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Spaces that Connect

A typology of communal meeting spaces in social housing

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the spatial and organisational characteristics of communal meeting spaces in social housing, with a focus on their role in supporting social interaction among older residents. Drawing on empirical data from sixteen locations and informed by social interaction theory and the socio-ecological model, the research identifies a typology of four recurring space types: Chatterbox cafés, Communal living rooms, Activity nexuses, and Neighbourhood nests. These types are differentiated by their spatial design, governance structure, and patterns of use.

Through a dual analytical approach—combining iterative clustering and abductive theorisation—the typology is positioned within a conceptual mapping framework that illustrates variation along two axes: interaction intensity (from spontaneous to structured) and systemic embedding (from micro-level to macro-level influence). While spatial and governance characteristics are empirically grounded, the patterns of use are presented as indicative, based on expected functionalities, interviews, and literature.

Together, the typology and mapping framework offer a strategic lens for understanding how communal spaces function within broader infrastructures of care, inclusion, and everyday autonomy. The findings aim to support more inclusive design and policy development for socially cohesive housing environments, particularly in ageing urban contexts.

Keywords: Communal meeting spaces; Social housing; Neighbourhood interaction; Socio-spatial typology

1. INTRODUCTION

Population ageing in Europe is placing new demands on housing providers. In the Netherlands, the proportion of residents aged 65 and over rose from 18% in 2010 to 23% in 2023 (CBS, 2023) and is projected to exceed 30% by 2050 (Eurostat, 2023). This demographic shift coincides with policy ambitions to promote independent living and reduce reliance on institutional care. Social contact and community embeddedness are increasingly recognised as key conditions for ageing in place, prompting renewed interest in the social dimensions of housing.

Dutch social housing organisations, which accommodate a substantial share of the older population, particularly those aged 75 and older, nearly 30% of whom lived in rental housing as of 2018 (CBS, 2020), are exploring new spatial and organisational approaches to strengthen health, autonomy and community in everyday living environments. These efforts include the provision of dedicated spaces for meeting, gathering, and informal interaction. It is often assumed, both in research and policy, that such spaces enhance social cohesion, foster self-reliance, and help reduce pressure on formal care structures (Hamers et al., 2024; Neykova, 2022; Mohammadi et al., 2024).

Within Dutch social housing complexes, communal meeting spaces—such as community lounges, inner courtyards, or repurposed ground-floor units—are intended to facilitate informal contact, group activities and peer support.

In this study, we define **communal meeting spaces** as semi-public, shared interior spaces within or immediately adjacent to residential complexes that are explicitly designed or designated to facilitate social interaction among residents. These spaces differ from general communal areas, such as hallways or laundries, in that their primary purpose is to support either planned or spontaneous encounters, informal activities, or collective initiatives.

Research in environmental gerontology shows that place-based interactions can reduce loneliness and depressive symptoms among older adults (Rowles & Berheide, 2010), while socio-ecological frameworks highlight how spatial design, organisational conditions and user agency jointly shape the use of communal spaces (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, real-world outcomes often diverge from these aspirations. Some spaces remain underused or become dominated by small subgroups, whereas others foster broader engagement through resident-led programming or partnerships with external actors (Hamers et al., 2024).

Recent reports from sector organisations, including Aedes (2024) - the national association of housing corporations - and the Dutch Ministry of the Interior (BZK, 2021), confirm these mixed outcomes and point to practical barriers in programming, staffing and resident participation.

This mismatch between policy expectations and everyday use highlights the need for an applied classification framework—an operational typology that categorises meeting spaces by their spatial and functional attributes and enables more targeted design, governance, and evaluation. Typologies can serve as boundary objects, helping to align architects, facility managers, housing associations, and policymakers around shared definitions, assessment criteria, and intervention strategies (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Knox, 2005). In the context of co-creative housing innovation, such typologies also operate as what Lee (2007) terms boundary negotiating artifacts: evolving frameworks that are shaped and negotiated through real-life collaboration between stakeholders. However, few empirically grounded frameworks exist that address the specific spatial and organisational dynamics of communal meeting spaces in multi-unit social housing.

This paper addresses that need by presenting an empirically grounded typology of communal meeting spaces for older adults in social housing. Drawing on interviews with residents and professionals involved, as well as socio-spatial data from sixteen locations of housing association Talis, the study identifies four recurring types (Chatterbox café, Communal living room, Activity nexus, and Neighbourhood nest), each characterised by distinct patterns of spatial form, use and governance. The guiding research question is: *Which types of communal meeting spaces emerge within social housing complexes for older adults, and what defining spatial and functional characteristics distinguish them?*

The resulting typology offers a shared framework to support design, decision-making and policy development in ageing urban neighbourhoods. It is intended as a decision-support tool for design workshops, policy discussions and operational planning. By linking observed usage patterns and stakeholder perspectives to spatial features and governance models, the typology provides a shared framework for evaluating existing spaces and informing future interventions.

2. METHODS

Within the Talis social housing association (2020–2023), socio-spatial data were collected on communal meeting spaces of 16 housing complexes in and around Nijmegen, with a more applied living-lab approach implemented in two of these locations. The sixteen spaces represented diverse building typologies (mid-rise blocks, courtyard configurations, renovated heritage complexes) and varying governance arrangements (association-led programming versus resident-led initiatives). The living-lab approach in two of these locations emphasised real-life experimentation, co-creation with residents and other end-users, and iterative development processes, directly influencing the research methods by promoting active participation of residents, staff, and stakeholders throughout data collection and analysis.

The **conceptual framework** was informed by Social Interaction Theory and the Socio-Ecological Model, structuring the analysis around three core dimensions: spatial design, governing, and using communal meeting spaces. These dimensions served both as interpretive lenses and as primary coding categories in the later classification of the sixteen communal meeting spaces. Social Interaction Theory emphasises how spatial arrangements create affordances that shape interaction opportunities (Rowles & Berheide, 2010). This was complemented by Gehl's empirical observations on how seemingly minor design features (such as the orientation of benches, visibility lines, and the threshold between public and semi-public zones) can either invite or inhibit spontaneous interaction in everyday spaces (Gehl, 2010). These insights informed the spatial dimension through an analysis of spatial configurations of the identified typologies. This analysis was conducted by a multidisciplinary team, consisting of two architects and a researcher with a background in health, under the supervision of two senior researchers with expertise in architecture and the social sciences.

The Socio-Ecological Model positions individual behaviour within nested systems, highlighting how organisational structures and policies facilitate or constrain user activities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This informed the governing dimension, explored via interview questions regarding management practices and programming arrangements. Both theories converge on the significance of user agency and social practices, underpinning the using dimension, intended to examine actual engagement behaviours and interaction patterns. While this dimension focuses on behaviours, modes of interaction, and residents' actual engagement with the spaces in everyday contexts, systematic observations to substantiate this aspect are planned for future research phases.

These **theoretical constructs** will guide the development of observation protocols, interview guides, and thematic coding frameworks. The living lab methodology enhances these instruments by ensuring they are continuously adapted based on stakeholder feedback and real-time observations. An abductive coding approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) will facilitate iterative alignment between theoretical concepts and empirical data, supported by systematic thematic analysis.

In 2021, semi-structured **interviews** were conducted with 19 residents, aged 64 to 91, from two housing complexes of the Talis housing association. The group respondents included frequent, occasional, and non-users of the available communal meeting space. The interview transcripts were thematically analysed using ATLAS.ti. Additionally, group interviews were held with ten professionals involved in the organisation and/or management of communal meeting spaces, comprising both Talis employees and collaboration partners within their network. Interviews explored participants' motivations, perceived barriers, and suggestions for improvements in spatial design and programming. Interview guides were structured around the three dimensions: spatial design, patterns of use, and governance, with iterative adjustments based on insights gained during the research process.

At the two locations where the interviews took place, **co-creation workshops** were conducted with groups of residents, using the results to collaboratively develop interventions aimed at stimulating both the use of the communal meeting space and the interactions occurring within it. These interventions included a furniture prototype, a table designed to encourage interaction through an icebreaker mechanism, and a redesign of the meeting space to better accommodate the needs of residents with diverse user profiles. These interventions embody the core principles of the living lab: informed experimentation, user-driven innovation, and iterative feedback loops.

Based on insights from the aforementioned interviews and findings from the literature, **a socio-spatial analysis** was conducted in 2023 on 16 communal meeting spaces within the Talis housing association. The mapped spatial factors of these spaces included their size, location within the building, accessibility, visibility from both inside and outside, connection to outdoor areas, and available facilities. The spatial observation data, collected by a trained researcher, was supplemented with information on the management and use of these spaces, derived from archival records and interviews with the location managers involved.

Ethical approval was obtained from HAN University of Applied Sciences. All participants provided informed consent.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The typology of communal meeting spaces presented in this study was developed through a two-stage analytical process that reflects both the empirical grounding of the project and its theoretical framing. This section describes how the analysis was conducted and what it yielded, drawing directly on the data collected across sixteen locations and connecting these outcomes to relevant theoretical frameworks.

3.1 Analysis approach

The analysis began with a structured documentation of each of the sixteen communal meeting spaces in and around Nijmegen, using a comparative matrix based on predefined variables. These were organised into three analytical categories:

- Spatial design (e.g., accessibility, visibility, size, available facilities),
- governance (e.g., conditions of use, range of activities, involvement of residents /other stakeholders),
- composition of the resident group (e.g., age composition, the presence of user groups with specific needs)

This empirical information was derived from spatial observations supplemented with archival data and interviews with the location managers involved. In a series of iterative team discussions, recurring combinations of features were identified. These included, for example, the repeated co-occurrence of informal furnishing, open access, and self-management.

Through visual and thematic clustering of these constellations, three dominant configurations were initially identified. These empirical groupings were not imposed a priori but emerged inductively from cross-case comparison. A fourth, albeit small, cluster identified by the researchers did not pertain to the 16 spaces (co-)managed by Talis, but rather to spaces under the self-management of residents in independently formed and community-led housing complexes within the housing stock of the association. Access to these spaces and further information were therefore not readily available to the researchers. In this fourth cluster, the key characteristics are the residents' complete self-management and their deliberate use of the meeting space as an integral part of collective life. The four resulting clusters served as the basis for the typology. In a second analytical step, these configurations were interpreted using an abductive coding logic (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), allowing the empirically grounded types to be theoretically positioned.

3.2 Typology Outcomes

The analysis yielded four distinct types of communal meeting spaces, each characterised by a unique configuration of spatial form, governance structure, and—based on currently available insights—indicative patterns of use. These patterns will be further substantiated through systematic observations in the next phase of our research:

Chatterbox café

Small, low-threshold spaces located in or near building entrances. These are typically furnished informally, frequently used for spontaneous encounters, and often informally self-managed by a small group of residents. Interaction is unstructured and primarily occurs at the micro-level.

Communal living room

Moderately sized spaces embedded within housing complexes with a focus on community building, designed for regular but semi-formal activities. These spaces are (primarily) used by residents of the collective living arrangement and are managed internally. These resident-led meeting spaces are intended to foster social cohesion at the meso-level. This typology is derived from a small subset of locations where direct data access was limited and where Talis plays a minimal role in day-to-day operations. The description is based on observable structural characteristics and contextual insights.

Activity nexus

Flexible, multi-use spaces governed through hybrid arrangements. Activities are typically scheduled within fixed time slots and are facilitated by active residents, neighbourhood volunteers or programme coordinators. While some informal use does occur, these spaces primarily function through planned programming. They foster community engagement at the meso-level, while occasionally connecting to the exo-level through collaboration with local institutions, volunteer networks, or municipal initiatives.

Neighbourhood nest

Relatively large, publicly accessible spaces managed by external partners or policy programmes. These spaces host formal, programmed activities that are intended to address broader neighbourhood goals (e.g., social interaction, health promotion). Although neighbourhood residents are welcome in principle, the primary users in practice often appear to be residents of the housing complex itself. Outreach and integration at the macro-level vary across cases. Use of these spaces is structured and institutionally supported.

Figure 1. Representative cases illustrating the four types of communal meeting spaces

Each type represents a recurring pattern of socio-spatial organisation found across multiple real-life cases. While they differ in formality, access, and target group, they all respond to the need for facilitated social interaction within collective housing.

To visualise the conceptual structure of these types, they were plotted within the Typology Mapping Framework (Figure 2), which positions them along two analytical axes: interactional intensity

(spontaneous vs structured) and socio-ecological embedding (micro to macro). This positioning represents an interpretive synthesis based on architectural characteristics, intended functions, stakeholder accounts, and relevant literature. While we have not yet collected empirical data on the actual use of all spaces—particularly regarding neighbourhood-level outreach—the typology integrates plausible patterns of engagement derived from observed design features, management structures, and policy intentions. As such, the mapping should be read as a theoretically informed typological construct, intended to support conceptual clarity and guide future empirical validation.

To complement this theoretical mapping, Figure 3 provides a detailed overview of each type's defining features across the three core dimensions: spatial design, patterns of use, and governance. This operational representation grounds the typology in empirical findings and is intended to support decision-making in design, programming, and policy.

3.3 Theoretical positioning and mapping

The typology is not only grounded in field observations but also linked to two theoretical frameworks: social interaction theory and the socio-ecological model. Social interaction theory (Goffman, 1963; Oldenburg, 1991) explains how spatial arrangements enable or limit encounters between people. For example, Chatterbox cafés are typically associated with informal, everyday contact, whereas Neighbourhood nests are designed to support more structured and programmed forms of interaction. However, these intentions do not always translate directly into practice; the realised patterns of use may differ across contexts.

The socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McLeroy et al., 1988) provides the multi-level framework (micro, meso, exo, macro) through which the communal space types are analysed. As shown in Figure 2, the four types are expected to differ in both their interactional intensity (from spontaneous to structured) and their positioning across socio-ecological levels of embedding—ranging from direct, situated interactions at the micro- and meso-levels to indirect structural influences and system-level coordination at the exo- and macro-levels.

This is illustrated, for instance, by the case of Neighbourhood nests, where residents engage in relatively structured and institutionalised ways, and where the use and management of space are embedded at the exo- to macro-level—often involving external stakeholders such as housing organisations, welfare services, or municipal programmes.

In Figure 2, the size of the circles representing the four types of communal meeting spaces reflects their potential impact on the surrounding social infrastructure and their contribution to residents' everyday well-being. The axes in this framework are conceptual rather than quantitative. Interaction intensity refers to the extent to which social interaction is structured, scheduled, and facilitated, rather than

spontaneous or resident-led. Systemic embedding indicates the degree to which a space is connected to external institutions or broader policy agendas. Accordingly, the positioning of the four types is interpretive and illustrative, not based on measured values.

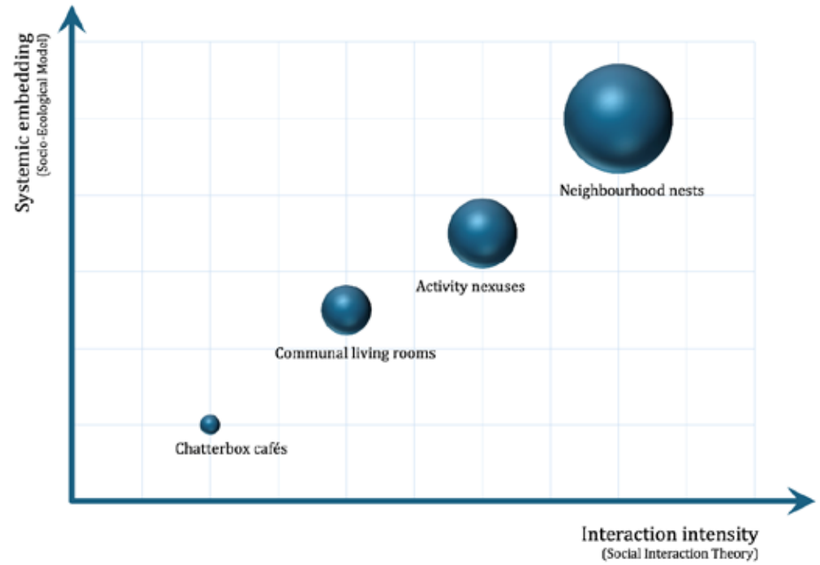

Figure 2. Typology mapping framework: Conceptual positioning of four communal meeting space types along two interpretive axes—interaction intensity and socio-ecological embedding. This framework illustrates how the types differ not only in physical form or governance but also in their broader relational role within the housing and social infrastructure ecosystem. By combining empirical pattern recognition with abductive theoretical positioning, the typology offers both empirical validity and conceptual depth.

Together, Figures 2 and 3 offer a combined perspective: the first shows how each type is positioned conceptually, while the second describes their practical features in terms of spatial design, patterns of use, and governance. This dual approach clarifies how these meeting spaces function within broader infrastructures of care, inclusion, and everyday autonomy.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Conceptual contribution: clarity to an overlooked spatial category

A key contribution of this study is that it brings empirical and conceptual clarity to a category of space that is often overlooked in both academic research and housing practice: communal meeting spaces in social housing. While such spaces are regularly referenced in relation to community building, ageing in place, or social cohesion, they are rarely analysed in a systematic or theoretically anchored way. This

study offers an empirically derived typology that reflects recurring patterns in spatial configuration, governance structures, and user engagement. It does not claim universal applicability, but it provides a structured lens through which these often informal, hybrid spaces can be examined and discussed across projects and contexts. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing debates on the social infrastructure of collective living environments and the role of shared spaces in everyday social life.

4.2 Methodological contribution: empirical analysis informed by theory

Beyond offering a descriptive classification, this study demonstrates the value of linking empirically grounded insights to established theoretical models. The dual-stage analytical process—combining iterative pattern recognition with abductive theorisation—enabled the development of types that are both contextually grounded and conceptually robust. The empirical observations were based on real-world situations and stakeholder input and were subsequently interpreted through the lens of Social Interaction Theory and the Socio-Ecological Model. This approach strengthens both the internal validity of the typology and its external transferability.

In methodological terms, the study addresses a broader gap in design and housing research: real-life projects often generate rich situated knowledge but lack theoretical scaffolding. Conversely, socio-spatial theories tend to remain abstract and detached from everyday housing realities. Working abductively, by moving between empirical patterns and theoretical frames, helps to bridge this divide and creates knowledge that is both grounded and generalisable.

4.3 Implications for design, housing and policy

The typology and mapping framework developed in this study are not intended as prescriptive tools, but as analytical instruments that can support critical reflection and dialogue among designers, housing professionals, and policy actors. Recognising that communal meeting spaces differ significantly in their spatial forms, governance logics, and social dynamics allows for more context-sensitive decisions in design, programming, and maintenance.

For instance, a Chatterbox café depends on informality, flexibility and resident stewardship, while a Neighbourhood nest requires more formalised coordination and a clear policy mandate. Understanding these differences helps stakeholders better match design interventions with social intentions and clarify expectations around use and ownership.

Moreover, the socio-ecological positioning of each type clarifies how communal spaces operate at different systemic levels—from fostering interpersonal ties to supporting institutional goals such as healthy ageing, social activation, or neighbourhood resilience. As such, the framework can support more targeted and integrated interventions across different scales of action.

4.4 Limitations and future research

While this study offers a conceptually grounded and empirically supported typology, it is based on a specific context: communal meeting spaces in Dutch social housing. The four types reflect recurring configurations across sixteen cases, but do not cover all possible variations. Cultural, institutional, or demographic differences may produce other spatial forms. Moreover, the cases stem from a single housing association in one region, potentially reflecting local priorities or constraints. Broader sampling across providers and contexts would be needed to assess wider applicability. Recognising this contextual specificity strengthens claims to transferability.

While the development of the typology was central to this study, its validation received less emphasis. The living lab approach in the Talis case study focused on developing and testing interventions to foster interactions in the communal meeting space, rather than on the validation of the typology. Although the typology is based on variables derived from input by both residents and professionals within the association, the typology has only been informally presented to a few Talis employees and lacks systematic stakeholder reflection. Future research could further refine and deepen its validation.

Furthermore, the data reflect a particular temporal moment and governance setting. Changes in local policy, funding structures, or community dynamics could shift how these spaces are used and valued. Future research could explore the evolution of communal spaces over time, how residents themselves perceive and shape these typologies, and how this framework might apply in other national or urban contexts. Comparative or longitudinal studies could further test and refine the categories proposed here and extend their relevance beyond the initial study area.

5. CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the spatial and organisational characteristics of communal meeting spaces in social housing, and to develop a typology that captures their diversity and relevance for social interaction among older residents. Based on empirical data from sixteen cases, and through a dual-stage analysis combining iterative clustering and abductive theorisation, the research resulted in a four-type typology: Chatterbox café, Communal living room, Activity nexus, and Neighbourhood nest. These types reflect recurring configurations of spatial form, user engagement, and governance, and were situated within a socio-ecological and interactional framework. The resulting typology is structured along three dimensions: spatial design, patterns of use, and governance. While the spatial and governance characteristics are based on systematically collected data across sixteen locations, the patterns of use should be interpreted as indicative. These reflect expected functionalities, insights from interviews, and theoretical references, rather than systematic behavioural observations. Figure 3 visualises these four types and their defining features along these three dimensions.

Figure 3. Four typologies of communal meeting spaces in social housing, structured by spatial design, patterns of use, and governance. Patterns of use are indicative and based on expected functions, interviews, and literature.

In response to the research question, three key insights can be drawn:

1. Communal meeting spaces can support social health and reduce feelings of isolation, but their impact depends on how and by whom they are used. Not all residents are equally motivated or able to engage. Patterns of participation vary widely, and expectations about community involvement should remain grounded in everyday realities, as also suggested by prior research on informal neighbour support (Hamers et al., 2024). This variation may also reflect differing levels of place attachment, which research shows to be a key factor in shaping participation and local engagement (Manzo & Perkins, 2006).
2. Typological clarity supports inclusive and differentiated design. A conceptual mapping of communal meeting space types helps policymakers, designers, and housing providers to make informed choices. It enables them to match spatial strategies with the diverse needs, preferences, and capabilities of older residents, rather than assuming a single model fits all.
3. Different types require different forms of support. The typology reveals that each meeting space type requires a distinct approach in terms of design, management, and programming. Some benefit from informal access and minimal governance, while others need structured support and institutional coordination. Recognising this variation is essential for sustainable and inclusive interventions.

By bridging empirical observation with theoretical interpretation, this study contributes a practical and conceptual framework for understanding and working with communal meeting spaces in ageing-friendly environments. It offers a basis for further research, policy development and design practice aimed at enhancing social infrastructure in housing contexts.

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