

Living made easy.

The all-inclusive Old Oak.

History and Theory Studies - Year 2

Term 2 Essay

Student: Carlo Alberto Campolo

Tutor: Georgios E.

The Collective Old Oak - part of 'The Collective' company, was built and opened in 2016 as the first of many co-living structures managed by the same company. Following the recent trends in an increased demand of new, innovative and stimulating environments, the prefix 'co-' has gained a substantial amount of popularity and friction within the modern housing context in some of the world's most favoured cities such as London and New York.

In a critical moment where housing and domesticity are widely challenged and their conventional functions are being completely rethought, it is crucial to observe and analyse new typologies for living that are now uprising in London in order to understand how and why these type of dwelling spaces is the direction we - as the entity who inhabits them - are moving towards.¹

More and more companies are now starting to provide these new 'co-living' and 'co-working' spaces, providing people with an innovative environment that can bring together a large number of individuals, perhaps with a variety of ethnical and professional background, and let them inhabit the same space while performing similar activities.² A deeper understanding of what these circumstances actually represent can be obtained by analysing the etymology from which its name derives: "Com-" from the Latin meaning "together, with". Therefore, even though the people who are using such spaces (either living in them by sleeping and eating or, on the other hand, people who are just working there) may not know each other, may be complete stranger to one another, they are subconsciously participating to a *collective* activity, they are all doing the same thing together.

This concept of doing certain things *together* reflects, to some extent, a person's biological necessity of interacting amongst each other. It is not a questionable fact that, as human beings, we constantly seek for someone's presence - external from ourselves - to share thoughts, exchange opinions and feel loved. If this would not be true, then why do we feel the urge to go out with other people we call our 'friends'? Why do we want to spend the rest of our lives with our 'partner'? On a similar level, this is probably what attracted people to these emerging new ways of living: the need to have other people around, the possibility to make new friends, a chance to meet new colleagues who do your same job.³

The Collective Old Oak is located just below the Harlesden area, in London's Zone 3, between Willesden Junction and North Acton stations. Sufficiently connected to the rest of the city through the public transportation network, commuting from and to the city centre will take about 35

¹ Lizzie Widdicombe, "The Rise of the Co-Living Startup." The New Yorker, published May 16, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/16/the-rise-of-the-co-living-startup>.

² Jessica Mairs, "World's largest co-living complex promises residents 'everything at their fingertips'." Dezeen, published February 22, 2017, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.dezeen.com/2016/04/28/collective-old-oak-common-co-living-plp-architecture-willesden-junction-london-housing/>.

³ Ed Thomas, "Co-living has a real impact on young people's lives." Property Week, published November 23, 2017, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.propertyweek.com/comment/co-living-has-a-real-impact-on-young-peoples-lives/5093699.article>.

to 40 minutes by tube (depending on the line and wait at the station). This cluster of 'self-contained studio apartments'⁴ overlooks its surroundings and can be easily spotted also at a distance as its 10-storeys height exceeds more than double the height of all the rest of the buildings in the area. The façade, being mainly made out of aluminium panels and glass windows, easily blends in with the sky on cloudy days. The angular and boxy aesthetics of the building vaguely reminds of prefabricated light-weight shipping containers; although this is likely just a coincidence as the shape has been probably obtained through the extrusion of a plan where the client wanted to maximise profit by minimising costs of construction and giving as less private space to the single individuals as possible.

Inside the complex, aside from the five hundred single-bed rooms (which will be treated more in-depth later in the text), a vast variety of facilities and shared spaces are offered and available to whoever stays at the Old Oak. Upon entering the structure, one is immediately presented with a pleasant and warm "Welcome back home" sign that is hanging from the ceiling, right next to the *front desk*. The paradox already starts to be noticeable just a few steps inside: the existence of a 'front desk' (or reception in other words) - entity found and relatable to other types of temporary living (and non) solutions such as hotels and offices - strongly contrasts the atmosphere of *home* The Collective tries to pursue. *Heimat* (and its secondary cause: *heimlich* - the feeling of being at home) cannot be perceived as such if one finds himself in such a literal and artificial replication of the *feeling of being welcomed back home*. The open plan common foyer fully equipped with generic furniture like tables, chairs, couches and sofas are available to be used by the guests at any time of the day in case they want to work or spend some time outside of their rooms.⁵

Adjacent to the entrance, one can find the common restaurant and bar where guests can go to have breakfast in the morning or eat something in the afternoon. At night this space becomes a place of encounters where one can have a drink and meet new people whom are also staying in the Old Oak. On the other floors, several other common rooms covering a wide variety of entertainment, leisure and utilitarian spaces; for instance: a spa, a laundrette, a gym, a games room, a dozen of communal kitchens and dining rooms, a cinema room, a library, a 'secret garden' room, and a roof terrace. Some of these can be also booked in advance for private use in case one of the members staying at the Old Oak wishes to have a common room all for themselves and their party.

The Collective is not the only company which is taking advantage of this popular hype of co-living occurring during these few recent years. Many new businesses have emerged, such as CitizenM, WeLive (and its other side WeWork), Lyvly, with the intention to participate to one of the

⁴ "The Collective Old Oak," The Collective, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.thecollective.co.uk/coliving/old-oak/studio>

⁵ Hannah Foulds, "Co-Living Spaces: Modern Utopia Or Over-Organised Hell?" Londonist, published April 10, 2017, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://londonist.com/london/housing/co-living-spaces-modern-utopia-or-over-organised-hell>.

£1040/month (+ £153.60 for a 1 month TFL travelcard Zones 1-3)

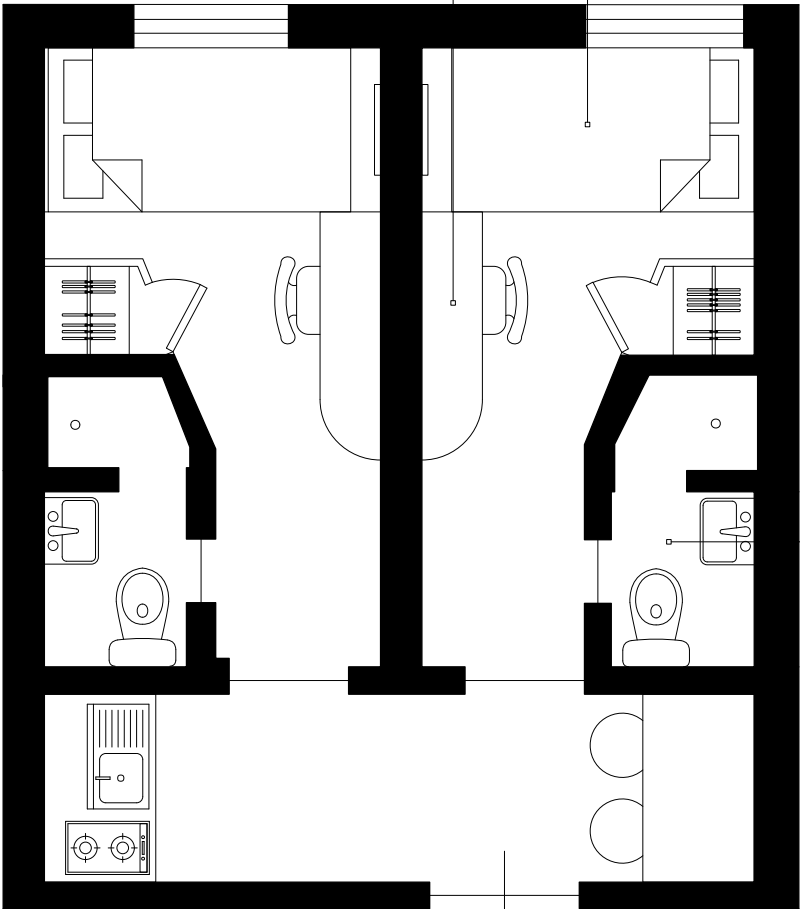
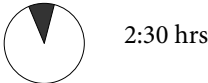
=

- 9m² room
- shared kitchen
- wifi
- light, water, gas
- lounge area
- roof terrace
- ‘secret garden’
- library
- cinema room
- games room
- gym*
- restaurant & bar
- laundrette
- spa
- community events to which you should participate because it’s very sad to stay all alone in your 9m² room.

*£50 fee for new members

great communal spaces...empty almost all the time!
who needs these spaces anyways?! we’re always so busy

how much time are you actually using the space?



Living made easy.
The all-inclusive Old Oak

The 9m² room: costs and stuff



0 2 1 2m

biggest changes in living-spaces typologies since private student accommodations were becoming popular. In fact, it is very easy to notice the many similarities between these two living-space typologies: floors filled with individual rooms for one person, often very small in size, various shared rooms spread across the different floors, a main entrance with a front desk and staff working both at the entrance or on the floors for cleaning and maintenance.

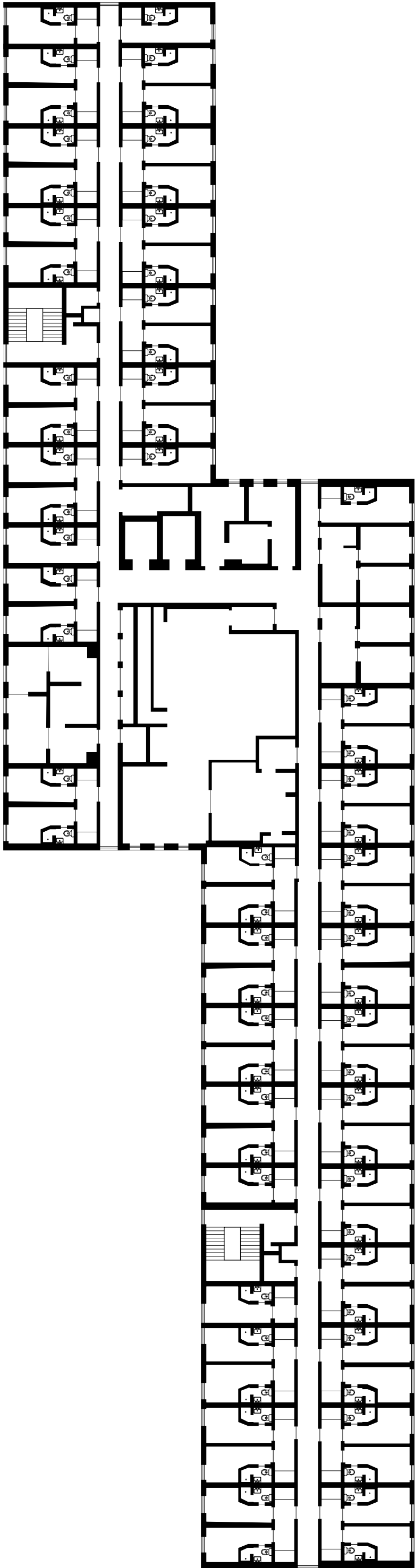
Their *promise* (actually more an intention rather than an actual promise) and the concept they advertise and persuade you to pay for, is relatively straightforward: living in a structure like the Old Oak will simplify your life; in other words - make *life easier to live*.⁶ Even though they may also not say it explicitly, they make people understand that *that's* the main reason they should get out of their traditional one bedroom flat and move in one of their structures. With prices starting from £240 per week,⁷ one has access to all the common and shared spaces the Old Oak provides them plus a personal and private 9m² room. The order in which they are stated is not random: most of the times companies such as The Collective tend to publicise more *everything else* there is a side from the (bed) room - only space that's actually private. From a psychological perception point of view, by looking (for example) at an ad for a room in The Collective Old Oak, one will probably give more importance to all the extra 'stuff' (everything else outside the 9m² room) as additional reasons to live there since "I won't have a games room, a cinema room, a spa, a gym, etc, in my flat." especially for a price like the one a person pays at the Old Oak.

On the other hand, what The Collective ads don't make you understand is the fact these 'extra' spaces are not yours: they belong to the company and, as a member of the structure who is paying for the service, you are entitled to access and use these spaces **but** only if you follow the company's rules and policies. Hence the second paradox of co-living in the Old Oak: if that had been your house, rather than a structure where you are solely a guest member, you should not be the only following and adapting to the rules but, opposite to that, you would be the one dictating your own rules for other people (the guests) who are occupying a space that does not belong to them.

Moreover, when one first moves in the Old Oak and starts to familiarise with the common spaces, he/she may realise that not everything one is allowed to use is *free* to use (therefore meaning not everything is included in what you pay for your room). The gym, for example, has a £50 fee for new members, meaning that even though you pay for access to the space, you cannot actually take advantage you are therefore buying *the possibility* of having a gym, which can be fully obtained by paying an extra amount on top of your regular fee.

⁶ "This is Not a Housing Crisis Article." The Collective, published September 23, 2016, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.thecollective.co.uk/collectivist/living/this-is-not-a-housing-crisis-article>.

⁷ "The Collective Old Oak." The Collective, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.thecollective.co.uk/coliving/old-oak#coliving-rooms>.



The Collective Old Oak
2016
PLP Architecture



0 1 5 10m

The individual private rooms are arranged in such a way that for every two people there is a shared kitchenette and a small counter with two stools facing a wall where people can eat their food. The bedroom, measuring 4m x 2.2m (for a total surface area of 8.8m²), contains only the essential furniture and services for basic human necessities (e.g. sleeping, washing, and defecating) as well as a small desk, a chair, a tv, and a very minimal wardrobe. The only window present in the room is located next to the bed and it cannot be opened because of safety regulations. Obviously a person cannot stay in such a small space for extended periods of time as it may become claustrophobic and therefore it is more probable that he/she will decide to spend most of the day outside the bedroom - perhaps in one of the many common rooms around the building.

Expressed in a humorous way "Smile! You're on CCTV", the signs on every floor of the Old Oak alert the people inside the space that, by being inside they're property, they are allowing the company to monitor, record and store anything that one does in the common areas such as the foyer, the elevators, the corridors and the common rooms. This can then enable The Collective to see and analyse the behavioural response to the space used by its members and study their routine patterns to improve the company's services. If the Big Brother⁸ notices that some common rooms are not systematically used in specific hours or days, then he may choose to close that room to cut down costs by saving electricity and cleaning shifts at determined times when demand is not adequate.


Even when the common rooms are open and could be potentially used by the 500 members staying at the Old Oak, going inside makes one realise that they are completely unused and it feels like the although there are 500 rooms, only a tenth of them are occupied.⁹

Referring to The Collective as the 'brother' is in fact not casual: one of the company's main goal is to make everyone who's staying in their structure feel as if they are part of a bigger family. A group of people where guests and staff all relate to each other regardless of whether they know each other's name. The bitter truth is that the family you are part is in reality just a company with the sole objective of making money and you, as a component of this numerous family, are contributing to it with the money paid to rent the rooms and all the extras one may consume (such as food and drinks) during their stay at the Old Oak.

Throughout your stay, you will be persuaded - multiple times - to participate to one of the many events organised by The Collective which regularly take place at the bar or the lounge area that are arranged in order to make you feel more at home by having some social interaction with other human beings. Posters, banners and leaflets will be put around the building to publicise the

⁸ Referring to The Collective as the Big Brother, observing and analysing everyone's life through the use of security cameras.

⁹ Tom Harrad, "This new co-living space is the dystopian symptom of a london failing young people." I-d, published June 20, 2017, accessed January 15, 2018, https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/43xgx9/this-new-co-living-space-is-the-dystopian-symptom-of-a-london-failing-young-people.



Wezley Joao Ferreira reviewed The Collective Old Oak – 1★

2 May 2017 · 🌐

1. Smallest Apartments In London
The collective have the smallest rooms in london and charge more money per square meter then any other company in London. The joke is they tell you it's a Studio Apartment, it's really a kitchen with a bed in it.

2. Human Rights Infringement
Their contact states that the staff of the collective have the right to enter your personal space and search your room. (I'm almost sure this is against human rights)

3. Rules and Punishment
They have ridiculous rules and when not followed actually **punish the residents. More rules then a prison** or a boarding school, and we are mature adults not child or criminals.

4. Complete Lack of Empathy
If you are not happy and approach staff to help you leave, they just pretend you don't exist but don't actually let you leave.

5. Social Experiment
What they don't tell you is that they are social experiments and will be filmed by CCTV 24hours a day and you have no Privacy expect for your room and even that is not safe.

6. Care Home
The number of times there is an ambulance or police car outside the front is amazing. People continuously overdosing on drugs or trying to take their own lives being covered up the staff is ridiculous. A number of people have also told me they we taken out of a social facility of some kind and put into the collective.

7. Half Job Cleaners
The cleaners come once every two weeks and don't even wash the dishes. What a joke, they leave the worst bit for us to clean ourselves. Like I can't sweep my 3 square meter apartment and put my own bedding in the wash. For £1200/month you would expect the cleaner came everyday and what's my dishes and make me dinner.

The list goes on and on and on and on about how this **fake hipster hotel nightmare!!** But I'm not waisting any more time on trying to fix it. Heed my warning don't sign the contract and if you want freedom and you human rights respected, stay very far away from THE CORRECTIVE!! 💎


👍 Like

💬 Comment

➦ Share

👍❤️

5



Tracy Eden reviewed The Collective Old Oak – 1★

7 May 2017 · 🌐

Truly awful place to live unless you're new to london and/or in need of a social circle. Not to mention that the staff regularly break the law, the management are unscrupulous hipsters with no idea how to run a business and zero clue about customer service unless that service is to provide **some kind of alcohol fuelled live action tinder**. Avoid unless in mid-life crisis or new to london.

👍 Like

💬 Comment

➦ Share

👍

4



Xenia Muntean reviewed The Collective Old Oak – 1★

10 January at 18:19 · 🌐

Rooms incredibly small and suffocating. It doesn't have the personality you see in the photos. **It looks and feels sterile like a hospital room.**

It smells bad on the hallways and the common rooms are always unavailable.


Wouldn't recommend it to anyone.

👍 Like

💬 Comment

➦ Share

1 Comment



Asadov Samir reviewed The Collective Old Oak – 2★

7 November 2016 · 🌐

Overrated. Staff can be **unprofessional, lazy and unhelpful**. Snoby like they give you a favour when you go to reception. Theft is an issue a lot too and nobody investigates. Yeah rooms are nice and clean convenient location. People are nice though.

👍 Like

💬 Comment

➦ Share

👍❤️

7

event and encourage people to participate. Facebook events will be posted in order for the guests to be always updated and reminded of these get-togethers.¹⁰

Considering the fact that the bedrooms are so minuscule almost causing a sense of claustrophobia, it would not be absurd to take into consideration the size of the individual room as one of the main factors that dictates the reasoning behind one's decision if to participate in these events or not. From a certain point of view, it is possible to say that by being so small, one nearly feels the need of getting out of the room against his/her will. Furthermore, because of the context the Old Oak is located - as it is an area currently undergoing a regeneration plan - the structure is completely isolated from any sort of entertainment and recreational venue therefore becoming the one and only place where to 'hang out' in the evening with others for (or not) a drink if one does not want to stay in their room on their own after dinner.

Current and past members who stayed at the Old Oak expressed their disappointment with the service provided on the accommodation's social media pages on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Among the numerous negative reviews one can find on social media, user *Wezley Joao Ferreira* clearly summarises some of the main aspects that scare the most about the untold and foggy side of living in the building. Alongside with other serious matters, he emphasises the total lack of care the company has towards its guests: how the staff 'starts to pretend you don't exist' in case you are unhappy with the accommodation and want to leave; he describes living in The Collective Old Oak as a 'social experiment' where one is constantly filmed with CCTV 24/7. He points out that one of the conditions that is stated in the contract that the company makes you agree to when you first move in gives them (The Collective and its staff) the right to enter your personal space and search your room. Other users have also contributed to this public critique describing the place as a series of sterile-feeling hospital rooms with unprofessional and lazy staff. This all links back to the original concept of The Collective treating its guests as money-giving assets rather than human beings with rights and emotions.

It is through these type of 'publicity' that the *two sides of the coin* get exposed. On one hand there is a new emerging company, like many others in these past few years, promising people a *fresh* way of living: making the everyday daily routine as easy and smooth as possible. Offering a wide variety of services, facilities and utilities all included in one single bill of £1040 a month. Allowing people to make new friends and take advantage of big open spaces to work and relax just an elevator ride away from their room. On the other hand, the mere truth is the fact that what the company is actually offering you is an overpaid 9-square-metres room in which you can barely sleep and wash as there is not enough space to do anything else. People used to bigger spaces may get claustrophobic if spending too much time in the bedroom and are therefore '*pushed*' to

¹⁰ Leanne Bayley, "'I swapped one flatmate for 500 in London's first co-living community'." Glamour, published November 17, 2016, accessed January 15, 2018, <http://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/the-collective-old-oak-review>.

get out and find another space where to spend most of their day. They can either be in a common room and sit next to strangers or commute for around 40 minutes with the tube and walk around the city centre.

The Collective Old Oak is, in conclusion, one of the many examples that are the results of an unsuccessful - at least up until now - attempt to reinvent domestic space and its physical and psychological connection with the human being that dwells within it. Co-living can therefore be expressed as an avant-garde way of living ahead of its time which, perhaps, has started being adopted by companies and housing businesses when it was still prematurely developed and not completely thought through as these feared to the idea of not being able to 'be among the first ones to do *this* something new' and losing its potential investors to other competitors.



Bibliography

Bayley, Leanne. "'I swapped one flatmate for 500 in London's first co-living community'." Glamour. November 17, 2016. Accessed January 15, 2018. <http://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/the-collective-old-oak-review>.

Brown, Annie. "The Ultimate Guide to Coliving." Outside, August 17, 2017.

Foulds, Hannah. "Co-Living Spaces: Modern Utopia Or Over-Organised Hell?" Londonist. April 10, 2017. Accessed January 15, 2018. <https://londonist.com/london/housing/co-living-spaces-modern-utopia-or-over-organised-hell>.

Harrad, Tom. "This new co-living space is the dystopian symptom of a london failing young people." I-d. June 20, 2017. Accessed January 15, 2018. https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/43xgx9/this-new-co-living-space-is-the-dystopian-symptom-of-a-london-failing-young-people.

Horti, Samuel. "The Collective to sell its £100m Old Oak co-living scheme." Property Week. May 31, 2017. Accessed January 15, 2018. <https://www.propertyweek.com/news/the-collective-to-sell-its-100m-old-oak-co-living-scheme/5089533.article>.

Mairs, Jessica. "World's largest co-living complex promises residents 'everything at their fingertips'." Dezeen. February 22, 2017. Accessed January 15, 2018. <https://www.dezeen.com/2016/04/28/collective-old-oak-common-co-living-plp-architecture-willesden-junction-london-housing/>.

Ray, Debika. "The Collective, Old Oak, London: Collective nightmare - Icon Magazine." Icon magazine: Architecture and design culture - Icon Magazine. Accessed January 15, 2018. <https://www.iconeye.com/opinion/comment/item/12482-collective-nightmare>.

"The Collective Old Oak." The Collective. Accessed January 15, 2018. <https://www.thecollective.co.uk/coliving/old-oak#coliving-rooms>.

"This is Not a Housing Crisis Article." The Collective. September 23, 2016. Accessed January 15, 2018. <https://www.thecollective.co.uk/collectivist/living/this-is-not-a-housing-crisis-article>.

Thomas, Ed. "Co-living has a real impact on young people's lives." Property Week. November 23, 2017. Accessed January 15, 2018. <https://www.propertyweek.com/comment/co-living-has-a-real-impact-on-young-peoples-lives/5093699.article>.

Widdicombe, Lizzie. "The Rise of the Co-Living Startup." The New Yorker, May 16, 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/16/the-rise-of-the-co-living-startup>.