

# How does Facilitating Relations between Generations Prevent Urban Isolation? The Response of Intergenerational Cohousing through Prospective Solidarity Design

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**Abstract** *Solidarity-based intergenerational homesharing (SIH) opens up new possibilities for older people faced with isolation and the quest for social recognition, to live differently, in a spirit of solidarity, conviviality, and togetherness. Our contribution aims to explore the convivial and supportive dimension of intergenerational homesharing based on a project-grounded research structured around several parallel surveys and social design dynamics. It argues for a prospective solidarity approach.*

**Author keywords** *housing; intergenerational; solidarity; codesign; foresight*

## 1. Introduction

Solidarity-based intergenerational homesharing (SIH) opens up new possibilities for older people faced with isolation and the quest for social recognition, to live differently, in a spirit of solidarity, conviviality, and togetherness. It offers solutions for an elderly person, generally a young retiree who is still active, to live with a young person who needs a moderate rent that can provide financial support without generating an income. The contract between the cohabitants established by the non-profit organization builds on behavioral and domestic arrangements for sharing a living space, respecting privacy, and promoting mutual aid without it being a constraint.

The SIH is part of a wider framework of housing and intergenerational initiatives for older people (Gauneau, Labardèche, & Tapie, 2022), which in particular focus on forms of housing that generate and facilitate intergenerational links. In addition to the phenomenon of an aging population, the precariousness of youth, and the isolation experienced at a societal level accentuated recently by the COVID-19 crisis, the SIH scheme responds to the challenges of an inclusive society. Although rarely

put into perspective, SIH's ecological and sustainable aim is, first and foremost, to promote the social dimension and solidarity in line with the objectives of sustainable development (United Nations), participation, and commitment (transmission and education). In the same way, the spatial dimension and uses of cohousing results in increased compactness of the building and, therefore, leads to better-occupied housing, even presenting an alternative to monofunctionality (elderly homes or student housing) by a mix of uses (living and working) and users. Finally, there is the lasting political and organizational dimension generated by intergenerational homesharing, notably due to the presence of a third-party mediator and governance based on trust and co-responsibility. How can these two generations live together in a "sustainable" way? What are the obstacles and needs generated by such cohabitation? In social isolation and structured distancing, how can intergenerational home-sharing build stronger ties and kinships between inhabitants and generations?

Our contribution aims to explore the convivial and supportive dimension of intergenerational homesharing, based on a project-grounded research (Findeli, 2015) structured around several parallel surveys: a social design approach to identify social representations and foresight, needs, and desires within cohabitation; participant observation with national and local players; and interviews with cohabitants in their homes, later complemented by photography. We begin by situating intergenerational homesharing within the broader ecology of intergenerational links (Watkin, 2022) and the structuring of associations. We will then explain the methodological approach used to enter the field, initially based on codesign workshops leading to a dozen interviews in parallel with a photographic report serving as a survey and narrative approach to space analysis, design, and intergenerationality. We will present some preliminary results of this survey of shared space.

## 2. The Recent Structuring of a Housing and Services Scheme

Sophie Nemoz's pioneering work in the French context on intergenerational home-sharing (Nemoz, 2007; 2017) demonstrated the mechanisms of a specific housing service from a socio-anthropological perspective. The development of intergenerational homesharing in the French context can be traced back to several major events that helped to structure scattered initiatives into a real structured movement and contributed to the mobilization of civil society. Initially, the point of emergence for non-profits appeared in the 2003 heatwave leaving marks on solidarity between neighbors who, particularly in Paris, became aware of the loneliness and isolation of the elderly, swept away alone by this deadly heatwave. The associative sector woke up and got organized under the leadership of Paris Solidaire and several other Parisian organizations. Several non-profit organizations quickly set up rental intermediation services.

Now enshrined in housing regulations by the *Elan Law* (in 2018), solidarity-based intergenerational homesharing can, depending on the case of the elderly, facilitate aging with higher quality of life and autonomy at home and become part of public housing policies (on the side of the landlords). From the outset, SIH has offered two distinct formulas for providing services to young people and senior citizens: one requires the young person to be present in the evenings and is free of charge. This formula, known as “solidarity”, means that the young person has to contribute a smaller share of the additional costs, while the other, known as “convivial”, imposes no constraints but does require a significant occupancy allowance, which is nevertheless lower than the usual rents and the prices in the rental market for accommodating a young person. This singularity constitutes the rental intermediation service offered by some 40 organizations nationwide following the 2020 merger of the national COSI (*Cohabitation Solidaire Intergénérationnelle / Solidarity and Intergenerational Homesharing*) and LIS (*Logement Intergénérationnel Solidaire / Intergenerational and Solidarity Housing*) networks. Now known as *Cohabilis*, this large-scale national network is boosting media coverage of the scheme at the level of public policy and studies to structure a network in the same way as a housing service movement.

Thinking of intergenerational homesharing in terms of solidarity means focusing on one form of cohabitation and a solidarity mechanism within the framework of housing belonging to several forms of cohabitation (Costa, 2021). The diversity of housing typologies (shared and participative housing) in full expansion underscores the fact that intergenerational relations are being considered beyond the domestic sphere, particularly in the intra-family setting, through forms of shared housing, subletting with cohabitants, or even forms of shared co-ownership. It belongs to the field of “intermediate housing” for the elderly, i.e., a semi-collective urban form that combines sharing domestic spaces through common areas and alternatives to the more private “home.” Unlike other commercial services, intergenerational homesharing offers a solidarity-based approach organized and structured by a committed local associative sector. The LIS and CoSI networks have since merged to form the *Cohabilis* network. Originally, such a housing movement (*Pari Solidaire*) emerged in Paris following the 2003 heatwave, bringing together a variety of initiatives. With the recent merger between LIS and CoSI, a charter connects the organizations, and a deontological and ethical framework is structured under a label for their actions, even though their establishment and presence in the territory are heterogeneous. The uneven geography of organizations at the national level corresponds to local supply and demand. They all maintain specific roots with local authorities, decentralized social actions, and professional and social circles (socio-educational, housing, health). The *Elan Law* enacted in 2018 recognizes and protects intergenerational homesharing by creating a specific contract that clarifies the rights and duties of associations and co-habitants. Social landlords, supported by the *Union Sociale pour l'Habitat*, have since

joined in the deployment of this cohabitation service by becoming partners with organizations that are experts in this field at the local level. Finally, public policies in favor of the elderly and their autonomy are leading local authorities to take notice of the proposed intergenerational homesharing service.

The recent development of Cohabilis is based on a rethinking of intergenerational homesharing that goes beyond the domestic sphere. This perspective embraces all links between generations in the home and living practices. This, in turn, is guiding organizations to redefine their intermediation services (communication, assistance and advice to communities, associative expertise on intergenerational issues, etc.). and the notion of inclusive housing and shared housing.

An ecology of cohabitation links can be noted to situate initial practices within this evolving whole. We thus propose the sketch of an “ecology” of these relationships between generations in the form of a table (Figure 1).

*Figure 1: Proposal for an outline of an ecology of links between generations (Watkin, 2022).*

Dimensions/ Scales	Social & cultural dimension	Spatial & environmental dimension	Political & organizational dimension
<b>Domestic scale (home)</b>	Trust Friendship Solidarity Conviviality	Sharing Respect Intimacy	Justice
<b>Neighborhood Scale</b>	Otherness Mutual help Conviviality	Protection Trust Solidarity Proximity	Participation Engagement Solidarity Empowerment
<b>Community / Neighborhood Scale (public space, service and facilities)</b>	Social mix Access Interaction		

This table outlines an interpretative framework of relationships arising from this cohabitation, understood in the broadest sense. It comprises three identified levels of scale and three complementary dimensions: a social and cultural dimension, a spatial and environmental dimension, and a political and organizational (or even ethical) dimension. The choice of these dimensions stems from our study of a system in which intergenerational relations are organized, notably through the presence of an intermediary (not-for-profit organizations). The domestic scale of intergenerational homesharing “under the same roof,” where pairs, families, and

organizations come together, becomes a transmission place, embodying the bond of trust and even friendship for its social dimension. On the other hand, the “urban” and “neighborhood” scales reflect a bond of commitment and solidarity as the political and organizational dimensions of this cohabitation, where all the players act. Here, we’re looking at the relationship of mutual aid within pairs, the participation of organizations, and the empowerment of players through their social mission, daily practices, actions, or services. The spatial and environmental dimensions remain those of actions and relationships in space, shared uses in the domestic sphere, and the search for negotiated common space or sociability relationships in public or intermediate spaces (neighborhood, residence).

### 3. A Fieldwork and Survey between Design and Sociology

The investigation began in 2013 with an observation, a photographic survey of co-habitants living in Paris, accompanied by the ensemble2générations association. It continued from 2017 through a project-grounded research approach, as named in the design sciences. Based on this empirical approach to the project and stimulated by the techniques and postures of social design (Manzini, 2015), it lies at the cross-roads of several approaches: research-intervention (for the researcher’s posture and social mission), research-creation (for the creative dimension through design) and research-action (through the constructivist aim).

Entitled SOLIDHAGE (*SOLIDarités pour l’Habitat entre GENérations*) and financed by the CFPPA (*Conférence des financeurs de la prévention de la perte d’autonomie des personnes âgées*) program of the CNSA (*Caisse nationale de solidarité pour l’autonomie*), this project-grounded research (PGR) mobilized a team made up of designers, psychologists, an organizer with a cultural and youth background, and an expert in intergenerational homesharing. This project-grounded research took shape thanks to conversations and interests crossed with the Avignon-based not-for-profit organization *La Logitude*, which is deeply rooted in its local area and was looking to develop new activities, particularly in Nîmes. This location in the south of France is both a place of economic instability for the youth and also a destination for retirement because of its Mediterranean climate. This first phase of analysis was determined by the project dynamic, which sought to identify communication principles and tools for *La Logitude* and the non-profit world associated with intergenerational home-sharing (including local policies). The process of this project-grounded research was based on co-creation workshops (codesign), public meetings, mobilization of stakeholders through public communication, and participant observation with organizations and professionals from various fields. The organization and conduct of these co-creation workshops forged relationships of trust and mutual interest between participants, which, for the design researcher, facilitates this socialization and in-

teraction (Figure 2). Two reports resulted from this project-grounded research lasting several months (between April and October 2018) delivered to the Gard department, then presented to partners at a meeting and debated with beneficiaries at a round-table in February 2020. This project-grounded research revealed the importance of local organizations in a wider circle of players (professionals, shopkeepers, services) than that explored during the workshops in Nîmes, repositioning the sociological perspective of the survey (Watkin, 2022). On the one hand, this second phase of the PGR is in line with the norms for disseminating and promoting academic research (communication, article). On the other, it is accompanied by a change in the researcher's posture towards the object. Our immersive participation in professional and associative events, a dedicated relationship to the local context of Avignon and Nîmes (through involvement in the administrative office of the *La Logitude* association), has made the investigation more interventionist vis-à-vis national and local players, supplemented by the organization of round tables and various commitments. Also, social design played a significant role in understanding such dynamics of intergenerational homesharing by engaging both the research and the researcher.

Figure 2A+2B+2C: Codesign workshops to analyze representations and projections for better communication about intergenerational homesharing (photography: Cédric Crouzy).





This more ethnographic survey favored observations of and conversations with cohabitants to understand their daily lives better and grasp their practices of intergenerational homesharing. The deployment of this method was partly due to successive confinements caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, making it difficult to organize workshops (health risks and logistical constraints). In return, this socialization and rapprochement with the “world” of intergenerational homesharing enabled us to understand the domestic practices and residential trajectories of the cohabitants’, some of whom are involved in the organizations’ activities. This achievement provided information on their day-to-day relationship with intergenerational ties (healthcare professionals, public life, and various activities). As an investigative device for self-presentation, interaction, and the staging of daily life, photography’s dialectic articulated the aesthetic interplay of photography and documentary reporting, with interviews playing a journalistic, non-expert role (Becker, 2005).

In this case, analyzing social dynamics is not separated from projections, which brings us to our research question: How can we favor relations between generations to prevent urban isolation? Social design approaches based on project-grounded research engaged actors in what we can call a prospective solidarity design (Watkin & Catoir-Brisson, 2021) as it engages non-profits and solidarity actions into foresight. We will argue for the use of prospective solidarity design in this perspective. Workshops and later photography were used as participatory documentation, projecting the public and users into their lives. Connecting generations relates to this different look on everyday practices and to the sharing of media to make this interaction happen (giving back, exhibiting, souvenirs).

#### 4. Negotiating Intergenerational Homesharing

Our project-grounded research on intergenerational homesharing, therefore, explores this domesticity from the inside, as close as possible to the lives of their inhabitants, cohabitants, and actors in the scheme from the associations. While Sophie Némoz’s study emphasized a socio-anthropological reading of interdependence, my experience in bringing social design into project-grounded research showed me a complementary rather than interdependent relationship between cohabitants.

The sociological approach adopted in this context, influenced by pragmatism and ethnomethodology, focuses on beings and objects. Rather than studying the relationship between inhabitants, I tried to look at the human-object relationships (Latour, 1987) and, in turn, how this informed the relationship between people living together. The spatial dimension of housing, understood as the very result and condition of the relationship between an “old” and a “young” person, at the very heart of an encounter lasting several months of domesticity, calls for a look at these “everyday objects” that dress the space, shaping it and endowing it with a particular

grammar that only the cohabitants have the keys to read. This script is constructed by two and three, with the non-profit organization acting as an intermediary. However, we need to understand this more or less reciprocal, mutual, shared construction. In her study, Sophie Némoz characterizes three “ideal types” (as defined by Max Weber) of these intergenerational homes through observation and interviews with cohabitants. Drawing on the “boundary-object” notion, we have sought to account for this spatial narrative of intergenerational homesharing. Limits or boundaries in domestic space provide keys to understanding these domesticities as invisible, explicitly physical, symbolically suggested limits. As explained by Trompette & Vinck (2009), certain activities can manage the relationship and this knowledge in everyday practice.

Three dwellings have been sketched out here from the various interviews conducted and from visits to dwellings and photographs taken. This contribution is based on the types identified by Sophie Némoz in her survey: the neo-family gîte, the student hostel, and the geriatric home. During our in-home interviews, we came across the first two categories. Residential, spatial, temporal, and personal configurations are all variables that ultimately call into question the ideal-type schematization. Describing places and objects tells the story of these relationships and the activities suggested or explicitly mentioned. We'll take a closer look at three different readings of households.

Josette's house is located in Avignon, in a residential area of working-class houses. Lison, a university student, stayed for a year. The two-story house, tucked away in a cul-de-sac, hides a lush garden. Lison has been living here for a year while she waits to move into a flat-share: “Next year, I'm moving into a flat-share with a friend. Even if I leave home, I'll come back for coffee. She's also offering to let me use the garden. Josette has lived together for a long time, welcoming young people into her home for years. This has given her a habit of “knowing how to manage” her aging. 75 years old and a 19-year age difference isn't an “obstacle” to living together.

Figure 3: Photography of shared common space (copyrights: Walid Ghali).



Eliane's apartment in Nîmes, in a small tower block near the city center, is home to a young student. Yumi is staying here for a year and is doing her best to balance her student life with her personal life. She leaves the apartment as soon as she can on weekends. The low-cost accommodation gives her the financial autonomy she would not otherwise have. Eliane points out cohabitation is not a solution for her, but that it corresponds to a temporary need following the death of her husband so that she doesn't find herself alone, "but that it does not interfere too much with my life", as she explains.

A final visit is that to Pierrette and Mathis in an apartment located in the heart of Avignon. Located in a condominium complex overlooking a courtyard on the first floor, Pierrette, a 95-year-old woman with visual impairment, chose this apartment because she did not want to isolate herself. Very lively despite her handicap, she is the doyenne of La Logitude's residents. Moreover, she does not hide certain "arrangements" without calling on the organization when it is necessary to manage cohabitation.

From these visits to specific places and contexts, we note three modes of action for living together to maintain the cohabitation relationship. These modes structure the dwelling space through places, spaces, objects and their users:

- The “transfers” relate to spaces dedicated to intimate domestic practices, stabilized in their meaning and practice. Bedrooms and individual bathrooms in some apartments keep these spaces “to oneself.” Certain objects become sedentary as if the elderly are trying not to move anything or to mark out their space and find landmarks corresponding to their life. During our visits, we noticed a shift from the communal space associated with the living room or “living room” to other rooms in search of greater calm. The living room then becomes a less-used space. These objects, stabilized by the host person, help the young person to find his or her bearings and recognize several elements in the other person (memory, taste, family, and social belonging). The kitchen’s storage areas (cupboards, fridge) are also unambiguous spaces of shared meaning (despite storage versus conservation). In this mode of action, there is a recognition of the other.
- “Translation” refers to “objects of cognitive mediation” that enable points of view through confrontation. This is the case of the kitchen space or places the two people jointly occupy, projecting different representations and meanings. In Josette’s case, a piece of entrance furniture used as decoration is appropriated by the young woman to hold a hat. A bathroom sink can, even if its use is alternated and shared between the cohabitants, become an object of discussion about body care. This example shows that there can be places that highlight this age difference. These boundary-objects or places enable recognition of others (from discomfort to acceptance, from need to renunciation). It is a question of understanding “in the other,” a sense of place that can lead to forms of appropriation (positive or negative). Above all, it is also a question if the person welcomes adapting to the practices and habits of aging (e.g., the imposition of laundry in the living room). For the older adult, this invitation and welcome can be experienced as a loss of personal space, leading to withdrawal (e.g., moving to the TV corner).
- Finally, “transaction” refers to those places and objects that generate divergent interests, where negotiation and compromise are essential to cohabitation. The kitchen, where shared meals and dishes constitute a commonplace and structure the daily agenda, becomes the epicenter of negotiation. To avoid this, the carers (in two of the three case studies considered) have independent kitchens (in a laundry room or fitted out in a cubbyhole).

Visits to the apartments were an opportunity to read the domestic space, but above all, to gather information through semi-structured interviews about the life negotiated through shared use and the role played by *La Logitude* (Figure 3). The photographs do not retrace these “boundary-objects” of intergenerational home-sharing. The intermediation plays a role at the start of the relationship between the two cohabitants following shared profiles. This role continues through regular visits or when the cohabitants need support as a new and complicated situation

emerges. This mutual trust, nurtured by the organization's presence, builds conviviality through objects and spaces. On a day-to-day basis and in the apartment, *La Logitude* can help with this implementation by making layout suggestions and selecting apartments during preliminary visits to the living quarters. These visits enable us to check whether the apartments meet certain criteria (hygiene, upkeep, cleanliness).

In this phase, where the triad between the two cohabitants and the non-profit organization such as *La Logitude* operates, the process of seeking intimacy and recognizing the needs of others, building safeguards and frameworks were imposed but also monitored and discussed. The preliminary results of this observation, these interviews, and the photographic study and experience inevitably lead us back to the ecology of intergenerational links mentioned earlier. To what extent do spatial practices, boundary-objects, and temporalities, as clues, enable us to echo each other on other spatial scales outside the home? How can aging, often recognized as a withdrawal into oneself and a reduction in the spatial scope of relationships with one's environment, be transformed, reinforced, or emancipated by encounters with another, younger age? How does intergenerational homesharing allow new individuals to compromise practices for living with others and finding balance through this search for reciprocity? How can foresight and codesign help make the future more liveable and change our point of view and common sense of the present?

## 5. New Perspectives for Crisis

Inspired by the emerging phenomenon of boundary-object design, "solidarity design" stimulates, through economic and territorial solidarities, anticipation of future objects of intergenerational kinships and constructive relationships. This social sustainability through project-grounded research (PGR) introduces solidarity design as a key element for rethinking transformations and activate solidarities between participants, which foster, in our case, tensions and cognitive mediation between the elderly, younger cohabitant and domestic objects, through structured forms of emancipatory organization (Escobar, 2020). It is essential to deal with sustainability and social issues simultaneously, instead of opposing them. In this social innovation perspective, the emergence of transition design (Irwin, 2015) can build bridges with social design into a mixed approach (co-design, transition design, prospective solidarity design).

Therefore, prospective solidarity design can find possible perspectives in thinking and materialize imaginative futures through objects. The perspective given by fiction design with the "cone of futures" displays a narrative of futures to rethink boundary-objects. This perspective under experimentation through PGR using var-

ious social design tools (multiple participations, workshops, interactive photography) helps to observe existing situations and their evolution.

Finally, intergenerational homesharing responds to isolation through project-grounded research. Prospective solidarity design surveys this social dynamic and phenomenon by looking at how the domestic space shared by two individuals depends on boundary-objects *translating* the representations and meanings projected by cohabitants. Intergenerational homesharing provides sustainable relations for the elderly, particularly as the most vulnerable group of the two cohabitants despite hosting in their own house. Here, prospective solidarity design highlights this social innovation and way of living, changing cultural norms and negotiating domesticity through common objects. If living together is not new between generations, our approach shows how prospective solidarity design can anticipate action in uncertain times by focusing on the core of isolation and social vulnerability.

### **Statement on compliance with ethical standards**

All photographs are copyrights of Walid Ghali. All photographs have authorizations for their publications. We thank La Logitude and Cohabilis for their collaboration in helping us uphold the ethical standards and rights of use of this material exposed in this article.

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