

## **Freedom**

**A conversation about Sweden's first senior co-housing community with:**

**Kertin Kärnekull (77), resident, international co-housing advocate, architect, and founder of the group Bo i Gemenskap [Living in Community]**

**Mette Kjørstad (71), resident, chairwoman, and member of Boföreningen Framtiden [Future Housing Association]**

**Ingela Blomberg (63), Färdknäppen architect, co-housing advocate, and member of Boföreningen Framtiden.**

## **Women**

**Kerstin:** I've lived at Färdknäppen for over 25 years, but I've been part of the cause for nearly half a century. In the late 1970s, along with a group of ten women, among whom were architects, researchers, and scientists, I took part in a discussion about possible alternative, community-based housing models. We called our idea "being together." At the time, co-housing was not a term anyone had ever heard of, and "being together" fully encapsulated our ideas. And as we were refining our project, we discovered that someone had already put it into practice. In Denmark. They made our dream a reality.

**Ingela:** The original idea, broadly speaking, was to approach daily chores such as cleaning and cooking as a group. You don't need to hire people from outside the community to take care of everything for you, because your home is the result of a collective effort. During those discussions we had several decades ago, we thought about what we wanted our lives to look like. Our list of dreams was as follows: having lots of room, being able to meet with one another whenever we wanted, living in a single building, supporting each other, and cooking and sharing meals together. But the word that preceded all of the above was "freedom." We didn't think of it as a feminist project, but not because we were opposed to that philosophy. On the contrary: feminism was such an integral part of our being that we saw no need to put a name on it. Our goal was to make home life simpler for people. By "people" we of course meant women, mostly, because they were the ones who were traditionally expected to take care of the home. The rule at Färdknäppen is that every resident has to cook for everyone once every six weeks. This arrangement draws occasional complaints from men who think it threatens their independence. Well, what they see as a constraint is actually liberating for women.

**Mette:** After forty years, you finally get to answer the question: "What's for dinner?" by saying: "I don't know." Once a year we hold an open house. 80% of the visitors are women. When men come, it's usually with their wives. Today 17 of our 56 residents are men, and only three of them are single. Kerstin likes to joke that men are so rarely interested in co-housing because they can find women to cook and care for them. She's just kidding, but there's a kernel of truth to every joke. And that's too bad. Aging single men are at greater risk

than any other group: on average, they drink and smoke more than women, have worse diets, and die earlier. In their old age they need women more than women need them.

**Kerstin:** Unfortunately, that group never ended up moving in together. My husband had absolutely no interest in co-housing. Only after my divorce could I move into a place organized along the principles that I had been exploring for several decades. There was nothing about my new home that I found surprising. I just thought, “finally!”

### **Motivation**

**Mette:** I moved to Sweden from Norway. I met my husband here and decided to stay. That’s when I got my first taste of community living: we shared a single house with another couple, with them living upstairs and us downstairs. I would choke at the very thought of a house that was fenced off from its neighbors. After we divorced I moved into an apartment building, where I was surrounded by people with kids of a similar age as mine. My children eventually moved out, my partner died, and I was left all by myself. A stroke of fortune led me to Färdknäppen, where I’ve been active on the board for eight years, and its chairwoman for six. I’m happy to be here. In the past I worked as the head of a public health department and an environmental protection department. One of the first things I learned about senior citizens was the oft-repeated phrase: “Loneliness is bad for your health.” Elderly people have to have someone to share meals with. That’s one way of coping with loneliness. A boxed meal microwaved by a social worker won’t replace a dinner with friends.

**Kerstin:** Co-housing allays our fear of growing old. It shows you that even at an old age, you can still have a fulfilling life. The presence of other people reduces your and your children’s anxiety—after all, aging is a family matter.

### **Beginnings**

**Kerstin:** In 1993, the year Färdknäppen was built, there were around 40 co-housing communities in all of Sweden. All of them were based on the model we designed. Those communities, however, were all multi-generational, while we specifically created our home for people in the latter half of their lives. Let’s be real: older people have different needs. Take one of our founders, for example: she wanted to live in a community, but she had no desire to be surrounded by children all the time. She raised her own kids and wanted to relax.

### **Property**

**Kerstin:** This is an interesting topic. In the 1980s a political decision was made to build 15 different types of co-housing communities. It’s extremely important to have politicians and decision-makers on your side. The founders of Färdknäppen hired a municipal construction company to find a site for the future house. Many co-housing communities in Sweden rent their properties from the city, whereas in the United States everything is privately owned. It’s a matter of cultural differences. I remember a meeting we had with Russians. For them, people saddled with the baggage of communism, the idea of communal living was repulsive. Likewise, Afghans were tired of living in groups. They dreamed about getting their own apartment. Also, different generations have different views on the issue. In Hungary, the co-

housing movement is gaining traction among young people, who treat it as something new and who don't have any traumas associated with a system imposed on them from the top-down.

If I could give one piece of advice to countries where co-housing is just getting off the ground: create an association for people interested in co-housing. Here in Sweden we have Boföreningen Framtiden, where Mette and Ingele are board members. These associations show the government how many people could potentially become involved in co-housing programs.

Another important thing to have is a set of clear rules that regulate who can join a given community. It's important for groups to be diverse; in the case of co-housing for seniors, this means striking the right balance between older seniors, seniors, and younger seniors. You want the right mix of people aged 50 to 90. At Färdknäppen, the youngest person is 54 years old, the oldest is 94.

**Mette:** When an apartment becomes available, we have interviews with prospective residents. Our agreement with city hall is that we have our own in-house waiting list. Who can or can't move in depends on many different factors, such as the size of the apartment in question. If we have three rooms available, we'll take a couple rather than a single person. Our architect Ingela advises communities to consider the need for studio apartments when designing senior housing. Most seniors, after all, are single, and may not be able to afford a two-room unit. Another factor that we take into consideration during the application process is the candidate's age: in order to achieve a balance between different age groups, we're currently looking for younger people. Younger seniors are important and they help us keep this place in working order.

### **Sustainable Development**

Mette: We offer one-, two-, and three-room apartments. In 1993 they were about 10% smaller than typical units in the area. We moved that 10% to our shared space, which is now 380 square meters. When we pay rent, we pay for our apartments and our part of the shared space. In Sweden it's customary for rent to include the cost of a custodian who performs maintenance, a cleaning crew for the stairwell, and the gardeners. But those costs are reimbursed, because we do those things ourselves. It comes out to about 20 euros per month per resident, which is paid out in installments. We also receive refunds for our water bills: after our shared meals, we wash the dishes in two industrial-grade dishwashers instead of having everyone do their own dishes, which means we use less than the amount of water allotted in our rent. That money forms the core of our community budget. We use those funds to buy things like new plants for the garden, exercise equipment, or a new TV. The rent isn't lower than it would be in a typical apartment building, but people with low retirement income can apply for public assistance, and in any case community living is more frugal. We buy less because we share many things. We have three computers, a TV, a gymnasium, a sewing machine, and daily newspapers, free of charge to all residents.

**Kerstin:** We've practically been begging scholars to research our community, but they still haven't figured out how to approach us.

### **Architecture**

**Ingela:** When you design a co-housing building, you need to keep in mind that the common spaces have to have the best location in the entire house. When visitors enter Färdknäppen, they don't encounter a traditional staircase, but a bright, open space with many windows. It's important to be able to look through the windows and see what's happening in the common space as you walk around the house. You need to be in touch with what's going on. Another important feature is a spacious shared kitchen and a dining room with good acoustics. Older people are often hard of hearing, so the acoustics have to be perfect. Designing a house in collaboration with its residents is time-consuming. If you want to understand what a group of future neighbors really want, don't rush the design process. Co-housing teaches you patience and attentiveness to group processes.

### **Organization**

**Mette:** We all regularly clean the common spaces. Every year we do a thorough spring cleaning where we wash the windows and tidy up the garden. We're also split into 6 cooking groups, and there's one cleaning crew needed every day. The cooks work in the kitchen until 5:30, and the cleaners come in immediately afterward. The latter are usually people who still work. The cooks are mostly retired residents, but my boss lets me leave work at 1:00 pm once every six weeks so I can cook for my community. Other people have kids, vaccinations, and parent-teacher conferences—I cook.

### **Challenges**

**Mette:** Open House. When a fantastic older lady is excited about our house, and I have to tell her that she has no chance of joining the community because she's 70 and single, and we're looking for someone from a different age group to improve diversity. It just breaks my heart.

**Kerstin:** The market. Here in Sweden construction problems are mostly resolved using market-based solutions. The market, banks, contractors, developers—they don't understand us. We can't just rely on grassroots groups that take seven years, on average, to finish a project. That's a prospect that turns off potential founders of co-housing communities. Building codes should be amended to allow the construction of multi-unit houses with common spaces. We need to launch a massive movement for community living. We need urban designers, politicians, and developers. We all need to pitch in for this to succeed. Meanwhile, here in Sweden most seniors have never even heard of us. That's too bad, because as a 25-year co-housing resident myself, I see no drawbacks to this model.

**Aleksandra Zbroja**