Article

The Co-'s of Co-Living: How the Advertisement of Living Is Taking Over Housing Realities

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Abstract

Co-living penetrated the urban realm both as a housing format and a neologism with fluid meaning. The co-living concept was developed by various companies in the early 2010s claiming to provide a valuable alternative to flat living in highly competitive rental markets. As a real estate product, co-living consists of all-inclusive rental plans of furnished rooms connected to fully equipped communal areas, conceived both for short-term and long-term stays. The few realized buildings combine collective spaces as laundries and co-working spaces with rooms as small as nine square meters. This kind of layout explicitly targets the urban middle-classer willing to live simultaneously *together and apart*. Differently from other housing formats, co-living is promoted through the jargon of sharing economy more than one of real-estate agencies. The *co*-root is commonly explained in companies' recurring website section "What's co-living?" as *collective*-living, *convenient*-living, and *community*-living. The emphasis on communitarian living echoes the semantics of co-housing. However, co-living *communities* differ radically from co-housing ones, based on a bottom-up initiative of inhabitants subscribing to a contract of cohabitation. In contrast, a co-living community is generated exclusively through economic accessibility. This article gives a critical insight into the mutated meanings of housing in the digital era by analysing co-living companies' narratives and their spatial counterpart in realized buildings. The evidence collected by co-living promotion contributes to addressing a broader shift in real estate towards emphasizing the experiential dimension of lifestyle over space and shelter as primary housing features.

Keywords

co-living; housing; living; real estate

Issue

1. Introduction

At the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the Global Financial Crisis occurred in parallel with several milestone technologies. Think of the temporal sequence of the release of the first iPhone (2007), Lehman Brothers bankruptcy (2008), the official launch of Airbnb (2009), and the release of the first version of the messaging app WhatsApp (2009). With the post-crisis austerity mindset, information technology opened the way to platform economy and sharing economy as an alternative to traditional models (Srnicek & De Sutter, 2016). In this context, several housing formats inspired by this new digital economic space penetrated the real estate market.

Co-living—which first appeared in London in the early 2010s—is the umbrella name for a multiplicity of housing products developed by the tech-friendly branches of real estate. Currently, it could be defined as a hybrid between commercial hospitality, serviced apartments, and co-working spaces. Co-living projects offer micro-units combined with collective facilities and services, compressing the private space to rooms as small as nine square meters, as in the case of The Collective Old Oak in London—one of the first built examples of co-living (see Figure 2).

The previous economic crisis of 1929 saw an analogous flourishing of rationalized and optimized housing solutions for the urban middle-classes. These kinds of

experimental buildings were promoted and debated on architectural magazines and conferences, bearing the signature of leading figures of the CIAM such as Ludwig Hilberseimer, Hans Scharoun, and Sven Markelius. Take into account the Borardinghaus in Berlin (1926), the WuWa in Breslau (1930), and the Kollektivhus in Stockholm (1935; see Aureli et al., 2019; Kries et al., 2017). On the contrary, co-living seems to be off-the-radar from the architectural debate, mainly appearing on non-architectural sources at the present day.

Currently, the co-living companies' profiles can span from the start-up environment to more traditional hospitality and real estate sectors. In any case, the focus on advanced digital tools for communication and management of the locations is a common requisite of all the studied businesses.

The realized projects span from an apartment building renovation in Tokyo to a long-stay hotel chain targeted to international students with several locations across Europe (The Student Hotel), a 500-unit building in the outskirts of London, and a privatization of a one-time pilot project for affordable housing in New York.

All the mentioned cases blend the contractual flexibility of a hotel with longer stay schemes as serviced apartments or dorms, including often co-working spaces and collective kitchens. This kind of layout addresses the younger generations of the urban middle-class, often labelled as "digital nomads," "generation x," "millennials," or "generation rent" (Gautreau & Bond Society, 2018).

"Generation rent" is a definition worth of a specification since it reveals a dichotomic condition. On the one hand, it recognizes flexible ways of working and the growing need of spaces into the city to host freelancers. On the other hand, it describes the socio-economic status of a generation incapable to become homeowners and renting for a longer span of their lives than the previous generations (McKee, 2012). For this reason, generation rent describes more a *privative* condition than an active status. It is not surprising that this class of perpetual urban renters is the main target group of co-living companies. But the inhabitant's economic status alone is not sufficient to explain the rationale of the co-living

project. The fact that housing cost is the main household expenditure in most of Western societies (Pittini et al., 2019) is not only related to a widespread market unaffordability, but also to the social quest for individual and private space in the city.

According to Erik Klinenberg (2012), singularization and *solo* living represent the dominant urban conditions of the contemporary city:

> The cult of the individual spread gradually across the Western world during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But it made its deepest impressions on modern societies in the West and beyond only in the second half of the twentieth century, when four other sweeping social changes—the rising status of women, the communications revolution, mass urbanization, and the longevity revolution—created conditions in which the individual could flourish….The collective project of living alone grew out of the culture of modern cities, not the monastic or transcendental traditions, as we often assume. (Klinenberg, 2012, pp. 13–21)

Working on the fringe between relative affordability—for a middle-class salary—and the pursue of independence, co-living companies positioned themselves as the solution to both these urban needs. To fulfil these goals, the maximum shrink of private space is balanced by externalized collective services (see Figure 1).

In architectural terms, the same dynamics characterized the abovementioned collective housing experiments of the late 1920s. Among many different examples—from the Soviet Dom Kommuna to New York's Apartment Hotels—it is worth mentioning the interest in boarding-houses by prominent figures of the Modern Movement such as Walter Gropius and Ludwig Hilberseimer. The proposals for the two *boardinghauser* respectively of 1926 and 1930 of the two German architects could be interpreted as a recognizable starting point of a typological genealogy culminating with contemporary co-living (Hilberseimer, 2012; Kries et al., 2017). The proposed typology consisted usually in a slab
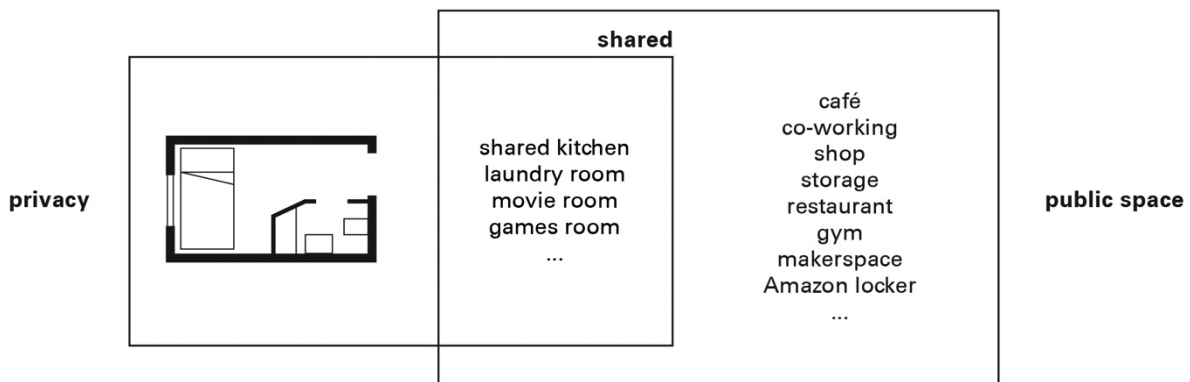

Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of co-living, showing the functional breakdown from privacy to public space.

of furnished rooms with services on the ground floor. Apart from the architectural layout, these projects were considered innovative for the inclusion of mechanic technology to optimize the services offered.

The buildings were equipped with pneumatic lifts to serve meals and with communal laundries on the ground floors (Sandoval-Strausz, 2007). According to the history of mechanization in buildings described by Giedion (2013), the technical achievements in the domestic realm of the last century were all pointed towards the simplification of household labour. Nevertheless, the notion of comfort changed radically from that time. Housing appliances such as the laundry machine or the refrigerator entered the post-war society initially as objects reserved to the urban elites, but in a few decades became products of mass consumption. This shift is crucial to understanding how the second post-war era introduced the possibility of living alone in the city without a centralized collective building.

For this reason, the co-living idea of comfort goes ahead with the simple benefits of mechanization of domestic appliances. The material and immaterial aspects of comfort contribute equally to a broader narrative of urban "wellness." For example, companies promote the comfort of co-living through intangible benefits, including superfast wi-fi connections, premium memberships, and online content (Bierbaum, 2017).

2. Co's

2.1. Definition of a Neologism

Defining co-living drawing from the academic literature is currently tricky. The only extensive and reliable definitions of this phenomenon can be found in the news media and in magazine reportages (Gautreau & Bond Society, 2018; Konrad, 2016; Outsite, 2017; Widdicombe, 2016). This lack of definition leads to several misunderstandings and threads when the concepts are transferred to the media, which tend to confuse socially aimed projects with commercial ones in a blurred discourse. For example, the Italian short term rental company Dove Vivo promotes traditional rooms for students and workers using the term co-living in place of cohabitation (Dove Vivo, n.d.).

The term co-living is a neologism of recent diffusion since it started to appear on the internet in the early 2010s. As it happened with other neologisms such as co-housing (1960s) and co-working (1990s), the consolidation of a concept can take decades. During the stabilising phase of a term like co-housing, this has often been misused by professionals and academic sources (Gresleri, 2015, p. 12). In the same way, even if mentioned as co-living, housing typologies as the Berlinese collaborative *baugruppen*, hacker "communes" of the San Francisco Bay area, or other participative forms of collective housing do not match the concept of co-living (Bhatia & Steinmuller, 2018).

Currently, the definition of co-living appears in few official English dictionaries, as the open-source Wikitionary.org, according to which "coliving" is "living together in the same residence" ("Co-living," 2017), or according to Macmillian dictionary, "a type of shared housing with communal spaces and amenities" ("Co-living,'' 2019). Both definitions fail to highlight the specificities of co-living compared to other forms of collective housing. In 2018, Wikipedia users posted a description in English, concluding that the concept of co-living overlaps with the one of co-housing, which is the opposite thesis of this study ("Co-living," 2022).

To clarify some possible meanings of the "co-" prefix of co-living, it is necessary to examine other definitions (see Table 1). Most major co-living companies reserve a section of their websites in the form of a short text from the title *What's co-living?* The fact itself that companies feel the need to explain the concept is revealing of the *newness* and instability of this notion. Several recurrent keywords emerge from the analysis of the leading operating companies' websites.

In general, in all the *What's co-living* analysed texts the employed jargon pertains more to the one of sharing economy than the one of real estate.

Table 1. Possible meanings of the "co-" prefix in co-living compared to the ones of co-housing.

IS	IS NOT
Co—living	**Co**—housing
Collective—living	**Collective**—housing
Convenient—living	**Collaborative**—housing
Community—living	**Cooperative**—housing

The statement provided by the London-based company The Collective LLC is revealing in this sense:

> Co-living is a way of living in cities that is focused on community and convenience. Live as part of a community, sharing wonderfully designed spaces and inspiring events, with the comfort of being able to retreat to your own fully furnished private apartment at the end of the day. Everything you need to make the most of city life is included in one convenient bill; rent, concierge, superfast internet, all utilities and taxes, room cleaning, exciting daily events and gym membership. So you can do the living, and leave the rest to us. (The Collective, n.d.a)

"Community" and "convenience." The recurrence of these two keywords occurs in almost all the selected texts. By the deliberate interest of co-living companies, the social aim of community-building is one of the central values incorporated in its promotion. As reported by *The Guardian* in 2019 in an article with an interview with Reza Merchant, the CEO of The Collective LLC:

Figure 2. The Collective Old Oak, London. Source: Courtesy of Nick Guttrige.

"We're very different to a conventional property developer," says Merchant, who has said his inspiration for the Collective draws on experiences at Burning Man festival. "If our driver was pure profit, we wouldn't be doing this. There are much easier ways to make money." (Coldwell, 2019, para. 27).

2.2. Community

However, the only selection criteria to be part of a co-living *community* is the economic capacity of its members. The kind of community addressed here is a community of *strangers*, at the antipodes with the intentional communities of other forms of collective housing as co-housing. In fact, as part of this kind of *community*, a co-living dweller must accept several social rules (e.g., declare at the concierge the presence of eventual hosts, or space usage time limitations), explicitly subscribed with the agreement of the service contract (Bierbaum, 2017).

In its early Scandinavian forms, co-housing unfolded as a series of low-dense suburban housing schemes, where middle-class families gathered to build the future community and its physical arrangement. Usually, the housing buildings had no specific features, while particular attention was devoted to the communal house, that hosted various collective activities such as dinners and events. The settlement of the community was—and is—always preceded by the subscription of a cohabitation rule that regulates the uses of the shared capital among the resident community, especially in the permanent co-housing schemes aimed for homeownership (McCamant et al., 1994).

While co-housing is regulated by a contract, in co-living the determination of the community members does not precede occupation. In co-living, the supervision of rules and their surveillance through CCTV cameras is demanded to employed staff, leading to incentives and penalties for the residents usually communicated through social media or messaging platforms—as reported by the on-site investigation of Max Bierbaum in The Collective Old Oak in London (Bierbaum, 2017).

The crucial node of difference between co-housing and co-living, and the profound difference between the two types of communities they generate, resides in the organization of work. The concept of sharing collective spaces would be similar in the two cases, if

co-housing would not ask for a commitment to the residents to self-regulate and self-organize domestic labour (e.g., cleaning, cooking, maintenance). In co-living, following the tradition of the early American residential hotels (Sandoval-Strausz, 2007), domestic labour is performed by employed staff on all the levels, from housekeeping to "community management." As noted by Sandoval-Strausz (2007) in his history of the first American hotels, the issue of professionalization of domestic labour had a disruptive impact on the emancipation of women at the end of the 19th century. In contemporary society, co-housing alternative communities addressing individuals exist, but most of them remain targeted to the traditional family. Co-housing relies on the principle of efficiency in the management of an intergenerational community based on familiar bounds (Gresleri, 2015). Co-living opens to the opportunity to include the most diverse social groups, because it is *not* a proper community, but a resident group of inhabitants managed by an ad hoc staff.

The insistence of co-living companies on the concept of community is also revealing of the dichotomic relationship of co-living with the city, which characterizes its promotional narratives. The contemporary city is presented, on one side, as the natural habitat for co-livers, and, on the other, as the main cause of alienation and isolation to which co-living is presented as an alternative. As exemplified in Common's New York-based co-living company description:

> Shared living spaces, common amenities, and occasional outings provide for a true sense of community that's often lacking in large cities….Co-living is simply a way to make living in a city work better for you. (Common, n.d.)

Again, the urban nature of co-living differentiates it from many suburban co-housing schemes and qualifies its community as a sub-group of the general urban population. Therefore, each member is replaceable because it has no real commitment to a defined community.

While opposite forms of collective living as co-living and co-housing show similarities in using their collective spaces and their spatial organization (separation of private and collective functions), co-living as a term could not refer to *community*-living (see Figures 3 and 4).

2.3. Convenience

The second possible interpretation of the "co-" that emerges in The Collective LLC definition is the one of "convenience." The concept of convenience stems in this case from an explicit replacement of the more typical reference in real estate to affordability. Looking at the prices of co-living plans, it appears that the 30% affordability threshold of rent spending over salary is always surpassed on a city population average. For example, the prices for a furnished room in New York start from

$2100 in the case of Starcity Carmel Place (Starcity, n.d.). Compared to the city average price for the same rentable floor area—approximately $1650 per month if considering an average price of $59 per square meter (RentCafe, n.d.)—it can be observed how the "convenience" issue is at least questionable.

In London, The Collective Old Oak offers rooms of eleven square meters at £1040 per month (The Collective, n.d.b); even here well beyond the threshold of regular rented flats—24.71£ per square meter (Nested, n.d.). It must be said that the inclusion of material and immaterial services in co-living projects is difficult to quantify, since every service (except for room cleaning) is not benefitted individually, but part of the shared services—as the laundry room or the co-working space. In their promotion, co-living companies usually draw the same comparison without explicating that most of the services are shared, usually resulting in a table where co-living is way more affordable than a regular flat rent in the same area coupled with the individual subscription to each of the services they provide. In this quote by the American company Common, this approach is evidently remarked: "Value. Common members save over $500 every month over a traditional studio apartment. Common coliving rooms are also furnished—more than a $4,000 value—and never require a broker fee" (Common, n.d.). According to Common (n.d.), each co-living member saves a total of $6000 a year, plus an extra $4000 for the initial room furnishing, which gives a total of $10000 over a year contract. Such an assumption can be considered realistic only when keeping in mind that the target population of co-living companies is a specific niche of the urban population, with specific consumption patterns.

While the economic frame of co-living is clear to understand, the issue of convenience is not bounded only to the relation with the traditional real estate products. The fact that most co-living projects include a self-sufficient microcosm of services also relates to other urban issues. The proximity of the living place and working place, and the relative mobility costs, are potentially solved by incorporating spaces for production and reproduction in a single building. The idea of the social condenser is not new in the filiation of collective living projects (Vestbro, 2008). Think of the early experiments of social utopia, such as Godin's Familistère or the Soviet Dom Kommuna gigantic dormitories with collective services (Kries et al., 2017). According to Niklas Maak, the possibility of a network of self-sufficient buildings containing the full extent of spaces for production and reproduction is still a valid alternative to the traditional urban models based on the dichotomy between city and countryside (Maak et al., 2020). The "Phalansterology" of Maak et al. (2020) is not only interesting for its radical proposal to appropriate dismissed spaces of the city to re-inhabit with co-living like projects (e.g., shopping malls, post offices, office buildings), it also highlights how the dynamics of daily life embodied in co-living are
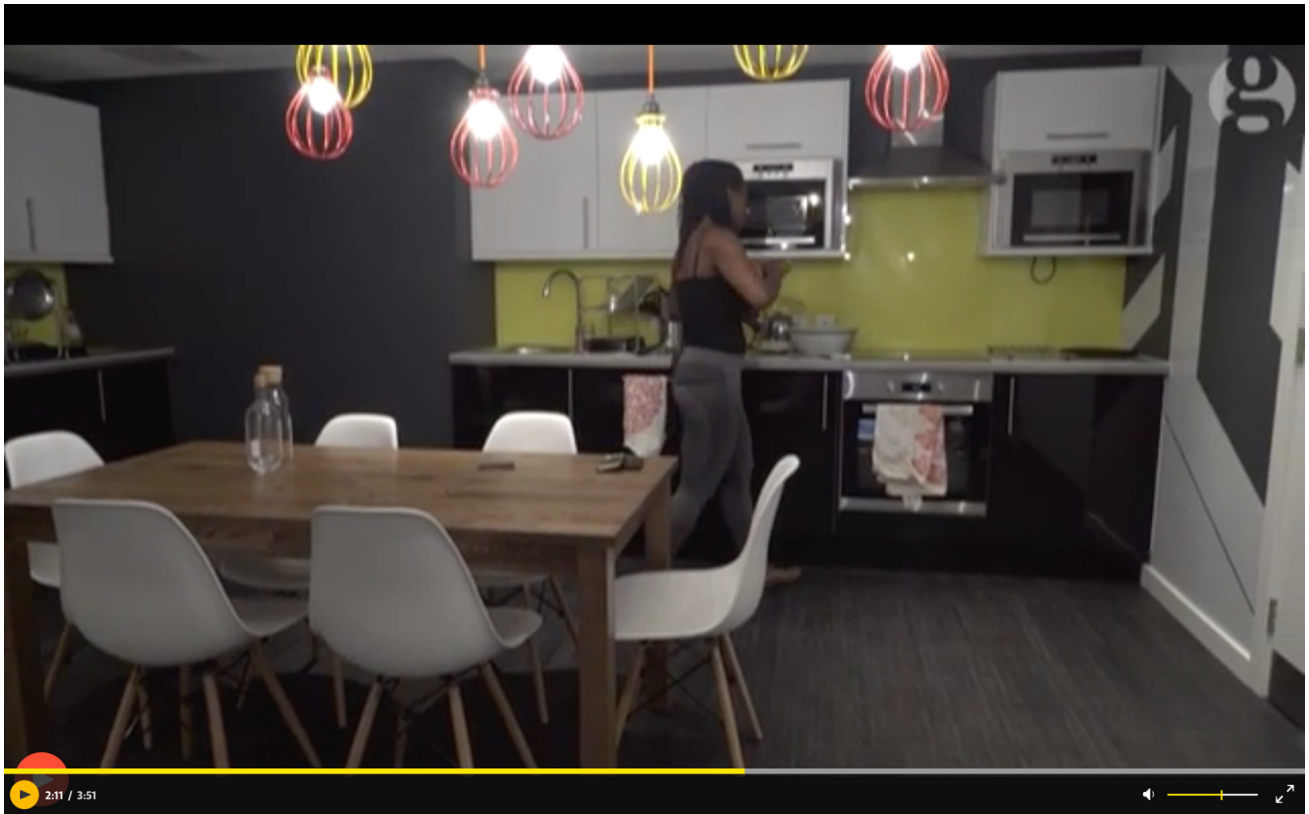
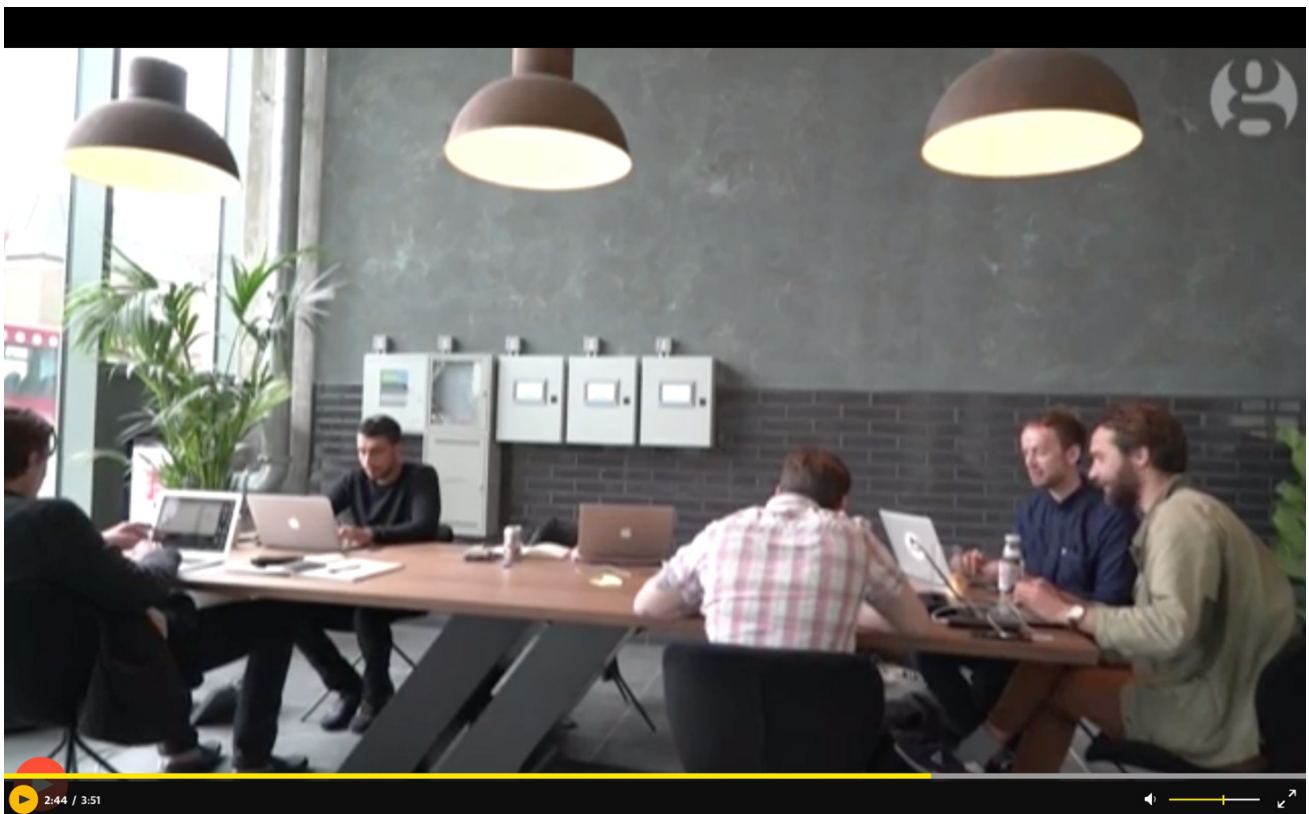**Figure 3.** Collective kitchen of the Collective in London. Source: Still frame from Coldwell (2019).

Figure 4. Co-working space of the Collective in London. Source: Still frame from Coldwell (2019).

extending beyond a niche housing model for urban middle classes. The convenience addressed by The Collective in the description of its amenities is the one of a daily urban routine, embodied in a single building:

> From morning yoga to after-work drinks, movie marathons to ping-pong tournaments, we have a space for your every move. Curl up with a good book in the library, watch the sunset from the roof terrace, nail your to-do list in the co-working space; or host a dinner party in one of the themed dining rooms. It's your choice: French bistro or Japanese tearoom? (The Collective, n.d.b)

The target of co-living is a middle-class consumer that would predictably subscribe to a gym, work from a cafeteria, and spend for a weekly laundry service. In this sense, co-living becomes "convenient" because it offers the same services in the same building and at a lower price. Plus, it addresses a specifically urban (and metropolitan) condition with all its clichés. If the co-living community is artificial, its inhabitants must understand the convenience it addresses in a specific frame. On the one hand, it is not capable of solving the housing crisis or transforming co-living into an affordable housing model. On the other hand, it can be understood as a laboratory for understanding the collective spaces of the contemporary city.

3. Living Taking Over Housing

Looking at co-living under the lenses of "community" and "convenience" peculiarly frames this housing model. On the one hand, it is not different from the other urban increasing inaccessible housing models because of its positioning on the market in a hybrid position between hospitality and traditional rental housing. On the other hand, it introduces a specific emphasis on sharing resources and the benefits of digitalization in the orchestration of daily life. The focus of co-living companies on this aspect opens a new domain of investigation on the marketization of collective comforts and shared routine activities. Since the current debate on the housing crisis is focused mainly on the dichotomy between the public and the private spheres of housing (Madden & Marcuse, 2016), this angle could reveal more subtle market tactics of commodification.

Co-living promoters' rhetoric marks a crucial shift from the focus on the shelter of *housing* to the performance of *living*, focusing on the predominance of the experiential over real needs. This attitude might be connected to one of the strategies of sharing economy, as the one employed by Airbnb starting from 2016 with the introduction of Airbnb Experiences (Airbnb, n.d.). From that moment on, the actual space of the experience became subordinate to its content. Co-living companies adopt this kind of tactics often to disguise the minimum limit size of the furnished rooms they offer. To quote the American co-living company Ollie (now Starcity):

> The co-living concept reflects the shifting value system of today's renters—values that embrace the quality of relationships and experiences over the quantity of square footage. (Ollie, n.d.)

Three driving forces could therefore summarize the shift from housing to living. First, the transformation operated by co-living companies in the description of amenities rather than the physical aspects of living space, i.e., the surface area. The pivotal element of the surface area as the key indicator of real estate promotion blurs into an experiential narrative. Secondly, the concept of affordability is replaced by the one of convenience, highlighting the mutated socio-economic conditions of the city. Inextricably unaffordable, urban life requires to rely on necessary services provided by private companies, not replaceable by public and free uses. Therefore, contemporary technology and marketing strategies do not focus on the set of spaces that can host urban life; instead, they focus on the orchestration of life itself as a product. Lastly, the space *par excellence* of co-living's *community* is the collective space of the buildings. Shared space is where the expectations of comfort and the new domestic standards unfold in co-living. The nature of this space is an overlap of different furniture and devices, often marked by claims and slogans. In the entrance hall of The Student Hotel in Maastricht, a billboard states: "HOME AWAY FROM HOME." Boltanski and Esquerre (2020) would frame this attitude into the economy of "enrichment." Instead of qualifying a given space, the economy of enrichment adds a symbolic layer to attach commercial allure to a rather generic space (see Figure 5).

4. Conclusions

The co-living housing model is ever evolving, and it would be reductive to pretend to grasp its complexity in a single study. Nevertheless, the main co-living companies offer some hints for a more detailed definition of this recent urban neologism. In their communication outlets, co-living companies insist on the concepts of "community" and "convenience." These two "co-s" are radically different from the "co-s" of the co-housing model. In co-living, the community is built top-down and based on the economic capacity of its dwellers, while in co-housing the setting of a bottom-up community is the *raison d'être* of the whole concept. Co-living is not aimed to be an affordable model and solve the housing crisis, and its praised "convenience" must be read in relation to the growing costs and consumption patterns of the contemporary city. The co-housing model was conceived also for practical reasons, but the social mission of this model cannot be compared to the one of co-living, which is explicitly aimed for mid-short stays and the urban middle classes. Finally, the terms related to co-living reveal a broader shift in the real estate industry. The traditional focus of promoters and managing companies on housing

Figure 5. The Student Hotel café in Maastricht. Source: The Student Hotel (n.d.).

as shelter and on floor area is replaced in the contemporary discourse by a narrative of experiential features and immaterial benefits.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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