



Anthropology Book Forum

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KINGFISHER, CATHERINE PÉLISSIER. 2022. *Collaborative Happiness: Building the Good Life in Urban Cohousing Communities*. New York: Berghahn Books, 242 pp., ISBN 9781800732391

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What are the ingredients of a good life? This is the question that acts as a red thread throughout the 242 pages of Catherine Kingfisher's book, *Collaborative Happiness: Building the Good Life in Urban Cohousing Communities*. Situated in the study of well-being and happiness, this work provides a compelling argument for urban cohousing communities as an alternative, collaborative, and feasible option for creating a good life in the urban context. Drawing from extensive research spanning over multiple years of two urban cohousing/collective housing communities in Canada and Japan,ⁱ Kingfisher offers a rich and detailed ethnographic account of the residents in Quayside Village and Kankanmori to present the processes and happenings in the making of these communities, giving the readers a glimpse into their daily lives.

The book has set out its goal “not only to describe what urban cohousing looks like but also to feed the increasing awareness of cohousing as a viable option and to argue for placing it on the list of interventions that can improve both our daily lives and the condition of our planet” (5), by “complementing breadth with depth—by providing a full-length movie, as it were, to fill out the snapshots” (17–18). And quite literally, the four film shorts accompanying the text and aptly referred to throughout the chapters contribute very helpful visual aids to help with the imagination of the space and put a face to the (real) names of the residents. The book is based on the premise that, against the rise of hyperindividualism in many societies (including such traditionally collectivist ones as Japan's), there exists a growing call to understand well-being and happiness as collectively built, and therefore cohousing as the solution to many social problems characterized

by loneliness and fragmented social relations, in addition to overconsumption and environmental concerns.

The stories of the residents in Kankanmori and Quayside Village gradually unfold in a meandering course, with the life histories of representatives from each community completed by the meticulous description of the interactions in community-building activities. The book starts with an introduction, offering the theoretical background on the study of happiness, with Gordon Mathews and Carolina Izquierdo's framework centering on three levels (macro, meso and micro) and four dimensions of well-being as the guiding lens. Chapter 1 sketches an overview of the two communities, with their principles, demographics, basic spatial summary and personal narratives laid out. Chapters 2 and 3 elaborate further on the processes, activities and principles that make cohousing/collective housing what it is, focusing on the dimension of the interpersonal in the collective meaning-making. A parallel conversation between philosophy and practice, as Kingfisher calls it, is conducted in each context, and this is where the ethnographic details shine through in presenting both the chartered rules and what happens on the ground. While in Kankanmori, community "is collaboratively produced in a deliberate, overtly planned way" (133), and "intimate public space was seen as a mechanism for building and maintaining community (126), the permeable boundaries between the public and the private allow for more fluidity in connection among Quayside Village residents. Through analyzing exemplary decision-making processes, characteristic activities such as common meals or cleaning of shared spaces, regular meetings, and their solution of conflict, the philosophy set out at the founding of the communities is carefully dissected in comparison with the practice of those principles in everyday life. The idea of the good life is also described for each of the communities: for the Canadians, the comfort of connection afforded by proximity with others; and for the Japanese, a balanced set of oppositions, a togetherness that nurtures and does not swallow the individual. While not having explicitly defined what community is, Kingfisher has shown how communities are made and what they are about through the vignettes, stories and conversations retold.

Chapter 4 then merges the two communities together by detailing the exchanges that the research team facilitated for representatives of each community to visit the other. Here, the researcher, as both a participant in the daily activities and the observer of community-making processes, took a step back to allow the voices of the protagonists—the residents in cohousing/collective housing—

to take center stage, embodying the collaborative nature of the research as much as the communities' own. The self-reflection from the residents' travel diaries, with them acting as co-researchers, as well as the discussion and implemented changes as a result of the two ten-day exchanges exemplifies the spirit of collaboration (and maybe friendly rivalry, where residents wonder "if we're really doing things the best way," 147), not just among the residents of Kankanmori or Quayside Village, between the researchers and the residents but also between the two communities. The concluding chapter brings the argument back to the call to understand well-being, happiness and the good life in the bigger context of national and international development policies, asserting the need to focus on the social, the collective and the community and away from the personal, the individual. As the author recounted the remark by Ikuko Koyabe, a pioneer in the collective housing movement in Japan, "individual well-being depends on being part of a community and developing bonds with multiple and diverse others," rather than approaches that prioritize one's own needs mainstreamed by positive psychology and popular culture (185).

Overall, Catherine Kingfisher has made a compelling case for the promotion, development and expansion of cohousing models as a viable alternative to other urban living arrangements, in the pursuit of happiness and the good life. The ethnography is well written, the language is accessible and generally the book can easily be read by an audience of various backgrounds, including policymakers; housing developers interested in cohousing; scholars in the study of well-being and happiness, housing and social transformation; as well as students of varying maturities in architecture, built environment and of course in the social sciences, especially anthropology. It can be an excellent reading for introductory courses in interdisciplinary studies.

Phuong Nguyen is a doctoral researcher in the SNSF Project *Aspiration for Change 4.0: The Making of Innovation in Viet Nam* at the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies (ISEK), Universität Zürich, Switzerland. With interests in urban ethnography, youth and technology, for her PhD project, Phuong is investigating innovations in the sharing economy of the PropTech industry (property technology), coworking and coliving spaces in urban Viet Nam.



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ⁱ As the author noted, the term varies in the two contexts: while in Canada, “cohousing” is adopted, Japanese interlocutors prefer to call the model “collective housing”, which has connotations related to communism and socialism in the West.