Anthropology & Aging
Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

Book Review

Review of Kingfisher Catherine, *Collaborative Happiness. Building the Good Life in Urban Cohousing Communities*. New York: Berghahn Books. 2022. pp. 254. Price: $35.32 (eBook).

Alin Constantin Ionescu

University of Bucharest
alin.ionescu@s.unibuc.ro

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 45, No 2 (2024), pp. 110-112

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2024.529

Book Review

Review of Kingfisher Catherine. *Collaborative Happiness. Building the Good Life in Urban Cohousing Communities*. New York: Berghahn Books. 2022. pp. 254. Price: $35.32 (eBook)

Alin Constantin Ionescu

University of Bucharest
alin.ionescu@s.unibuc.ro

In *Collaborative Happiness: Building the Good Life in Urban Cohousing Communities*, anthropologist Catherine Kingfisher explores urban cohousing as an alternative to the social and ecological problems that people face. In the two case studies from urban intentional communities situated in different cultures – Quayside Village (Canada) and Kankanmori (Japan) – the author highlights how social connection and collaboration promotes a good life and healthy wellbeing. An intentional community involves groups of people with a common view on the good life, who live together to achieve this goal. Throughout the book, Kingfisher addresses three interrelated issues: hyper individualism, loneliness, and new types of collective living. The author problematizes the high rates of people living or dying alone, not just in the two individualistic and consumerist societies discussed in the book, but across the world. She finds that loneliness is amplified by excessive autonomy and individualised ways of living, that erode social connections, with urban cohousing communities having an antidote to the effects of such atomistic societies. However, people living in intentional communities do not detach themselves from the societies to which they belong but build on existing material and social infrastructures to create something new, namely ways of dwelling and living collectively.

In this monograph the author draws on some of her previous research on neoliberalism (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008), the discursive production of homelessness (Kingfisher 2007), and social policies regarding ethnic groups (Simon-Kumar and Kingfisher 2015). The author's ethnographic work in the present book builds on these analytical interests but also represents everyday life inside the communities in its own right. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted intermittently between 2014 and 2017, Kingfisher provides an in-depth analysis of the two intentional communities, Quayside Village and Kankanmori. One of her findings, from participation in monthly meetings and workshops where people can share their recent experiences and propose solutions for the community's problems, is that trust and communication create a socially safe community. Kingfisher takes these examples as landmarks for policymakers, arguing that the state should facilitate the access to these alternative ways of life. With reference to anthropological research from the past couple of decades (Jarvis 2011; Malinowski 1997) the author demonstrated how in many societies it is not self-reliance, but social relations that are fundamental to personhood. Individualism is a particularly Western phenomenon, and is not a universal aspect of human nature.

Collaboration is not only the book's subject matter, but it also characterizes the researcher's methodology. Kingfisher initiated group discussions and brainstorming sessions and engaged in several informal dialogues with the aim of helping the inhabitants of the communities to codesign the

research process. These initiatives denaturalized the basic infrastructures of the inhabitants' everyday lives and enabled them to be reflexive about their practices of collective living and the positive and negative aspects of cohousing. This collaborative ethnographic method allowed her to gain access to the structure and philosophy of these communities that determined the daily life and routines and preferences of the inhabitants. The comparative analysis draws attention to how the concept of intentional community circulates around the world and is practiced in different contexts.
The two communities share some common features, such as self-governance, a focus on ecological awareness, and communal resources. Belonging to different generations and backgrounds, inhabitants merge personal purposes (e.g., an active professional career, balancing work and leisure) with collective ones (e.g., having common meals, gardening).

When a member of the community becomes ill or gets hurt, the others take care of them However, the two communities are not prepared to provide long term care. Instead, the inhabitants get involved in raising the others' children with an active dialogue between the young and the old. At the same time, at least in Kankanmori, aging is an important challenge for these communities. If the number of those incapacitated rises because of aging, then they need to balance the average age to be able to guarantee the everyday functioning of the community. Those at Kankanmori try to attract new residents 20 to 30 years of age by lowering the rent for this age group. Although during the research there were no cases of invalid persons, the inhabitants were aware of the not so happy future of demographic aging.

Collaborative Happiness is a valuable contribution to ongoing research on aging, care and the life course. The author highlights intergenerational relations and critically analyses the socio-political potential of urban intentional communities. Moreover, in line with other recent work (Salazar-Norambuena 2024), she focuses on the subjectivity of well-being. Also, Kingfisher's research reveals that strong social interactions and relations are an indicator of wellbeing during late age. Older residents in these communities retain their interest in nurturing positive relations with those around them, which in turn contributes to their happiness.

In this monograph, Kingfisher succeeds in offering a comprehensive picture of the two communities, merging personal and theoretical reflections with the residents' life stories. The strengths of the book also include the comparative perspective: the exchange between the two communities and the collaborative method. However, the book would have benefited from more detailed attention to how these communities imagine guaranteeing the well-being of aging residents longer term. The two communities, especially Kankanmori, face the challenge of aging, but apart from strong intergenerational relations, do not seem to offer solutions against loneliness in old age. The book hence offers a limited account of well-being in old age in community life. Another limitation is the impossibility to generalize findings taken from the comparison of two intentional communities to other similar forms of cohabitation and collaboration.

Ultimately, this book is written in an accessible prose and is relevant for academic researchers as well as policy makers. As Kingfisher argues, the two communities represent models of wellbeing and happiness, that can be transformed in political programs, in line with United Nations' proposals. Integrating intentional communities in housing, care, and social policies, would require new ways of urban planning and design that promote the use of green and cultural spaces, as well as an active revitalization of the connections between neighbours at district, neighbourhood, and street level. *Collaborative Happiness* has the potential to facilitate the rethinking of social systems based on individualism and revitalise a sense of community through the sharing of experiences of collective living.

References

Conty, Sherydan. 2024. "Institutional Care for our Elders: A Conversation with Dr. Ellen Badone." Anthropology & Aging 45 (1): 36-39. http://dx.doi.org/10.5195/aa.2024.507.

Kingfisher, Catherine. 2007. "Discursive Constructions of Homelessness in a Small City in the Canadian Prairies: Notes on Destructuration, Individualization, and the Production of (Raced and Gendered) Unmarked Categories." American Ethnologist 34 (1): 91-107. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2007.34.1.91.

Kingfisher, Catherine and Jeff Maskovsky. 2008. "Introduction: The Limits of Neoliberalism." Critique of Anthropology 28 (2): 115-126. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X08090544.

Salazar-Norambuena, Carola. 2024. " 'Estar Tranquilo': Using a Life-course Approach to Explore Perceptions of Well-being among Older Adults in Curicó, Chile." Anthropology & Aging 45 (1): 1-19. https://doi.org/10.5195/aa.2024.404.

Simon-Kumar, Rachel and Catherine Kingfisher. 2015. "Situated Meaning Frameworks in Ethnic Policy Communities: Translating 'Engagement' in Aotearoa/New Zealand." Critical Policy Studies 9 (2): 177–197. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2014.986493.