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Review of

Catherine Kingfisher, *Collaborative Happiness: Building the Good Life in Urban Cohousing Communities*, New York: Berghahn Books 2022, 242 pages including index.

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Cohousing affords important insights into encounters of the individual with larger social collectivities and hence can be seen as venues of new approaches to the good life. As Junko, one of the residents portrayed in the book put it, “We are not friends and not family, but something different, something new.” (p. 143)

Kingfisher’s compelling ethnography engages the reader from page one as it offers a comparative analysis of a cohousing community in Japan and Canada and uses it as a starting point to reflect about well-being, with a special focus on loneliness and isolation as an increasing feature in contemporary societies. Kingfisher takes the reader on an absorbing journey rich with ethnographic details. The book starts with an introduction about how urban cohousing communities can expand how we think about well-being. It then provides a chapter outlining the two key field sites of this study, Kankanmori and Quayside Village, two cohousing communities. Chapter 2 and 3 contain elaborate ethnographies of the two communities, with numerous lively episodes of residents that constitute the highlights of this book in this reviewer’s opinion. Vignettes from the daily lives of residents vividly illustrate that life in cohousing communities is a permanently changing process. They also show that individuals work together to establish the good life collaboratively – a process that can be fraught with difficulties. Chapter 4 portrays the exchanges taking place in the communities and most intriguingly, between the two field sites as some of the residents had the chance to visit the other cohousing community for ten days respectively, with the author being present during both exchanges. This unique angle highlights cultural specificities in how individuals share houses in both countries, but also illustrates common features. For example, one finding was that common meals in both cohousing units resemble one another. Yet, the Canadian residents argue that the way common meals are organized in Kankanmori is much more regimented than in their own unit, with stricter rules of meal preparation (p. 153). Individual narratives help us to understand how residents of the shared housing envisage ideal living and well-being. Since some parts of the study consist of highly engaging conversations between residents in the units, the reader gets the feeling of being temporarily a part of the cohousing world. The book ends with a conclusion dissecting policies of well-being, arguing that cohousing constitutes a way to “challenge the narrow focus on individual selves characteristic of contemporary

society” (p. 185). In this reviewer’s opinion, one of the great strengths of this book is the perfect balance between quotidian episodes from the ground with more abstract theoretical reflections.

Interestingly, some of the residents portrayed have experienced considerable changes with regards to their work and lifestyle values as they initially worked long hours in corporate employment, but gradually cut down their working hours and eventually contributing more to the cohousing community. In other words, sharing accommodation with others made some individuals rethink their lifestyles, thus improving their work-life-balance in the process. These cases show the potential of shared living as residents of Kankanmori and Quayside Village “work to build the good life *collaboratively*” (p. 208). Ultimately, individual well-being, collective happiness and the well-being of the planet are all intricately related. This process of residents building the good life together is shown to be enriching both from the diversity point of view as some residents observe that they would not have engaged with others outside of the shared house as well as from the perspective of environmental sustainability since residents share resources, tools and skills. Drawing on Ruth Levitas’ understanding of utopia as method, this intriguing study cogently shows how cohousing projects constitute powerful attempts to live in a holistic way that reflects on the “connections between economic, social, existential and ecological processes in an integrated way.” (Levitas 2013, 18). In the conclusion, Kingfisher poignantly observes: “As practical utopias, urban cohousing communities are always already imperfect and unfinished; and yet they are also always reflexive and always striving, representing one attempt, simultaneously critical and hopeful, imaginary and practical, fantastical and realistic, to collaboratively move more in the direction of a happy, good life.” (p. 208)

An appendix containing four film shorts shot mostly by residents by the two sharehouses is accessible online, which greatly enriches the empirical data presented in this book.

Caitlin Meagher’s recent ethnography of Japanese sharehouses (2020) with its close focus on the complex social relations in cohousing units and the tension between the desire for and resistance to social change makes for excellent complementary reading to Kingfisher’s work.

Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013.

Caitlin Meagher, *Inside a Japanese Sharehouse: Dreams and Realities*, Routledge 2020.