

bottom-up / collectief

english

tentoonstelling

volkshuisvesting

Designing cooperation: Dogma's urban villas

Hanna Rudner

Brussels architecture firm Dogma is well known for its theoretical approach and distinctive aesthetic. Hanna Rudner, community-living enthusiast and De Warren resident visited their latest exhibition, Dogma: Urban Villa from Speculation to Cooperation. A reading of Dogma's *urban villas*: eye candy vs messy realities.



Inglorious Bastard, Prototype for social housing as 'urban villa' (Udine, Italy) / Dogma (2023)

I was recently asked to share my thoughts on this exhibition, and naturally, I was excited. Over the past few years, I've developed a taste for cooperative housing. I've been living in communities for years and am currently a happy resident of De Warren in Amsterdam, the first new-build housing cooperative in the Netherlands. I love knowing everyone in my building, sharing meals, inventing elaborate parties, and hosting living-room concerts. You never really know where all the cups go – or, for that matter, anything else you leave behind in the seemingly all-consuming black hole that is our communal space. But that's a fair price to pay for all the fun, adventure, and access to facilities that you simply wouldn't otherwise have in a small studio rental.

Born shortly before the 2000s, I quickly realized that, unlike my parents and grandparents, I had little chance of becoming a homeowner. Frustrated by the so-called housing crisis, I decided I would not accept the bleak fate of homes being treated as a commodity – something I firmly believe should be a basic human right. The discovery of collective

ownership models – where a group of citizens set their own rent prices and use legal mechanisms to ensure homes cannot be sold and remain protected from the speculative housing market – was a breakthrough that continues to energize me. So beyond being part of De Warren, I'm committed to spreading the cooperative movement, or the 'third sector', as people often call it, and am currently pushing to get another cooperative housing project, Het Krakeel, off the ground in The Hague.

Dogma's exhibition *Urban Villa from Speculation to Cooperation* taps into two important themes I care about: living together and collective ownership models.

Dogma is an architectural office founded in 2002 by Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara. Known for their theoretical, research-driven approach, they explore the evolving relationship between architecture, the city, society, and domestic space. Through teaching, writing, and exhibiting internationally, they have become influential voices in architectural discourse. In promoting collective living, Dogma researched the urban villa.

As I stepped into a brightly coloured blue room in De Singel Art Centre, I was greeted by neatly arranged architectural drawings and a large introductory text on the wall that set the tone. Here, Dogma presents a central idea that shapes the entire exhibition: the urban villa typology is 'the best form of affordable and cooperative housing'. Visually, the exhibition is striking in its structured and flawless presentation. On the wall hang 40 meticulously drawn references in full-colour axonometrics, each accompanied by a floor plan. Every image is hung perfectly level, with drawings centred on squared canvases and equal proportions of white space. The axonometrics are rich in detail, capturing ornaments, plants, window shutters, balustrades, and neighbouring buildings, all drawn with the same attentive care.



Dogma: *Urban Villa* / Flanders Architecture Institute (Antwerp, 2024) / photo by © Robbrecht Desmet

The drawings, despite their rich detail, feel controlled and lifeless – largely devoid of humans and their contributions. If there's anything I've learned from living in communities, it's that it's far from predictable or tidy. Think of massive shared meals, with stacks of dirty pans and chopping boards, paint spills from kids playing pirates, tools left out from someone's DIY pergola project. Don't get me started on the sinks, notoriously clogged with food. Living with people is messy, vibrant, and full of surprises – that's the beauty of it. The atmosphere of Dogma's presentation, through film and drawing, feels controlled and composed – a sharp contrast to my own lived experience.

My first thought is: what even is an urban villa? I've not come across this term before in the context of cooperative housing. Dogma describes the urban villa as a medium-sized

multifamily building, typically free-standing on all sides. In the exhibition, they first explore it as a typology, through a historical analysis, re-drawing 40 urban villas from European cities spanning from the Renaissance to the present. Then, architects present their own speculative, unbuilt design reinterpretations – some from past years, alongside three new “affordable” and “cooperative” housing projects for unused sites in Antwerp, created specifically for this exhibition.

Dogma’s leap to crown urban villa as ‘the best form of affordable and cooperative housing’ feels unsubstantiated. What makes it so suitable for cooperative housing? And what does cooperative housing even mean in this context?

Confusion around terminology is one of the key difficulties in having meaningful conversations about living together. People use terms like co-living, cooperative, and collective interchangeably, making the concepts feel broad and imprecise. Dogma adds to this by labelling their imagined designs variously as ‘cooperative housing’, ‘social housing’, ‘affordable housing’, or even ‘public housing’. Well, in my world, these are very different concepts, each a can of worms in its own right. Intentions such as ‘more participatory process’, ‘citizens are more engaged’ and ‘socially shared space’ are also mentioned.

In such moments of muddled terminology, I turn to *Together: Towards Collaborative Living*, a book by a TU Delft research group that has been pivotal in clarifying all things ‘co’. It helps me be precise about what I aim to achieve in my work in this field, introducing ‘collaborative living’ as an umbrella term for collective citizen self-organization, with five essential characteristics:

- A common vision of residents
- Sharing of spaces and activities
- Intentionality to live together
- Collective decision-making (beginning with the project’s design and continuing through daily management and maintenance)
- A high level of resident involvement

Housing cooperatives (a term for a specific ownership model where a legal entity collectively owns real estate), eco-villages, living groups, and community land trusts, all fall under this definition.

When talking about all this sharing, participation and affordability, I believe it takes more than just name-dropping ‘housing cooperative’. The people must come first – very different from traditional developer-led projects, where residents only come in when the building is finished. Darinka Czischke captures this well in an article ‘[The role\(s\) of the architect in collaborative housing](https://co-lab-research.net/2022/09/29/the-roles-of-the-architect-in-collaborative-housing/)’ in *De Architect*, highlighting the shift from conventional client-architect relationships to direct resident participation, with residents as active participants rather than passive recipients. For architects, this shift demands new forms of practice and soft skills to effectively collaborate with resident groups.

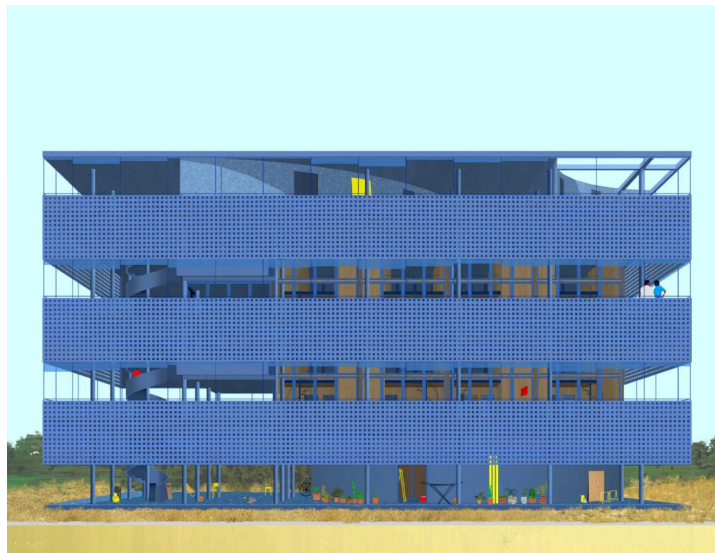


Tiled Kiosk, Topkapi Palace (Istanbul, 1472) / Drawing by Dogma

When Dogma presents their polished proposals for seven beautifully efficient, Corbusian free-facade buildings and simply adds the words ‘cooperative’ and ‘Mietshäuser Syndikat (<https://www.syndikat.org/en/>)’ to the description, I am a bit confused. Are people supposed to join these legal entities on the architect’s instruction? How would that work? How can you have a finished design before having a group? To me, without an explicit plan to work together with the future residents during the design process, Dogma missed the mark from the start.

Even overlooking this shortcoming, the pretty plans lack essential layers of information that are needed to assess how spaces function for living together. Firstly, the drawings lack a clear distinction between private, collective and public spaces. The plans are simply white. Shared spaces are essential to living together – they are a playground for spontaneity and social connection.

At De Warren, I live in a 50m² apartment but have access to 800m² of shared facilities, including a multipurpose room for sports and dance, a co-working space, a recording studio, a chill room, a large kitchen and guest rooms. When I look at Dogma’s plans, I want to know, for example: Do residents access their apartments through shared spaces to encourage interaction? Are laundry facilities shared for efficiency? Are there public areas open to city dwellers and, if so, how is the threshold to private apartments resolved? In literature on typologies for living together, shading is typically a great visual tool for distinguishing between private, collective and public spaces, facilitating their discussion. Reach out, for example, to Birkhauser’s *History of Collective Living*, or our own *Operatie Coöperatie*, published by Valiz. But maybe shading wouldn’t go well with Dogma’s aesthetic vision?



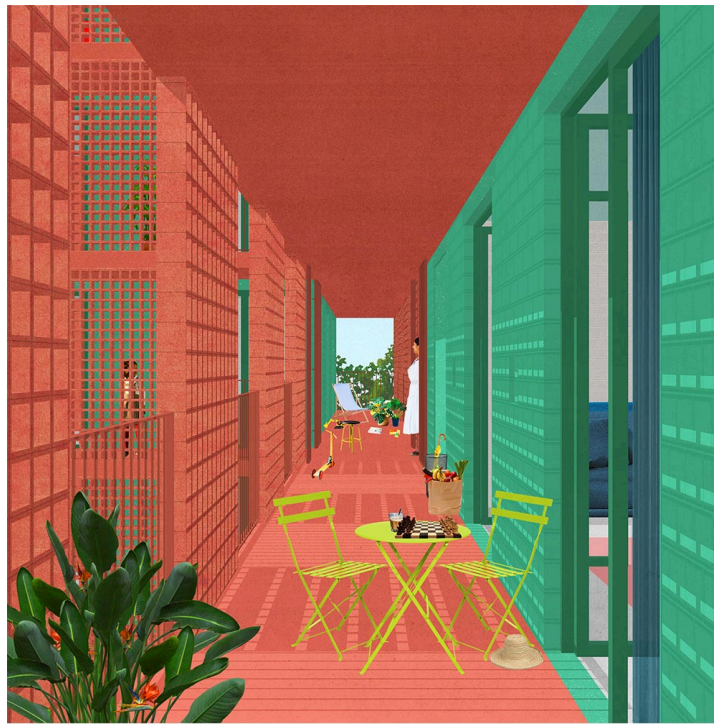
Faux Corbu, Prototype for cooperative housing in Tunis (Tunisia) / Dogma (2024)

Another key piece of missing information is the group size. Group size is very important because it determines social dynamics. How many people are you living with? Dogma's drawings suggest their urban villas house from 6 to 16 households, which is somewhat on the smaller side. While smaller communities can be cosy and easier to manage, they may lack the numbers needed to keep things active – like filling a dinner roster – and it's harder to justify the cost of common facilities.

I stand by the analysis from McCamant and Durrett, who, after extensive research visiting cohousing communities in Denmark and the US, concluded that mid-sized projects of 13-35 households are optimal. They're large enough to support shared facilities and activities but small enough for everyone to know each other and govern effectively. Dogma's exhibition doesn't make a stronger case for keeping the number of households low, so I remain sceptical about the urban villa's size and asserted superiority.

That study, '[Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves](https://archive.org/details/cohousingcontemp00mcca/page/n3/mode/2up)' (<https://archive.org/details/cohousingcontemp00mcca/page/n3/mode/2up>) by McCamant and Durrett, also offers an incredible layer of documentation on the self-organization needed to realize collective housing projects. Clippings from newspaper ads where people searched for other initiators, breakdowns of working groups handling various aspects of projects, and accounts of workshops on organization, planning and design. These layers of human collaboration are nowhere to be seen in Dogma's exhibition. Yet, in my experience, this is what truly makes such initiatives possible – driven by enthusiastic groups with shared goals, organizing themselves to undertake collective housing projects.

Had this exhibition been called *Urban Villa*: a painstaking analysis of a floor plan and urban massing, it would have delivered. The rigour, precision and detail of the myriad floor plans and axonometrics are impressive – at least, they would have impressed me a few years ago. Today, I can't look at such displays of perfectionism without a trace of anxiety. How much labour went into producing all this work? Does a small-sized office like Dogma have the resources to ensure fair working conditions? But these thoughts sit quietly in the back of my mind, an engraved scar of wider concerns about today's architecture industry.



Territorio de Gigantes, Two social housing blocks in Aguascalientes (Mexico) / Dogma (2018)

Essentially, Dogma took the historical typology of the urban villa and found a modern application for it in today's city densification, particularly for small leftover sites. With a compact floor plan, this building type can offer high-quality housing, its freestanding form allows light and openness into the apartments, while the narrow public spaces between blocks can be surprisingly pleasant and intimate.

This, they did well. However, any claims about cooperation and affordability feel misplaced and unsubstantiated. More than genuine curiosity for exploring how people live together and share spaces, I see a restraining preoccupation with symmetry and form. Having experienced the richness of living in communities and working in and with groups trying to realize their own projects, Dogma's urban villa approach strikes me as quite absolutist, leaning toward a top-down 'this is how it should be' narrative.

Communities are great because they are all different – each group has its own identity and quirks. Perhaps there's a group somewhere that would thrive in an urban villa. But urban villa as a universal model? I remain unconvinced.

info

Hanna Rudner is a multidisciplinary practitioner active in citizen-led initiatives, including [Buurthuis de Bol](#), [De Warren](#), and [Het Krakeel](#), and a recipient of the 2025 Stimuleringsfonds Talent Development Scheme.

The exhibition, [Dogma: Urban Villa from Speculation to Cooperation](#), is on view till the 9th of February 2025 at the Flanders Architecture Institute at De Singel in Antwerp.

On the 12th of December, het Keilecollectief is organising [M4H in de Maak: Stadsgesprek Coöperatief Bouwen](#) together with Gebiedscoöperatie Keilekwartier, AIR, and the municipality of Rotterdam.