet runs through the research and seeks your consent for each activity. I will have a copy of the information sheet and consent form printed out for you to read through again and fill out before we begin. An interview

forms the main part of the research. The interviews take a semi-structured form in that they follow a number of key themes, but not a rigid question and answer format. Key themes under question include: development and specific land access issues, policies and laws on state land disposal, cohousing groups and land acquisition, cohousing and urban planning, understandings of land ownership and/or stewardship, cohousing and environmental sustainability.

2. Following the interview, a transcription will be created of our conversation. This aims to be an accurate outline of our conversation. The material from this conversation will form part of my research and help me answer some of the key questions I've identified. How this transcription will be managed is answered further below.
3. I expect the interview to last for up to 1 hour. At points throughout the interview I'll stop and ask if you're OK to continue. You'll be free to stop at any time.
4. It may be the case that I would like to interview you further. Of course if you'd rather not undertake any further questions or would like to defer to another time that's more than fine.
5. Further to the above, I may like to include you as part of a focus group or group interview. Of course you may prefer not to.
6. With your consent, I would like to audio record you so I can have an accurate record of our conversation.

#### **What are the possible disadvantages in taking part?**

For cohousing members - there may be interview topics that could lead to questions about your household, the cohousing community and other matters relating to your home. If you feel like you'd prefer not to answer these questions, then that is more than fine.

For government/civil service representatives - there may be themes that raise questions about sensitive government matters or decision-making processes. You're of course welcome not to answer questions as you see fit.

#### **Are there any benefits in taking part?**

While there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this research will lead to better understanding of the cohousing model in Australia and the UK and produce learnings that could assist cohousing or similar housing forms.

#### **What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?**

For this study a number of types of data will be collected from participants. This includes:

- Consent records – i.e. written consent forms
- Contact details for the purpose of this research only
- Audio recordings
- Transcript of audio recordings

The consent records is important in order to fully gain your assent to each part of the research activity. Contact details are kept so clarifications or follow-ups can be made post the research and also so researchers can contact me about future studies. You can of course opt-out of being part

of future studies. Identifiable data including consent forms will be stored in soft copy form on the University's OneDrive for Business, which has been approved by the University's Information Security team for the storage of research data. Along with hard copy forms this data will be kept for the minimum storage period of three years after publication according to University policy.

As discussed above, audio recordings and a transcript of the conversation will be collected in order to ensure an accurate record of the interview and for findings to be verified upon submission of any thesis or publication.

Every effort will be made to anonymise your identity if you so desire, however it will be impossible to fully anonymise data in many circumstances, and you may be indirectly identifiable in the published research even if we don't use your name.

The researcher and the researcher's supervisor will have access to the research data. Research data may be transferred to, and stored at, a destination outside the UK and the European Economic Area, namely Australia. Identifiable data will be removed whenever possible and any data transfer will be done securely and with a similar level of data protection as required under UK law.

**Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?**

The findings from the research will be written up in a thesis and may also be included in academic publications and conference presentations. Every effort will be made to anonymise your identity but in some circumstances it may be possible for participants to be identifiable from the outputs.

I would like your permission to use direct quotations in any research outputs, with or without your identity attached as you so choose.

A copy of my thesis/ dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the [Oxford University Research Archive](#) where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

**Data Protection**

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

**Who has reviewed this study?**

This study has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: SOGE1A2021-038)

**Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact Bruno Friedel at [bruno.friedel@ouce.ox.ac.uk](mailto:bruno.friedel@ouce.ox.ac.uk), and we will do our best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Geography and the Environment Departmental Research Ethics Committee

Email: [curec@ouce.ox.ac.uk](mailto:curec@ouce.ox.ac.uk); Address: Oxford University Centre for the Environment  
University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford, OX1 3QY United Kingdom

**Further Information and Contact Details**

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Bruno Friedel, School of Geography and the Environment, Oxford University Centre for the  
Environment University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford, OX1 3QY United Kingdom

University email: [bruno.friedel@ouce.ox.ac.uk](mailto:bruno.friedel@ouce.ox.ac.uk)

## Appendix 3: Consent form

### Consent form for research on the cohousing model

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: SOGE1A2021-038

Purpose of Study: This research is focused on the cohousing model. It is primarily interested in exploring the issues that cohousing groups undergo in attempting to secure developable land and in the relationships of cohousing groups to the land that they're situated on. The research aims to investigate how cohousing groups interact with the existing planning and housing system, and what this may suggest about the strengths, weaknesses, obstacles, opportunities and tensions surrounding the model.

**Please initial  
each box if you  
agree with the  
statement**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet version 2, dated 07.08.24 for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until 1/September/2025, without giving any reason.

I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I give approval for my name to be revealed in any research output

I give approval for the name of my organisations to be revealed in any research output

I understand the extent to which I could be identifiable from any publications

I consent to being audio recorded.

I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.

I consent to participating in an interview via email correspondence, with the emails clearly marked as for interview purposes.

Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):

- a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or**
- b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable. **or**
- c) I agree to the use of direct quotations, attributed to my name, in research outputs.



I would like to read a copy of a transcript to comment on following the interview.

I would like to read a copy of the final report, and any publication that features my interview.

I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

I agree to take part.

I agree that my personal contact details can be retained in a secure database so that the researchers can contact me about future studies.

\_\_\_\_\_ dd / mm / yyyy

Name of participant

Date

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_ dd / mm / yyyy

Name of person taking consent

Date<sup>5</sup>

Signature

<sup>5</sup> \*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant. Once this has been signed by both parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form. The original signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents, which must be kept in a secure location.