

# **URBA PROJECT: DEVELOPING NEW URBAN HOUSING CONCEPTS IN THE HELSINKI METROPOLITAN AREA**

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## **Abstract**

The paper describes a research and development project entitled URBA (2007-2010) that was initiated to foster the vitality of urban dwelling in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The area suffers from urban sprawl, soaring prices and lack of feasible and attractive housing alternatives, which are the result of a narrow and inflexible housing market. Moreover, the housing sector suffers from a lack of cooperation. URBA is a multi-disciplinary research project that brings together a wide range of stakeholders and actors of the housing sector. The first phase of the project has produced an initial selection of promising urban housing concepts, which serve as the basis for the development phase. The second, development phase is structured in the form of a collective learning and invention process that involves a wide group of participants from the housing sector.

key words: urban sprawl, sustainability, urban housing concepts, housing production, co-configuration.

## **1 Introduction**

The paper describes a research and development project entitled URBA (2007–2010) that was initiated to foster the vitality of urban dwelling in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, which faces the threatening prospect of urban sprawl. Problems in the area, such as soaring prices and lack of feasible and attractive housing alternatives, are the result of a narrow and inflexible housing market. Moreover, the housing sector suffers from a lack of cooperation. In this

situation, the overall aim of establishing a sustainable urban structure and providing feasible and attractive housing needs to be conceptualised in a way that takes into account the contradictory needs of actors in the area. URBA is a multi-disciplinary research project that brings together a wide range of stakeholders and actors of the housing sector.

We begin the paper by presenting a description of the narrow and inflexible housing market of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. Then we discuss a conception of the historical types of organizing work and production and identify features of mass production in the Finnish housing production. Then we introduce the URBA project, its aims, and the broad based stakeholder group involved, and the first phase of the project. The first phase of the project has produced an initial selection of promising urban housing concepts, which serve as the basis for the development phase. The last part of the paper deals with the current, development phase of the project. The development phase is structured in the form of a collective learning and invention process that involves a wide group of participants from the housing sector.

## **2 A Narrow and Inflexible Housing Market: An Obstacle to Sustainable Development**

The Helsinki Metropolitan Area suffers from severe problems in housing and urban planning. International surveys show that the area is relatively decentralised (e.g. OECD 2003). As a result of soaring prices and one-sided supply in the housing market, the Helsinki Metropolitan Area is suffering from urban sprawl. Families in particular are moving from the centre to the suburbs, where they are able to afford a larger dwelling and a garden of their own. This development is very much dependent on private motoring, it exacerbates climate change and is against the principle of sustainable development.

Helsinki Metropolitan Area is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in Europe. It is Finland's capital for business, education, research, culture and government. Some 70% of foreign companies operating in Finland have settled in the area. The influx of inhabitants comes both from Finland and abroad. The percentage of foreign nationals in the population in the area has grown rapidly in recent years, and the growth is expected to continue (Vuori 2007).



Figure 1: Helsinki Metropolitan area consists of four municipalities with city status: Helsinki, Vantaa, Espoo and Kauniainen. The area covers 745 square kilometers, and its total population is about one million (Helsinki Metropolitan Area Council, 2007).

The housing market in the Helsinki area is narrow and one-sided in more ways than one. The market is lacking in flexibility, which has a negative effect on the competitiveness of the region. There is a constant shortage of reasonably priced dwellings for a number of target groups. The ideal of home-ownership predominates, and the supply of rental dwellings is insufficient. In times of fluctuating economic conditions, the acquisition of a dwelling for a short period of time, if only for a couple of years, is a risky proposition. For example, an expert moving temporarily to the area with his/her family from abroad is in trouble. The housing market operates almost exclusively in the Finnish language. There is a marked shortage of dwellings for rent and of services for moving and adapting to new conditions.

Urban living and the production of new dwellings are both in need of greater flexibility, because the population in the capital region is more heterogeneous than average. Differences in income and social status are greater than elsewhere. The percentage of foreign nationals in the population is considerably higher than elsewhere. The structure of professions is also different than in Finland on average. There are proportionally more people than average in supervisory or leading positions, specialists, IT professionals and professionals in the natural sciences and in artistic professions, as well as office and customer service

personnel. The Helsinki region is suffering from workforce shortage now and will do so in the near future. There is a shortage of nurses, social and health services personnel, bus drivers and cleaners. These are typical groups whose settlement in the capital area is hampered by the high prices in the housing market. There is relatively little employer-provided housing, even though this would help people move into the capital region and also help them settle down. Moreover, employer-provided housing would also make employees more committed to their employer.

Housing production in Finland remains predominantly in the hands of Finnish developers, and over the decades practices have become entrenched. One factor that explains the nature of housing policy and urban planning in Finland is that it was first after World War II that urbanisation got under way here and prosperity increased, and residential suburban areas were developed by public-private partnerships. Another important factor was Finnish welfare policy which put an emphasis on equitable housing, yet at the same time led to a lack of diversity in industrial housing production.

This lack of diversity in current housing production is one of the main problems in the housing market today. The majority of new housing consists of mass-produced multi-storey residential buildings, and from the consumer's viewpoint alternatives are hard to find in the market. In practice, the choice of dwelling is dictated by location and price, which in turn largely depends on the location. In terms of their floor plan, fittings and materials, new dwellings are very uniform. Even in expensive and trendy properties that are carefully branded in view of a particular customer group, the dwellings themselves are ordinary. In mass-customised housing areas, the buyer's possibilities to have a say in the dwelling are generally limited to the choice of finishing materials, cabinet doors and domestic appliances that alternatives for which have all been decided beforehand. In the rental market, the occupant's options are even slimmer, even though some experiments in participatory planning have been carried out. The design of residential buildings is typically conservative. There is a general belief that occupants want things that are safe and familiar. There is fear that unusual solutions might scare away the customers and obstruct the resale market later on. It is safer for the occupant to be flexible than for an expensive dwelling. (Rask & Timonen & Väliniemi 2008.)

### 3 From mass production towards co-configuration in housing production

Industrial housing production in Finland can be examined in terms of the historical stages in the development of work and production as described by Bart Victor and Andrew Boynton (1998), in particular its second stage, mass production.

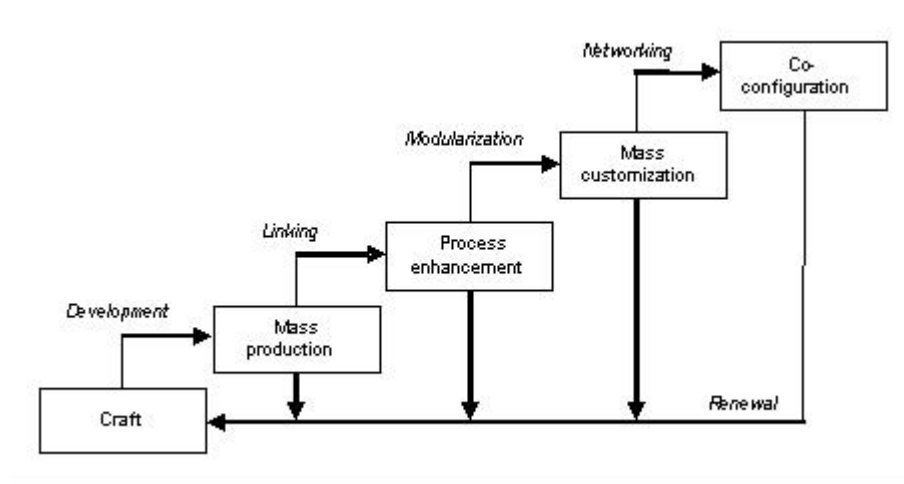


Figure 2. The historical stages in the development of work and production (Victor & Boynton 1998)

Victor and Boynton have identified five stages in which the operative principles, know-how and production management are all different. The five stages of production are craft work, mass production, process enhancement, mass customisation, and co-configuration. The last stage is based on continuous collaboration and reconfiguration of the product between the producer network and the user. Although the five stages of production are the result of historical development, the first four of all co-exist today. The stages are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. Historically, progress from one stage to the next has always required technical and/or technological innovations and possibilities for new core inputs. Every technological revolution (water power, motorisation, electricity, information technology) have led to new opportunities for organising work and production. For example, the revolution in information technology is currently making a crucial difference in the division of labour, but also increasing the need for interaction and cooperation. However, we are still just taking the first steps towards the fifth stage, co-configuration. (Victor & Boynton 1998, Freeman & Louçã 2001.)

Housing production in Finland consists typically of industrial mass production based on a concrete element system. The most advanced form of production employed to date in multi-storey residential buildings is mass customisation. It has nevertheless been used relatively little and is more common in the production of detached houses.

The Finnish housing sector, which in this context covers urban planning, housing policy, housing production and housing market, has many actors. The problem is that no single actor is responsible for the overall workings of the system, nor have any general targets been set for it anywhere. Cooperation between different actors is infrequent and incidental. The operating conditions of the sector are determined by the State through legislation and norms. Municipalities are responsible for land use policy, land use planning and building control. Banks and investors provide funding, developers and building companies construct, market and sell their products. The system is a complex network of codes and nodes of intersecting interests and actors. The key factors are economic trends, interest rates and the prevalent interests in housing policy.

All actors in the sector have their own ways of operating, their own aims and earning logic. The aims as such are good and useful, at least from each actor's own perspective. However, sometimes the multitude of implemented aims leads to undesirable side effects for the occupants. For example, an environment that meets every single norm regarding safety in traffic can be dull and unaesthetic. Similarly, complying with all the norms and standards of housing design does guarantee a healthy and safe environment, but can push up the price of dwellings. New dwellings fitted with all possible conveniences may give the occupants a sense of a high standard of living, but will above all line the pockets of the developer who sells it.

Risk management is a key factor in the operation of the various actors in the housing sector. All actors have their own ways of managing and outsourcing the risks involved in their operation. One typical feature of the housing sector is that actors demand that other actors take risks, such as implementing experiments in housing policy, yet they are not willing themselves to take risks or to change their own modes of operation. The results can be seen in the inflexibility and dull character of the housing market, where supply dominates demand.

This situation may be changing, however. The global economy also affects the Finnish housing market. The economic downturn that began in 2008 was reflected quite rapidly in housing production in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. There are currently thousands of expensive, privately funded dwellings (free from price regulation) unsold in the area. Non-subsidised housing production has come to an almost complete standstill. The construction sector is facing a deep recession and mass unemployment. The Finnish housing industry has already turned to the State and the municipal sector, asking for measures to alleviate the situation. Cities in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area are in fact increasing the production of subsidised rental dwellings. It will be interesting to see whether the housing industry will change its operating approach by, for example, increasing R&D or trying out new housing concepts.

#### **4 Research and Development Project URBA seeks solutions for sustainable housing and urban structure**

Decision makers and authorities on all levels, built environment professionals and developers in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area have recently come out with statements that the problems of housing and urban structure must be solved collaboratively. One serious issue bringing actors together is climate change. For example, the Climate Strategy for the Helsinki Metropolitan Area 2030 (drawn up by the Helsinki Metropolitan Area Council and the four cities of the area) sets the target that greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced by more than one third from current levels by the year 2030. This can only be achieved with a denser urban structure and traffic based on public transport, walking and cycling. Moreover, the design, development and use of buildings should be guided by whole life-cycle costs, energy efficiency, versatility and degree of use.

The Centre for Urban and Regional Research initiated a three-year research and development project, The Future Concepts of Urban Housing – URBA that has the subheading Diversification and Attractiveness of the Housing Stock in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area together with a large stakeholder group. The project was launched in autumn 2007 and will continue until April 2010. URBA is a part of the housing-related Centre of Expertise programme, as well as the Innovative City development programme of the City of Helsinki (see [www.urba.tkk.fi](http://www.urba.tkk.fi)).

## 4.1 The overall aims of the URBA project

URBA represents a new approach to knowledge production. The strengths of the project are reflexivity, interdisciplinarity, innovative research methods and the large number of collaborative actors and financiers participating in it. The project also involves international cooperation with American as well as European universities, and its interdisciplinary group of researchers includes experts from the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (YTK) at the Helsinki University of Technology, the National Consumer Research Centre of Finland, the Technical Research Centre of Finland, and from City of Helsinki Urban Facts. Principal funding for the project comes from the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (TEKES), but additional funding is provided by the cities in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, the Finnish Ministry of the Environment, the Helsinki Metropolitan Area Council, and several construction companies and developers. The project is headed by Professor Raine Mäntysalo, Director of the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies. The Principal Investigator is Professor Hilikka Lehtonen.

The URBA research and development project aims to answer the following questions:

- How can urban living be made more attractive in a way that does not lead to excessive urban sprawl?
- Which resident groups are in a key position regarding the urbanisation and development of the Helsinki metropolitan area?
- What kind of new urban housing concepts can be developed on the basis of international examples and subsequently applied to new construction?
- What kind of new urban housing concepts can be developed on the basis of international examples and subsequently applied to new construction?
- How are new housing concepts received by the key resident groups in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, and how do they relate to urbanisation in Finland?
- How can the new concepts be utilised in diversifying housing and promoting sustainable development?

In the URBA-project, sustainability is understood in its broad meaning referring to environmental, social and economical dimensions.

Environmental sustainability includes

- dense urban structure and infrastructure based on developed, high standard public transport
- durable housing stock
- sustainable building materials and building performance
- energy-efficient buildings with low carbon release
- sustainable and ageless design.

Social sustainability means

- possibilities to citizen participation in planning and design processes
- user-initiated flexibility of apartments
- possibility of inhabitants' self-determination
- high quality of life in a safe, healthy and aesthetic urban environment
- freedom of choice and versatility in the housing market.

Economical dimension includes

- housing stock and urban structure which enable sustainable economic growth in the Helsinki Metropolitan area.
- new actors in the fields of sustainable construction, design and assessment.

These dimensions are emphasized in varying degrees in each of the new 'urban housing concepts' (introduced below in section 4.2.), which serve as a platform for examining and testing out possible directions for developing more sustainable housing in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area.

There is a need for assessment methods that take into account various dimensions of sustainability and concrete accepted criteria so that it becomes possible for decision makers to evaluate proposals.

The central goal of the URBA project is to bring together actors in the housing sector in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, and to initiate a collective brainstorming process to find new solutions to the conflicting needs of the various stakeholder groups. This process takes place in two stages: 1) finding promising new urban housing concepts through international comparison, and 2) establishing a structured development process (seminars, working groups) for developing these further into viable new operating concepts and business models that are appropriate for the particular local context.

A sub-project of URBA is looking to draw up a set of criteria for evaluating the attractiveness of any given living environment and to create a tool for analysing it. The tool is being developed by City of Helsinki Urban Facts and will be tested in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area.

The URBA project also aims to intensify connections between Finnish and international research in the sphere of housing and housing development with a view to furthering cooperation in the future. Its final results will be presented in the form of a concise publication and an illustrated concept database with web-based maps.

## **4.2 The first phase of the project produces promising housing concepts**

In the first phase of the project (2007–2008), the task was to identify and pre-evaluate interesting international concepts for urban housing and to develop preliminary descriptions of them. A number of international housing concepts and models from Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, UK and USA were found. In November 2008 the project published a book that gathered together the results and experiences from the first phase. The book *Another Way to Dwell? Looking for new concepts for urban housing* (Norvasuo (ed.), 2008) includes descriptions of the international concepts as well as theoretical articles on related themes. It also discusses user experiences in the development of international housing concepts, their developers, and the role of consumers in the related processes.

The URBA research group selected five concepts for further development. These were:

- Settle-down flat (Modest or moderately priced and equipped, easy- to- get rental apartments for transitory life situations. Target groups: newcomers, immigrants, students, low-wage employees, temporary workers, divorcees etc.)
- James – serviced apartments (Centrally situated, mostly rental apartments combined with services, such as cleaning, laundry, shopping, walk the dog, etc. to ease everyday life. Target groups: modern city people, 'yuppies', singles, ITC workers, people who travel a lot, etc.)
- Group building and/or self-help housing (Building a house or a group of houses by a voluntary, non-profit group of future occupants, assisted by

professionals. The aim is a building that serves individual and/or group needs better than an ordinary building. Target group: active inhabitants who want to participate more than average in decisions affecting their living environment, and are committed to participate in a demanding planning/building process.)

- Town house (An old concept that is common in many countries except for Finland. Mostly private houses with a front door facing the street and a small (backyard) garden. Target groups: families and those who want a private garden, but prefer urban living.)
- Flexible housing – user-initiated flexibility (The concept focuses on the flexible organisation of space properly scaled for the site. The dwelling can accommodate changes over time concerning styles of habitation and use of space. This represents a change from function-based design thinking towards organisation-based thinking.)

These concepts are incommensurable as regards housing design, construction, and dwelling. They are not finished, fixed solutions to the housing problem, but examples of what can be achieved if we alter the prevailing system of urban planning and housing production in Finland. These preliminary concepts are answers to broader development needs, such as densifying the urban structure, developing rental housing, combining housing with services, increasing the possibility of inhabitants' self-determination, increasing user-initiated flexibility of buildings, developing the management and control of the building process, and developing the sustainability of housing.

### **4.3 Focus groups**

The applicability of the new concepts in Finland was first tested in October–November 2008 using the methods of public participation. The idea was to integrate public participation in the innovation process as early as possible. The new housing concepts were evaluated by consumers in focus group discussions organised by the National Consumer Research Centre (See Heiskanen et al. 2008). The final analysis of the data gathered in these discussions is currently still under way.

The focus groups consist of 4–12 people brought together to participate in a discussion on some area of interest. The discussions are conducted by trained moderators, and the course of the discussions is documented. Focus groups

produce research data by generating social interaction. This is done by assembling a group of participants to discuss a specific topic – in this case the new housing concepts – and observing how the ensuing discussion evolves. (Heiskanen 2008, see also Boddy, 2005.) The underlying assumption is that meaning will be created in the course of the interaction (e.g., Wilkinson, 2001). Organised and focused group discussions provide a context for participants to articulate their experiences and to elaborate on them in a collective sense-making process (Heiskanen et al. 2008). Participants are encouraged to define the concepts and framings themselves. Since the discussion is conducted in a group, participants have an opportunity to learn from each others' comments. Focus group discussions also support collective sense-making processes; when dealing with complex topics, participants can pool their prior knowledge and experience. Thus, the viewpoints gained are more carefully articulated than, for example, immediate responses to survey questionnaires (Heiskanen, 2005; Timonen, 2002).

Focus groups highlight lay experience rather than ignorance, and can thus make a positive contribution to policy making (Cunningham-Burely & Kerr & Pavis, 2001). Focus groups are a frequently used method in marketing research, but today they are also used in serious research in the social sciences. In the past few decades, they have established their role in sociology and communications research. More recently, they have also become increasingly popular in applied fields such as urban and community studies, development studies, and educational research (e.g. Nancarrow & Vir & Barker, 2005; Barbour & Kitzinger, 2001; Gibbs, 1997). They are also used increasingly for practical ends such as evaluation, community improvement and empowerment. (Heiskanen et al. 2008).

In addition to consumers, participants in the focus group discussions also included some housing and planning experts. Preliminary concepts were presented by researchers from the URBA project, who also made observations regarding the discussions. The discussions produced valuable research data (the final analysis remains to be completed by the National Consumer Research Centre). One thing that came up in the discussions was cultural differences between international concepts and Finnish traditions regarding housing and dwelling. For example, the researchers introduced the concept of James-serviced apartments, which originally comes from Switzerland. Some consumers expressed the opinion that such services linked to the dwelling would not have any demand in Finland. In addition to this, many legislative, social and financial obstacles to the implementation of the preliminary concepts surfaced in the

discussions. This was just the kind of information the researchers wanted to gather.

It was observed by the researchers, however, that focus group discussions would be more suitable for testing finished products and ideas rather than for developing new concepts. The task of introducing consumers to undeveloped, unfinished and incommensurable concepts was considered too difficult and demanding. In the case of some concepts, the consumers were embarrassed to discuss them, because they did not understand what the concept was, or what it was for. It was also noticed that there was too little time and too many concepts; there was barely enough time for proper discussion. Furthermore, even if the participating consumers felt that the discussions were very interesting and they were enthusiastic about the topic, we may ask if the focus groups were participatory and empowering (see also Heiskanen et. al. 2008; Chiu, 2003; Waterton & Wynne, 2001; Wilkinson, 2001).

## **5 URBA 2009: Developing new modes of operation and business models through a research-based intervention process**

The focus of the URBA research and development project shifted more explicitly towards development in the beginning of 2009, when the intervention phase of the project began. The term 'intervention' is used here in the sense of a deliberate attempt, in this case by researchers, to effect a change in the reality being studied. This type of research is often termed 'action research', but because action research has its own established tradition, with particular theoretical and methodological tools and concepts (see e.g. Lewin, K. 1946, Carr & Kemmis 1986, Reason & Rowan 1981, Stringer 1999), we want to distinguish our approach from action research proper. When describing the overall organisation of the process, we shall therefore discuss in somewhat greater detail the theoretical foundations underlying the design of our intervention process.

### **5.1 The theoretical basis of the intervention**

The design of the intervention process in the URBA project is rooted in the Finnish methodology of developmental work research. The approach builds on

the theoretical traditions of cultural historical psychology (L.S. Vygotsky, A.R. Luria, M. Cole) and activity theory (A.N. Leontjev, Y. Engeström).

Jaakko Virkkunen describes the approach as follows:

*Developmental Work Research (Engeström, 1987, 2000, 2005b) is an interventionist methodology that aims at prompting and supporting practitioners' agency in analyzing and transforming the system of their joint activity. Agency here means breaking away from the given frame of action and taking the initiative to transform it. According to Bandura (1989, p.1175-1177), agency depends on actors' beliefs about their capabilities of exercising control over what is going on. Belief in self-efficacy is not the developmental starting point, however, and external artifacts play a crucial role. As Vygotsky has shown, "The development and use of artificial stimuli play an auxiliary role that permits human beings to master their own behavior, at first by external means and later by more complex inner operations" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 73). People develop and use external artifacts to reach a redefinition of the situation and to control their own actions. They do so, however, not as isolated individuals but as members of a community. A number of individuals can collaboratively develop and use a shared artifact to enable them to redefine their situation and to master their joint actions in transforming the context of their daily work. (Virkkunen 2006, p. 49.)*

The theory of expansive learning was formulated by Engeström in his 1987 book *Learning by Expanding*. An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research. This interventionist methodology has already been evolving in the past three decades in the context of actual development projects of real-life organisations. Since the mid-1990s, this has taken place mainly in the context of a particular method called Change Laboratory (see e.g. Engeström, Y & al. 1996, Virkkunen 2006).

The Change Laboratory method is not being applied in the URBA project in any strict sense, however. Rather, we have been inspired by the theoretical ideas underlying the method, namely ideas as well as experiences on how to initiate and sustain a process of collective invention in the context of multi-organisational and cross-sectoral problem definition and solving.

## 5.2 The organisation of the development process

After the first phase of the URBA project was completed and the book presenting the initial findings of the international study of promising urban housing concepts (Norvasuo 2008) was launched at the end of 2008, key actors of the housing sector in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area were invited to an all-day working seminar held in the beginning of February. Out of the 80 invitees 60 participated. The participants represented all major stakeholders and actors, such as legislators from the Ministry of the Environment, key officials and planners from the cities of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa, and representatives from major construction companies, real-estate developers and investors.

The seminar was organised with the principles of the Change Laboratory method in mind (Ahonen & al. 2000, Engeström & al. 1996, 2005) In the seminar, participants were offered two types of 'cognitive stimuli' in order to launch a collective learning process. The first type of 'stimuli' was comprised of views on the challenges of housing production in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. These were provided in the form of a statistical overview of the demographic development of the region, presented by the leading statistician Pekka Vuori from the City of Helsinki Urban Facts.

Pekka Vuori's presentation emphasised the two main demographic challenges that need to be addressed in urban planning and housing production in the region: ageing population and the very significant increase in the number of migrants in the area. Next, formulations of the problem and challenges were solicited from the seminar participants. These formulations included the challenges and imperatives related to climate change and sustainability discussed in the beginning of this paper. However, many institutional shortcomings were also identified in the incentive structure of the housing sector, as well as a lack of suitable actors in the field (e.g. advice bureau for self-help builders) and tools, such as flexible financial instruments. The problems of the current practice and how the potential new is emerging from within it were brought to life by architect Karin Krokfors with a concrete case of a pilot construction project 'Vanhankaupungin Kellokas', in which several of the promising new concepts are being explored in one and the same project including group building, townhouse and flexible housing.

Jaakko Virkkunen gave a keynote lecture in which he linked the widespread interest in concepts, reflected also in URBA's desire to find new concepts for urban housing, to the idea of historical change in the modes of production and work and the resulting dynamical nature of business concepts.

Virkkunen has noted that the term 'concept' has different meanings in different situations and contexts. It is often used to describe a half-finished output, the first idea or a sketch. However, just like any invention, a concept matures from its first, sketchy idea into a finished product or practice through many phases of concretisation and elaboration. When an original idea starts to acquire a concrete form, an increasing number of practical demands are brought to bear on it, and the idea is brought into completion and formed by those demands. (Virkkunen 2002).

In his lecture, Virkkunen made use of the model, developed by Bart Victor and Andrew Boynton, of historical types of work associated with each era of key technological innovation, and also theories of the long waves of economic development.

Virkkunen writes:

*According to Victor and Boynton's model, an activity can be developed within the prevailing concept: craft as craft, mass production as mass production etc., or the concept of the activity can be transformed: from craft to mass production, from mass production to process enhancement etc. The latter can be seen as processes of collective expansive learning (Engeström, 1987), in which a new concept is created and implemented to overcome a developmental dead end and an aggravating inner contradiction within the prevailing one. Collective expansive learning processes are typically complex long-term processes in which the actors continuously encounter new contradictions within the activity that they have to overcome expansively. (Virkkunen 2007, p. 160)*

These theoretical ideas, together with the presentation of the promising urban housing concepts, were the second type of 'cognitive stimuli' presented at the working seminar. Consisting of theoretical models and conceptualisations, they were intended as an aid for the participants to being re-conceptualising and

reframing the aforementioned initial problems and challenges, and thus to enable expansive learning (Engeström 1987).

Expansive learning is a step-wise process of collective 'learning actions' that lead to a qualitatively new type of activity in which the initial contradiction has been overcome by re-mediating the system. Learning actions are different in the different phases of the expansive cycle, and they can be described typologically as follows: questioning the present practice; analysing the history which has led to the current practice; constructing hypotheses about the underlying developmental contradictions; modelling new solutions; and experimenting and evaluating the experiments.

### **5.3 Working groups**

Thematic working groups were established on the basis of the points of interest expressed by participants in the first intervention seminar. Participants were given an initial list of five groups, based on the selection of international examples made by the researchers (presented in section 4.2). The participants themselves suggested several additional working groups, and after merging some of the suggested groups thematically, the following eight working groups were established:

- Town house
- James – serviced apartments
- Group building and/or self-help housing
- Flexible housing – user-initiated flexibility
- Settle-down flat
- Development of multi-storey residential housing
- Concepts for housing combining dwellings and commercial services and
- "downtown" dwelling
- Developing forms of management and funding instruments

In order to enhance opportunities for collective invention and to strengthen distributed ownership and organisational and institutional anchoring, the thematic working groups are structured on the following principles: They self-organising and independent, that is, the ownership of the groups belongs jointly to the participants. All participants can bring in their own interests to see how

they can be useful to the group. The URBA researchers serve as secretaries in the groups, and their notion of what the groups are for and about is just one legitimate interpretation among others. The groups are temporary and open-ended; they can outlive the URBA project and invite more participants along the way. The groups are 'flat', that is, structured in such a way that all participants are equal regardless of formal institutional position. Heads of organisations, lay persons and students all engage in the same dialogue.

By this point in time there have been over 10 group meetings and some preliminary observations can be made regarding the nature of the agency that is emerging in these groups: the groups have also attracted the interest of others who did not participate in the first working seminar. Approximately 80 people are now involved in the URBA development process, some of them are members in more than one thematic group. In other words, the process has attracted major interest and acceptance among key actors in the housing sector in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The discussions have been very lively and interesting, illuminating the future potentialities as well as present problems.

The not very surprising observation is, however, that the big constructing companies are almost missing and participants represent mainly the public sector (both from the ministry and the cities) and small architect enterprises. Urban planners, designers, architects and authorities from the housing sector have been well represented. In most cases these actors share the opinions of how the housing sector should be developed and seek to act strategically according to their understanding. They mostly agree that many problems are caused by “greedy developers” or by “conservative construction companies”.

Each of the groups gathered 1-5 times between the first and the second joint all-day working seminar. The second seminar took place in May 2009. The next steps of the process will depend on the participants' interests and activeness. Some of the groups have already established concrete goals (like establishing an agency to support group building processes), which means that the intervention has supported the formation of a new intermediary and interactive agency within the housing sector, which has been traditionally very fragmented.

## **6 Conclusions**

The development phase of the URBA project is grounded in the idea that it is possible for the same actors to behave differently in a new situation. By providing an alternative forum for the stakeholders to conceptualize the current challenges and desired direction for change we hope that also the conceptualizations would go beyond the prevailing trenches. This kind of collective concept formation is typically a contradictory learning process (Engeström 2005).

Currently we are analyzing the nature and the dynamics of the learning process which is taking place. Based on preliminary observations, it seems to alter between consensual dialogue and enthusiastic testing of new ideas among people who share the same normative values and a more defensive or conservative claim making on what is possible and feasible.

The idea that the URBA project itself could provide a neutral space for debate and dialogue for genuinely conflicting interests is still alive and we seek ways to facilitate efforts that are not based on shared goals, but rather shared understanding of the interdependency of the network in the face of the most vital goals of each of the actors. The next phase of the URBA project is to further examine how the shared drivers, namely climate change, aging population, and immigration actually move each individual actor – what are the mechanisms through which change happens. If we can gain a better understanding of the nature and logic of each of the stakeholders we can better design and facilitate potential proactive change.

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