

# SELF MADE CITY

Citizens can go from consumer to pioneer by driving new designs for living. The German baugruppe model is one leading example.

Kristien Ring



Image: Jan Bittner

Today, the housing markets of most major cities are shaped by profit-driven developments. However, there exist new models that offer increased choice and lower costs, and which foster cohesive neighbourhoods and enable adaptable, customised living solutions. These alternatives have been diverse and of a high architectural standard. They have also allowed self-determination: they are initiated by the people who will dwell in them.

*Baugruppen* – German for ‘building group’ – stands for a long tradition of self-initiated, community-oriented living, and the shared responsibility of building. The concept has taken off in Berlin. There is no ‘typical’ model – every project differs in its financing, social make-up, the wishes and desires of the group, and the project’s resulting architectural and urban qualities.

The most significant and innovative built examples, particularly in Berlin, have been initiated by architects for a specific group of clients who were all looking to live in the buildings. On the surface, these are practical solutions, where single-family homes are stacked and



The apartment layouts at R50 - Cohousing (initiated by ifau und Jesko Fezer with Heide & Von Beckerath) are highly individualised to meet each family’s needs and desires. Moveable walls add adaptability. Image: Andrea Kroth

combined to optimise the use of an urban site. But on closer inspection, it is clear that the close collaboration between the architects and the clients has resulted in projects packed with special features and spaces that foster social interaction.

*Baugruppe* adds to urban vitality by considering social issues of inclusion and community, and by incorporating mixed-use elements that fuel urban interaction. Green, open and community spaces have proven vital parts of good neighborhoods, and they are also important here. Common spaces such as rooftop terraces, function rooms, playrooms, guest rooms and even saunas also help to bring people together.



Families at Big Yard, designed by Zanderroth Architekten, share a courtyard garden along with a sauna and guest apartment. Image: Simon Menges

Every *baugruppe* project in Berlin has a shared garden that is often also open to the public. The entire neighborhood profits from the green and surrounding urban spaces. The experience helps foster a sense of community identity and encourages people to take responsibility for the place they live in.





Public access at Spreefeld Berlin is created with permeable solitary blocks that extend through to the Spree river. Image: Andrea Kroth

Long-term affordability helps to create stable neighborhoods. In collective projects, the future users decide what to invest in and where money can be best saved, redefining the quality-to-price relationship. Alternative models for financing and ownership have offered a new level of long-term affordability within a non-profit ideology.

One example of this is the co-op association Spreefeld. This project diverges from the traditional owner-occupier *baugruppe* model: here, a land grant or a leasehold contract guarantees the long-term use of land in return for rent, but also ensures that what is built and established there meets certain criteria and ideals.

Personalised solutions, and spaces that can be adapted to suit changing needs over time, allow people with special needs to find a place in the city; for example, these spaces can allow multi-generation living, barrier-free standards or an environmentally aware way of

→ Spreefeld Berlin is a building and housing association with approximately 60 members. It has a statute that guides its development, which includes enshrining the equal rights of its residents.

life. The Strelitzerstrasse 53 project, on which architect Florian Koehl worked closely with the owner group, includes fold-out balconies, as city planning regulations prohibit real ones. This design decision inspired many other *baugruppen* to try new ideas. Such projects show the architect's role expanding from that of designer to that of initiator, developer, moderator of engagement processes and project manager.

*Baugruppe* projects are leading the way in environmental sustainability by employing, for example, high-rise timber construction or passive design. Users and owners willingly explore new technology, carefully balancing its pros and cons. Several different types of multi-storey wooden construction solutions are now certified in Germany as a result of *baugruppe* experimentation.

It is time that our cities are determined by the people who live in them, and that high-quality solutions that contribute to the surrounding communities become standard. However, this requires such solutions being valued by the architectural profession, as well as by policy makers.



Communal spaces - including playrooms, office space, terraces and a club space for teenagers - feature throughout Spreefeld Berlin. Image: Andrea Kroth





Left and above: At Urbane Living 01, Abcarius and Burns Architecture Design circumvent the prohibition of balconies by creating an operable facade. The layered facade mediates between the street and living spaces. Images: Andrea Kroth

Often, the largest challenge for groups is buying a site; specifically, getting the loan organised quickly enough so that they beat other investors to the table. Governments could allow payment on a site to be deferred until the groups are fully formed and planning approval is gained.

By designating public land for development, the social, cultural and urban planning goals of the city can be realised through private initiatives and long-term self-administration. Goals such as social mix, mixed use, environmental standards or non-profit constraints can all be regulated within land allocation policies. England, Finland and many other countries are reestablishing policy in order to facilitate *baugruppe* building.



*Baugruppen* can help cities face the challenge of providing an adequate amount of suitable, affordable housing and planning that meets our growing sustainability challenges. By transforming themselves from consumers into pioneers, the people that make up the collectives have succeeded in developing projects that allow a high quality of life, give added value to the community, and provide long-term affordability.



Above: Linienstrasse 23 by BCO Architekten responds to context with twisting windows that frame the street. Image: Werner Huthmacher  
 Right: Balconies become backyards at 3xGruen, by Atelier Pk, Roedig-Schop and Rozynski-Sturm Architects. Image: Stefan Mueller





# OWNER OCCUPIED

Berlin-based architect  
Kristien Ring speaks with  
Geoffrey London about the  
German phenomenon of  
apartment-building design and  
development driven by citizens.

Geoffrey London: There are many models of building and living collectively, such as co-housing and *baugruppen*. Can you define these models?

Kristien Ring: Co-housing, as far as it is understood in Europe and the United States, has a long history. It is not only about living in the same building. The act of sharing spaces, meals, routines or chores defines a co-housing project as a community. Sometimes they operate on an ownership-based model, sometimes they are associations. *Baugruppen* [German for 'building group'] is an ownership-based model, but it's pragmatic. The development is design driven, and co-initiated and co-created by an architect, together with future users. People come together in order to create their own homes, but they do this as a group on more urban sites. They buy the site together, contract the building together and share facilities, but they don't necessarily share meals. Often they decide at the beginning what they would like to share.

What was it in Berlin, in particular, that prompted people to adopt this model?

People were not finding apartments on the market that suited their needs or tastes. For example, there were young families that didn't want to move outside of the city. They were looking to keep their urban way of life, but needed to expand. People were also looking for apartments that could adapt to changing ways of life in the future, so as to avoid the need to move, and they wanted to be surrounded by good neighbours. At the same time, there was a slow market. Many architects in need of commissions recognised potential in this set of circumstances. Architects did designs for available building sites and found many people with similar needs keen to get together to build. At first we thought of it as a stacking of single-family homes.





Rooftop terraces act as private backyards at Big Yard, designed by Zanderroth Architekten. Image: Simon Menges

To what extent is amenity shared in *baugruppen*?

When it first started they shared very little. But now, through this process, they have become more accustomed to the idea of sharing more with each other. The more pragmatic view is that the people have their own apartments, and that's the centre of their life, but they also share things that make their life in the city better, such as common spaces where children can play in the afternoon. When the kids grow up, they use spaces for different purposes.

How effectively has the concept of *baugruppen* evolved in cities outside Berlin?

Other German cities, such as Hamburg, Freiburg and Tübingen, have seen the benefit of this model in redeveloping brownfield sites, and often see *baugruppen* communities as an incubator as they display so much initiative in terms of ecological and sustainable building, and they have social benefits. Because the group already knows each other well before they move in, you get an instant close-knit neighbourhood. These cities require at least 40 per cent of their sites to be developed this way and support them by reserving land (at market prices).

Relative to conventional apartment delivery, what advantages are there as a result of the *baugruppen* process?

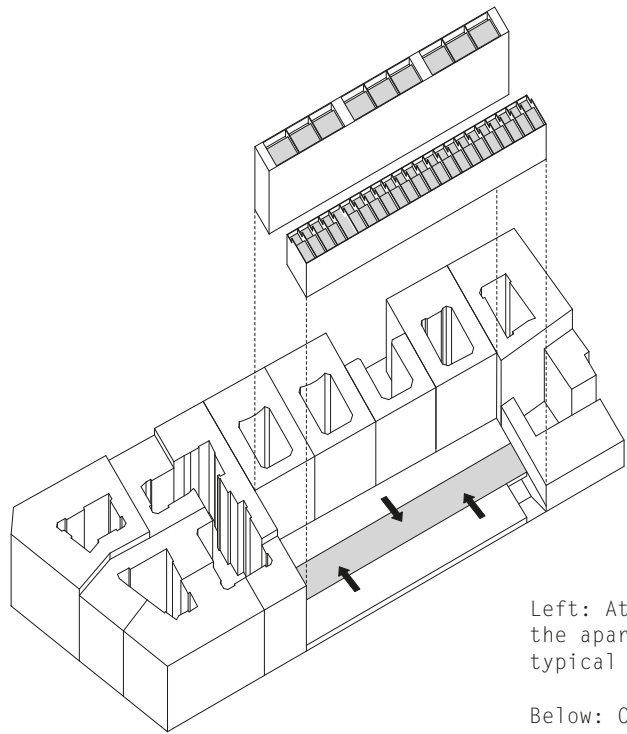
The built architectural quality of these projects can exceed that of anything else on the market. They also have an emphasis on green spaces. They activate the street frontage with mixed use. They build to a really high quality at affordable prices. It's amazing how much the groups save by being their own investor. The projects cost about 20 per cent less than what's offered in the developer-delivered marketplace. They don't need an external organisational structure to manage the building [for example]. There's a greater trust. There's a greater willingness to share than in a place with fewer owner-occupiers, because they've got to know each other in the process.

This emerged from a pragmatic desire to get a better product rather than from a utopian desire to share?

That's right. It's just common sense. [Laughs].

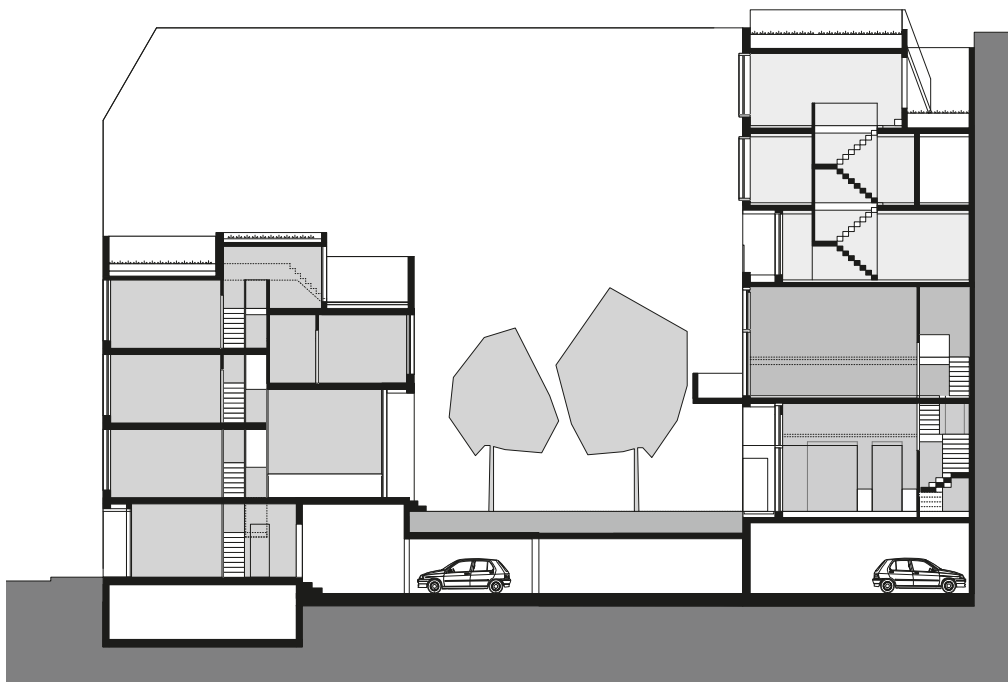


Big Yard is a *baugruppe* with 9,210 square meters of 45 high-amenity, family-sized units achieved at a cost of €2,280 per square metre. Image: Simon Menges



Left: At Big Yard, the insertion of the apartment building completes the typical urban block.

Below: Communal spaces, such as terraces, balconies and courtyards, are made prominent.



How many projects are there in Berlin that demonstrate these outcomes?

Over the last twelve years over 400 projects have been built with well over 5,000 apartments.

In Berlin how have the more traditional developers responded to the *baugruppen* model?

They were sceptical at first, and then they saw it working. They realised they need to embrace it, and offer something similar. They were surprised because owner-occupiers came with huge demands. They wanted regular meetings – the developers were unprepared for this system. It's time consuming. In that way they gave it up. They realised their model is something different. It's healthy to have diversification of the market. And it's not eating into their profits. It's for people who wouldn't be able to buy on the market and wouldn't necessarily want to.

Is there a role for developers in the delivery of *baugruppen*?

Potentially. The developer could be an investor that secures the land and sells it to *baugruppen*, or they can lease the land, which reduces the initial cost of investment. A traditional developer could also provide project management services.



The shared internal courtyard at Big Yard. Image: Simon Menges



What role do you see for government in assisting the formation of *baugruppen*?

They need to recognise the potential of it as an incubator or a catalyst within new developments and make land available for *baugruppen* projects. Government can also help in the facilitation of *baugruppen* by having a place where people can gather, such as a website, so people can learn more about it and register interest if they want to. The website could inform people of differences in the various models so people understand the alternatives on the market. A demonstration project would also show people what's possible. They could even support a third party that consults with *baugruppen*, such as in Berlin where the government is not sanctioned to officially consult itself.

In Berlin was there any need to change regulatory requirements to allow for *baugruppen* to develop?

No, there were no changes needed. Banks also found that it was quite simple, because the only pragmatic way is to give each party their own loan and, in that way, finance the whole group. In the end they pay stamp duty twice. This is quite a large sum, so it would be advantageous if that could be avoided.

From what you have seen, what opportunities are there for this model to work in Western Australia?

I think there is a huge opportunity not only in more urban situations, but also in the situation you have of densifying the suburbs. This would be much better done by people coming together to make their own decisions rather than selling to a developer, who just squishes in three badly done units. There's huge potential there for people to take it into their own hands, and go in together with neighbours. In doing so, they could create a situation where they can live there too, which could be both rewarding and lucrative — particularly for the idea of aging in place. It's often hard to imagine how a site or space could be used. *Baugruppen* brings in people with a lot of ideas about how they want the urban environment to be, and working together with architects helps get excellent design solutions. People make entirely different decisions when they are going to live there themselves.



Am Friedrichshain by Zoom Architekten  
Image: Leo Ritz.