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# group dynamics

The dire housing situation in Stockholm is a subject discussed so much over the years that it's beyond trite. We all know there aren't enough apartments in this town, and we're all familiar with having to move flats with an annoying regularity. But what if the problem isn't only down to the lack of apartments; what if it's rooted in the fact that Stockholmers prefer living alone? In fact, nearly half of the city's residents live by themselves and living with others is much less common than it is in other countries like the UK and the US for example. However, there are signs that this is changing and Stockholm is seeing a move towards more collective living as people start to give up on long waiting queues, realizing that it's much cheaper and more sensible to live as a group and share the costs as well as the responsibilities. Communes are not just a thing of some hippie past; they also seem to be the way of the future for our ever-growing city.

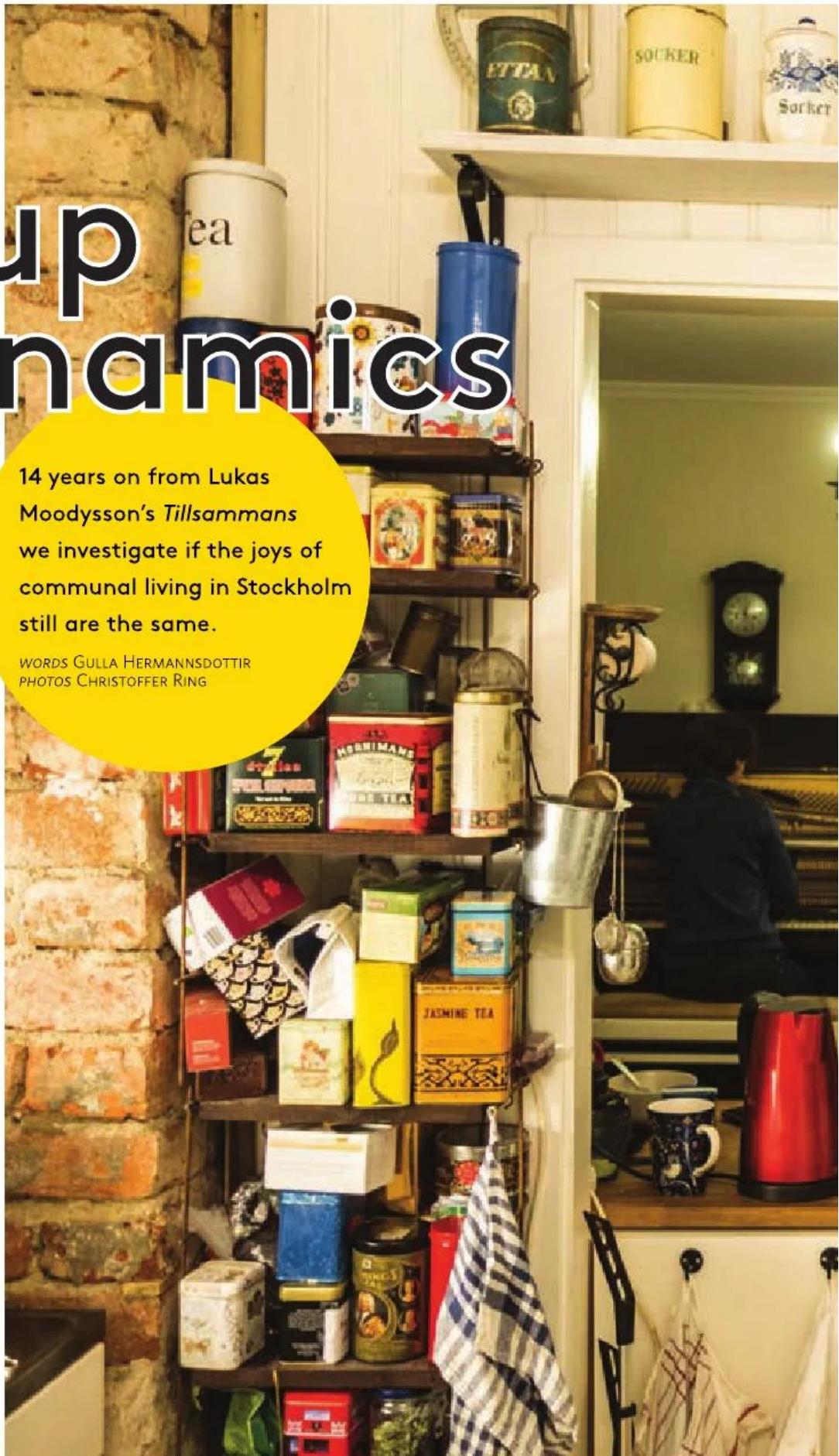
Kollektivet Värdhuset Vita Hästen was founded 44 years ago by writer Jarlo Hammerberg and later became the inspiration for Lukas Moodysson's *Tillsammans*, with the film largely based on Jarlo's diaries. Although Jarlo is still involved with the house and has a guest room for whenever he visits from his current home city of Gothenburg, the house is now in the hands of a new generation and has grown and changed considerably over the years. Vita Hästen has however always been true to its roots of being the first vegetarian collective in Sweden and has been tied to that ideology from the very start.

"Currently there are 11 people living at Vita Hästen and we buy most basic food-stuffs together and someone cooks dinner almost every night for everyone to share," says one of the present occupants, Colorado-born Isis Marina. "Even though most of us are vegetarian, we have a good scope of people and a wide variety of interests and professions are represented. We aim to keep the rent affordable so people can have time and freedom to pursue their interests."

"For the most part we all get along well. Some people are close friends and others are less close, but I think everyone in the house tries their best to respect each other, and of course everyone has different needs. We

14 years on from Lukas Moodysson's *Tillsammans* we investigate if the joys of communal living in Stockholm still are the same.

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set basic guidelines in terms of noise and cleanliness as those are things that can get a bit out of hand when dealing with so many people. We have a meeting every other week to check in with each other and deal with practical matters. Sometimes everyone gets along beautifully and at other times there is conflict but our main aim is open and honest communication in order to resolve conflicts relatively quickly and peacefully."

Isis has a long experience of living collectively, having lived in various communes over the past seven years. "Collectives are vibrant and energetic, which is something I miss when I live alone. I like living in a big house and having space to move around and doing different things like gardening, make art, cook, or read in a quiet corner. I recently got married and my husband and I moved out of the house and lived on our own for six months, but we missed the connection with people and all the benefits living here had to offer so we eventually moved back."

"There are several advantages that come with living in a collective. It costs much less than living on your own, you learn a lot of interpersonal skills like listening and compromising, it can be easier to be creative together and it's more fun to cook, clean, and do projects such as music and art when there are others to join in. Also, it's great to be able to divide the responsibilities. When you live on your own you are the cook, cleaner, maintenance person, gardener, accountant, and so on, but in a collective you can divide and share these tasks according to individual interests and skills. The downside is that sometimes feeling responsible towards so many different people can be heavy, and trying to meet so many people's needs doesn't always work. But although things go up and down I would definitely say the benefits outweigh the drawbacks."

"There is a sense of isolation that a lot of people feel that is specific to living in Stockholm, and I think a lot of people would be surprised to find what a joy it is to live collectively. The housing situation in Stockholm is just mind-blowing and I think more and more people are drawn to living together nowadays. I believe anyone could live in a collective depending on how it is designed. A collective could be tailored to any specific interest and finding people you share a common interest with is the first step. I imagine some people have 'Tillsammans' in mind when they think of collective living, but it can be whatever the people living there make it into."

"The idea of communal living is a bit different in Sweden; it seems like most people living with three or four other people consider it an 'unofficial' collective, which I think is great! In the US, living together is extremely popular and many unmarried people live with a few friends without calling it a collective. I would say houses like Vita Hästen are not as common in Sweden as they are in other places, such as Denmark, but more and more houses are popping up and I hope this popularity continues to increase."



**A**bout a year ago, a group of five close-knit friends in their late 20s to late 30s decided to give up their own apartments in the city to buy a house together in the suburbs and live the way they had always dreamed of. They fell for a century-old charming and spacious house and settled on the name 'Folkhemmet' (The People's Home) for their new residence. "The unusual thing about our collective is that we own the house together," says one of the Folkhemmet inhabitants, My Durén. "We had been planning for several years to move in together and we really wanted it to be a long-term accommodation so we opted to buy. We decided that in order to live on equal terms it would be best to own an equal share and therefore have the same interest in renovations and so on. We all lean to the left politically and our shared ideology is what influences how we want to live together and guides our collective solutions."

"Moving into a house with friends had been a dream of mine since I was little," says My's housemate, Ylva Berry. "My parents are left-leaning and had always spoken highly of living collectively. Their hard-working life with busy jobs and a house to take care of made me wish for less housework and more active leisure time with friends. And we really do have that now! Also, we are better set financially than most individuals because we share all cost five ways."

"Before we bought the house we all had our own secure places so we actively chose to move in together as a collective, rather than doing it out of need of somewhere to stay," continues My. "We're all adults and have had time to sort out our lives financially through building up careers, so this decision was well thought-out and we see this as a permanent living arrangement. We've also carefully considered the different situations that can come up, such as





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bringing new partners and children into the household, or what will happen if somebody wants to sell their share in the house, and we're convinced that we can solve whatever issues that might eventually come up, but it will be interesting to see what happens in practice when the time comes."

"Living collectively questions the old ideals about family norms and suits people who are not necessarily interested in the traditional nuclear family. This type of living is quite unusual for Sweden; for some reason it has become natural for us to live alone. To some extent this may have to do with the idea of independence and individualism. I also believe that there's a purely practical explanation, which is that building policy during the 40s-70s left us with many small apartments in Stockholm and other Swedish cities which enables single-person households. The modern housing policy also probably plays a role because it regulates apartment ownership and rental rights."

"Living in a commune provides you with so much space and access to various things like a workshop, garden, office, etcetera, I could never have all this if I lived alone. But the most important aspect is the solidarity and that we support each other like a family but without having all the requirements for consideration and participation that comes with a family. It's great to always have company around without having to make an effort, and at the same time you're not obliged to socialize and it's fine that everyone's sitting in their own corner with their own computer. We like each other's company enough to not be disturbed by the constant presence of others in common areas and if anyone wants to be completely alone they just go to their own room. When it comes to noise I have to say I'm less disturbed by my housemates than I was by my neighbours when I lived in an apartment. That's probably because we have pretty similar habits and throw mutual parties and so on."

"The only downside I can think of is that it takes longer to renovate or change things in the home when five people have to share the decision," adds Ylva. "But I believe that the decisions we make will be better and more informed than if we had to decide things by ourselves or with just one partner."

One of the reasons for the great harmony in the house comes through a clever scoring system that one of the housemates created and administers through a web page where everyone enters their various household chores. "With the help of this system we can see that everyone does the same amount of work, and it also allows for flexibility because you can choose to collect a lot of points however quickly you want and then work less later on. Thanks to the system we never have arguments about somebody leaving dishes and so on; you just do the dishes that are there and report your points, and then the rest of the house will just have to catch up another time. We also have a very good cooking system where we take turns preparing dinner and it's such a luxury to come home to a hot meal a few nights a week and not have to think about anything!"

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Another way of living collectively, yet slightly more privately, is through the so-called kollektivhus (collective housing), which comes in the form of communal apartment buildings with shared facilities as well as activities. Examples of this type of living are found all over Stockholm and these buildings include common dining halls with a rotating cooking schedule, a gym and sauna, woodworking shops and paint studios, music rooms and libraries, communal gardens, and even guest apartments. The shared activities involve everything from game, craft and movie nights to yoga classes, outings and joint house parties.

The collective house Tre Portar dates from the late 80s and consists of 52 apartments. It was one of the houses built following a new political policy that a certain amount of newly built properties should become communal houses (in more recent times, communal buildings have mostly been private initiatives).

"In order to live here you have to be a member in the association and pay your membership, participate in a cleaning team and help out with the cooking and other activities in the house," says Thord Håkansson, a resident of Tre Portar since the very beginning. "Every year we arrange a joint party in addition to various theme nights and family outings. We have people of all ages here, but perhaps mostly in their 30s and 40s, in addition to quite a lot of students, and I'd say the residents of the house are on the left half of the political spectrum. We also have external members - that is, people who do not live in the commune but who are keen to be involved in cooking and other activities."

"I think most of us have chosen to live here to gain access to the community that collective housing generates. There are so many benefits of living like this; for example your children will have many friends within the house and we help each other out with various things. The only drawback is perhaps that we become a little isolated in the neighbourhood because we mostly hang out at the house as it has everything we need."



**O**ur final example of collective living comes in the shape of the 'informal commune': just a few friends sharing a flat together without any official rules or ideology. Tove Sörblom lives in one such place in Bagarmossen, along with two other girls also in their 20s. "We all have a common interest in art in various forms, whether it's theatre, painting, animation, music or poetry," says Tove. "Our core values are similar and we have similar political views, which helps when you live together."

"There are not too many rules here. We apply common sense and try to see to that it's not the same person who buys coffee and toilet paper every time. Sometimes we eat together. Whoever is cooking usually asks if anyone else wants to eat. Basically, we live our own lives, but we do it together in the same apartment."

"I love living collectively. It's a wonderful feeling to be able to do your own thing in your own space, but still always have the option of talking to somebody, or lying on the couch and cuddling. I see myself having children and a family in the future, but I'd still like my friends to be a part of that future because my friends are my family. It's good to be a group and it's incredibly inspiring."

"I definitely think that the housing situation in Stockholm has something to do with the fact that more young people are choosing to live collectively nowadays. To live with more people is a big economic advantage and for many people it becomes necessary to live with others to make ends meet. I absolutely believe it's a growing trend to live this way, and not just for young people, which I think is a positive thing. We are herd animals after all."