CONSTEL-LATIONS HOUSE

A Conversation Between Something Fantastic and sociologist Christine Hannemann

Departing from Something Fantastic's project *Constellations House*, Prof. Christine Hannemann, and the Berlin-based studio discuss housing for non-nuclear families, communal living, and alternative ways to live together.

SOMETHING FANTASTIC (Julian Schubert, Elena Schütz and Leonard Streich): Dear Christine, we'd like to introduce you to our concept of the Constellations House. The idea is to cater to a wider range of potential living arrangements, or, as we call them, constellations, that reflect changing ways of life and at the same time mitigate unused living space. The units in the Constellations House are designed to be more permeable than traditional apartments and offer greater independence within each unit. Here's how it works spatially: there are two different room types, day rooms and night rooms. Day rooms are larger and contain a living kitchen, night rooms are half the size and have an ensuite bathroom each. Two day rooms make up a day floor,

Constellations House exterior

four night rooms a night floor, the two floor plans alternate, there is always one day floor after two night floors. A constellation is defined by its day room, to which as many night rooms as needed can be assigned to. This could cater, for example, to a family of four, or a family with an au pair and grandparents living together, or a group of friends, students, or elderly people living together, or a combination of these. If the constellation and its spatial needs change, the unit can be adjusted without structural changes.

SOMETHING FANTASTIC (SF): We developed this concept when we were young, considering nuclear families as couples with one, two, or three children. Within our group, consisting of four couples, it was foreseeable that our current and prospective spatial needs would be pretty high, but it was equally foreseeable that our spatial demands would be much lower once all of our children have moved out. It also became clear that we didn't want to live in empty family apartments in the future, but maybe in new constellations – divorces etc. not taken into account. We wanted communal living but found existing cluster housing projects too restrictive. Beyond our more personal reasons, the main driver is to avoid creating a situation where we end up using much more space than we actually need just because we remain in family homes – as a sociologist you are familiar with the remanence effect in urbanism. Another effect that inspired Constellations House is the rebound effect, which describes how technological improvements are levelled by comfort gains – very efficient SUV cars being the most vivid example for this. Nothing is gained if the ecological improvements brought about by building new technology, materials, etc. is levelled by ever increasing individual space consumption.

CHRISTINE HANNEMANN (CH): I think your project addresses precisely the questions we urgently need from a sociological perspective. Shared living (German *Cluster-wohnen*) has shown to be disappointing, as it doesn't actually reduce living space per person; on the contrary, there are studies indicating that people in cluster apartments use even more space. So, your starting point of "how can we reduce high space consumption?" is absolutely relevant. What I have a bit of an issue with is the term "house", which I strongly associate with the single-family home.

In sociology, we examine living on various levels. It's about living as a place that structures everyday life; it's about public and private spheres; it's about unpaid work, it's about reproduction, cleaning, storage, and food preparation, and thus also about technologization. Accordingly, societal change and living must always be seen in parallel. We are now in the postmodern era, where (again) working and living are no longer strictly separated; homes have become the primary place of work. Consequently, it's absolutely necessary to develop spatial concepts beyond nuclear family life. Especially in

Constellations House
By giving a very private room (Night Room) to each individual that is disconnected from a common room (Day Room) in which the constellation interacts, the boundaries of a constellation can expand and contract, reacting to life's turns. The amount of people interacting in a day room can expand or decrease, the individuals can change. Next to the common rooms used by a specific constellation there is one big common room for everyone in the house community to use as well as two joker Night Rooms for guests.

Germany, there is a long history of engaging with this. The science of floor plans has a long tradition here. In the 1920s and 30s, there were already discussions about the proportions the rooms of an apartment must have and how large they should be. The two major currents were represented by Ernst May on one side and Bruno Taut on the other side. The former defended rooms of different sizes, while Taut advocated the concept of rooms of equal size. Behind both are very different views of society and living. In short, Ernst May prevailed, and thus the notion of living room, bedroom, children's room, kitchen, bathroom, as a hierarchical model has spread all over the world, in the USA, Canada, and Europe. Taut argued that rooms of equal size bring more flexibility. And that's exactly the problem. We lack this flexibility, and this is where I think you are addressing an important point with the Constellations concept.

What also interests me is to what extent the concept can be implemented in existing buildings. From office construction, we know flexible partitions and wall units that allow for changes; this corresponds to classic flexibility research. But much more exciting is the question of how to achieve this without actually rebuilding, because it is technically too complex and usually too messy and dirty for inhabitants.

SF: That was an important point for us as well: that it's rather a reprogramming than a renovation. You just open or close a door, and that changes everything.

CH: Exactly, one must consider the entire life cycle; the housing stock doesn't manifest this architecturally and spatially. I see your concept as a quite feasible solution. And, just as important, are the vivid terms and neologisms you work with: day rooms and night rooms. Those semantic differentiations are easy to grasp, and they differ from the idea of living we have through the words we currently use for it: Living room, bedroom, children's room, kitchen, bathroom, hallway. When you ask people how they live or what living is, this one image always comes up. And the goal is to change this image as well. And that's what I like about your considerations because you also attach a communication concept to it from the outset, not just drawing floor plans but also thinking about how to communicate it. An important approach in architecture, in my opinion, is to consider the communication process.

SF: Besides day and night, we have other pairs of contrasting words to describe the house, such as loud/quiet or togetherness/solitude, and the like. This helps to understand the spatial arrangement but also what can be experienced in the house. We also talked about private/communal, whereas I noticed you don't use the word "private", but rather "individual".

CH: Yes, private – for me – is a *bourgeois* term that has certain legal and economical connotations. Private actually means having control over property. And I understood

your concept as one with a communal focus rather than the individual.

SF: Indeed. We try to allow community by actually strengthening privacy. Your own bathroom is a personal, an intimate space. We have always been interested in those terms, like representational versus intimate, dressed versus naked, communal versus personal.

CH: We live in times of a privacy paradox. Private matters are publicly discussed, almost no one in a cafe discusses public matters. Or think social media on smartphones. From a sociological point of view, I'd suggest individuality instead of intimacy or privacy. Again, privacy is a bourgeois concept of property. But sure, the average person understands privacy as what we call individuality. Safety actually plays a big role in it too.

SF: Can you say more about safety? From whom or what are people seeking security?

CH: From intruders such as burglars, digital surveillance, even fire. This concept of security is very comprehensive. Starting from burglary protection to the protection of my individual situation. That the state has no access to it, it means a wide range of things. The meaning associated with the concept of feeling safe normally, from the connotation perspective, is about living, feeling comfortable, cozy, and so on. But I think, in today's time, considering all the political crises, feeling safe is more important than comfort.

SF: I think safety is an important point in shared living, as in sharing in general. Let's look at reliability as an everyday aspect of security, for example: If I bought milk yesterday, will there still be some in the fridge tomorrow? In communal living, such questions can be covered by rules, and I've seen various ways to handle these things in communal housing projects. There are boards where people write things down, or there are household books where you note your purchases and expenses, or there are labels on the food in the fridge. I believe it is not easy to find and implement such solutions in everyday life, and I think the need for security is much greater in shared housing than in other sharing fields like, for example, car sharing or so.

CH: True, security has and will always be an important aspect in housing. And when you share, you're forced to develop strategies, and they work differently well and are more or less formalized. In the library, you leave the books you would like to read the next day secretly elsewhere in the evening... That's also a way to
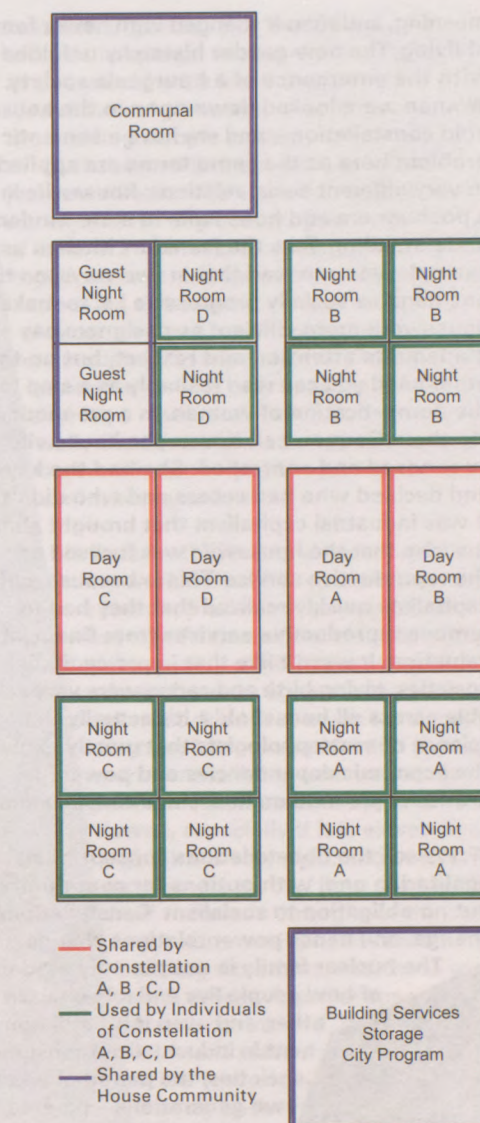
provide security for yourself. There's a range of security criteria that I have to define for myself, that I can discuss. And there, I have to develop my own small strategies.

Ideally, social and spatial aspects develop in parallel and complement each other. I find your approach to the Constellations House interesting because it allows for a different relationship between residents and their living space and its boundaries. That could be the basis for an interesting discussion. I am convinced that we need different spatial programs.

SF: How is living evolving? How do we come up with new approaches and how do they spread?

CH: By questioning the status quo. Why does everyone think living is a living room, bedroom, children's room, kitchen off the hallway? Where does it come from and what needs to change?

SF: Getting back to the stereotypical idea of living we carry with us and that is dominating the discourse globally – where did it actually come from?
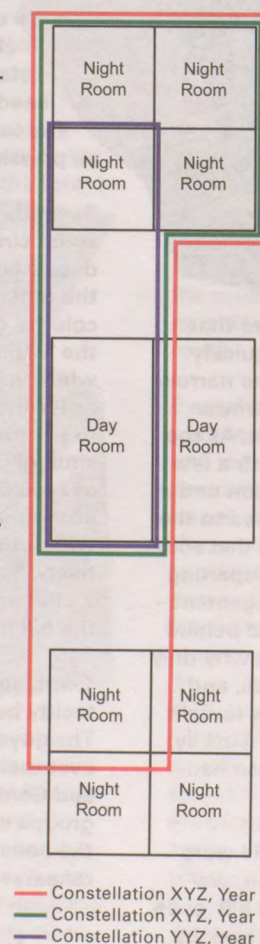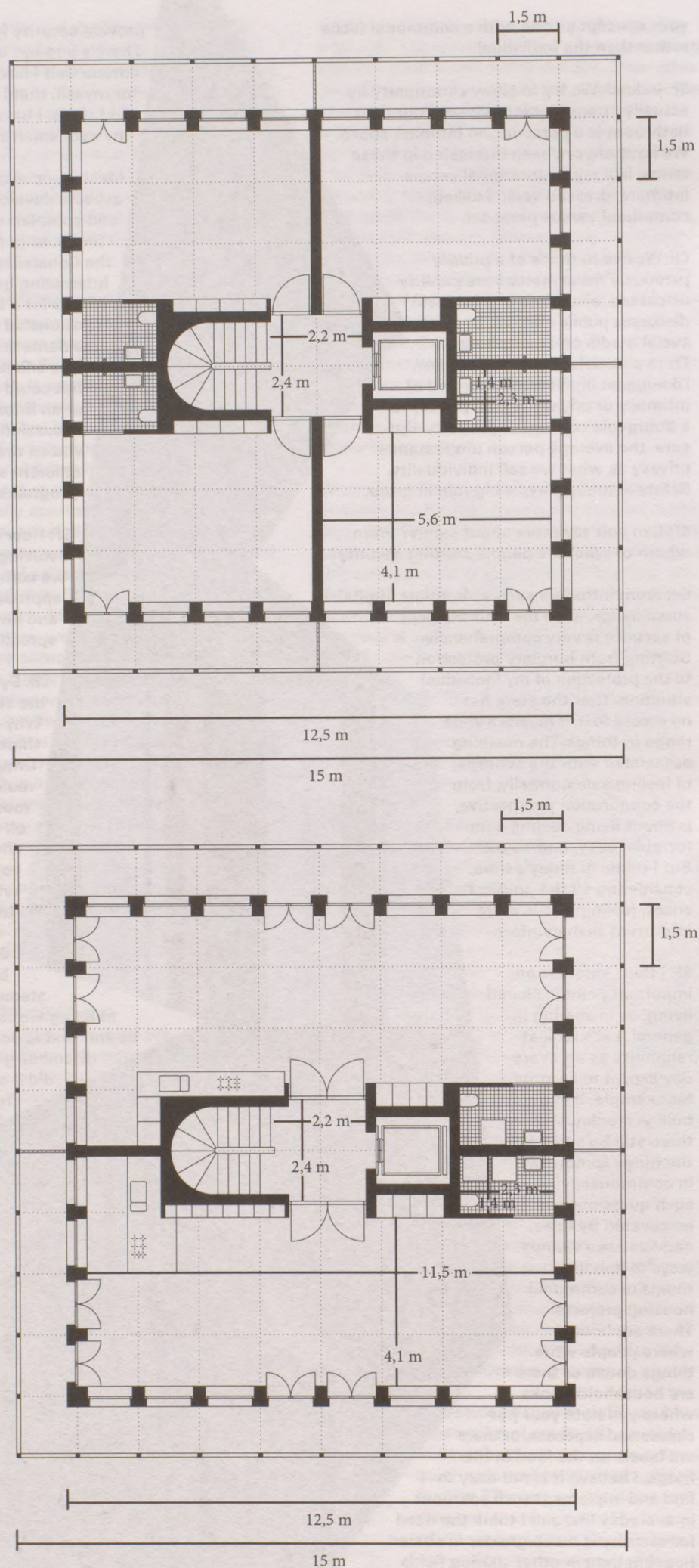
CH: Historically, our status quo comes from what was actually a precarious living situation during industrialization. What in pre-modern times and also in early urban domestic types like *Mansard* apartments happened in one room, got separated and ordered through – in my perspective – fossil-induced technological progress. Its structure also depends on the efficient use of utility shafts (German *Strangabhängigkeit*). Equally the outsourcing of all social functions from the living area happened, building types like the hospital, the school, the factory, and so on, developed. The corresponding functions were outsourced from the household. And this also had an impact on the power relations within the household.

Previously, the notion of the housewife carried a very different

Constellations House Day Room

Night Room D | Night Room B | Night Room B
Guest Night Room | Night Room D | Night Room B | Night Room B
Day Room C | Day Room D | Day Room C | Day Room C
Night Room C | Night Room C | Night Room A | Night Room A
Night Room C | Night Room C | Night Room A | Night Room A

Legend:
— Shared by Constellation A, B, C, D
— Used by Individuals of Constellation A, B, C, D
— Shared by the House Community

Communal Room · Guest Night Room · Building Services Storage City Program

Legend (left diagram):
— Constellation XYZ, Year 1
— Constellation XYZ, Year 7
— Constellation YYZ, Year 15

meaning, and then it changed with newer forms of living. The new gender hierarchy unfolded with the emergence of a bourgeois society. Women were looked down upon in the household constellation – and we have a semantic problem here as the same terms are applied to very different social relations: housewife in a postwar era and housewife in a pre-modern understanding. Take the Frankfurt Kitchen as example, you can read that in two ways, on the one hand as socially progressive i.e. to make housework more efficient as designers pay it adequate attention and respect, but on the other hand you can read it simply as a step in the domestication of women. In a pre-modern Northern German hall-house, the housewife supervised and controlled. She had the keys and decided who had access and who didn't. It was industrial capitalism that brought about the idea that the housewife was focused on the reproductive service. This is because early capitalists quickly realized that they had to remove reproductive services from financial valuation. It wasn't like that in pre-capitalist societies, giving birth and caring were very valuable across all households. It's actually the science of ecotrophologists that greatly explain the economic dependencies and power hierarchies of pre-modern household constellations.

SF: We see the Constellations concept as an egalitarian one, with options for community but no obligation to socialism. Constellations change, and hence power relations change. The nuclear family is not the only model of how people live and rely on each other, and even if it's still dominant in industrialized consumer societies, the period of when two generations – parents and their children – live together in one household, is rather short in comparison to a life span nowadays.

CH: You mention consumer society. I'd call it a consumer democracy. I think that our idea of the home has a lot to do with our consumer model. Single-family houses are there to accommodate things like cars, ski equipment, the 85th kitchen gadget, etc. I always speak of our apartments as storage facilities. We need so much living space because we have to store so many consumer goods. Of course it makes all sense, mass production, jobs, prosperity, growth, but in a world of almost 10 billion people we need radically new models. To start that with discussing a simple floor plan concept I find exciting.

The above plan features the 'Night Rooms', and the below plan is living with additional options for partitioning over time.

SF: What challenges do you think constellation living has to overcome?

CH: I think the biggest problem is that people can't imagine it. They can't imagine it if they haven't experienced it, and the real estate industry is very successful with falling back on its classic model. They can build any junk, and it will sell. This image of living has become so entrenched. Most people can't imagine other housing concepts; the image of home-life in Germany is single-family homes or apartments. Where do we get our living experience from? From personal experience, from travels, but above all from an Ikea catalog. So, it's really proverbial when people need something for living, they go to Ikea. Only a few people know that it's not always good, and that there is something nicer out there. What the media communicates always falls in line with the accepted standard. There are too few alternative offers in everyday living experience to experience other concepts. And secondly, the positive alternatives are historically connected with a left-wing eccentricity. Think of the hippies living and loving together at *Kommune 1* in Germany. So, it's a combination of lack of knowledge, and, thus, a lack of demand, and the economic success of prevailing housing forms. The latter is reinforced by the fact that the world situation is complex and unpredictable.

SF: What role does the climate crisis play, couldn't this be an opportunity to question the status quo and rethink everything, and actually start from how we live?

CH: Yes and no. It could, but unfortunately – and un-understandably – the climate crisis is not on the political agenda, it's not perceived as a social problem. Housing has always been considered an individual problem, but not a societal one. The climate crisis has the same problem. It's currently not seen as a social problem. Something that is increasingly perceived as a social problem in Europe is loneliness. Even before COVID-19 – actually, namely since 2018 – it became clear that loneliness is a big societal problem, one that causes death and illnesses in such scale that large parts of the society are affected, and that it's very expensive for the state to not care about it. And with COVID-19 it became clear that it's not a problem to only associate with elderly people. This is related to the before-mentioned individualization. There is individualization since the Enlightenment, since Kant and so on, since the individual as a solitary being is perceived, with interests and needs, but individualization in sociology means the change in living conditions. Since the 1980s, in Western, industrialized societies, we live in what sociology defines as pluralization of lifestyles.

SF: In your opinion, and from a sociological point of view, what does successful urban policy look like that promotes different, less disparate lifestyles?

CH: As a sociologist, I advocate the idea of a diverse network of small homogeneous groups. We assume that each person can't really know more than 120 people. People in average don't want to be in larger structures because then it feels no longer safe and we're experiencing that also with larger institutions – we lose our sense of responsibility. One feels controlled instead of being in control.

SF: Besides the number, what role does the quality of relationships play? I remember a friend who lived in a building in Berlin Wedding, which was very heterogeneous in terms of gender, age, occupation, country of birth, language, and so on. It was as mixed as you would wish for it. But he said that there was absolutely no sense of community inside the building. People couldn't talk to each other at all, it seemed like the people there were just too different. On the other side stands my experience of growing up in a neighborhood of around 20 houses where people had come together through a nature conservation organization. So, there was a common denominator on a certain level, even though the people were quite different otherwise. With Constellations House, we also imagine it that way, that it's a residential community, not necessarily the best of friends, but trusted neighbors, with whom you live closely together and whom you know.

CH: Exactly, that's also a central question in my work. How different and how similar are the people I surround myself with, what significance can social mixing have for the quality of life? What speaks for and what speaks against social mixing? And what does that mean for spatial structures? For example, I find the classic apartment building with two apartments per floor (German: Zweispänner) fatally flawed, especially if it is eleven floors high. That's very rigid, and even if the community on one floor works, it's hard to have it throughout the building. A community needs community-building situations, and those appropriate spaces. And that space, in turn, must be protected. The mixing must then take place outside, at a larger scale. I'm quite convinced of that, mixing shouldn't happen on the staircase, as it would cause conflict, and that's counterproductive. But already the neighboring building can and should be different. That's why I'm also very much against residential settlements. They are too homogeneous on a too-large scale. On such a scale, conscious urban planning must be pursued, otherwise it won't be livable and lacks social mixing. If infrastructure is reduced to kindergarten and shopping facilities, it's not urban. Everyone suffers from this, and those who have to live there suffer the most. I think that's the good thing about your concept. It's repetitious in the best sense, so it's actually a very simple floor plan, but it's flexible due to the use by the different constellations and allows for experimentation. It would be interesting to see what people do with it.

Constellations House Night Room