

Cohousing Communities: A Sustainable Approach to Housing Development

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Submitted By
Charles L. Belk

UC Davis Extension
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Introduction

Would you be interested in residing in something called a “*bofællesskabe*?” Well, thousands of people around the world have opted to do just that, and it appears they are thoroughly enjoying themselves. Bofællesskabe, is a Danish word that translates into English as “living community.”¹

In the United States these living communities have come to be known as cohousing, a term introduced by Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett in the mid 1980s in their book titled “Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves.” This approach to housing which is centered on the establishment of intentional communities has been very successful and currently there are “hundreds of cohousing communities, expanding from Denmark into the U.S, Canada, Australia, Sweden, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Belgium, Austria and elsewhere.”²

What is Cohousing?

Cohousing neighborhoods or developments are typically formed by a group of people who are “consciously committed to living as a community.”³ In most cases, the residents actually participate in finding, acquiring, designing, developing and in the ongoing operation and upkeep of their neighborhoods. These communities are small in scale, usually consisting of between 20-40 homes on average,⁴ and are designed to “provide a balance between personal privacy and living amidst people who know and care about each other.”⁵

Another feature of cohousing is that “each household owns a private residence – complete with kitchen – but also shares extensive common facilities with the larger group” such as workshops, gardens, and various other amenities.⁶ While ownership is prevalent, some developments may also contain several rental units. Common space and facilities are an “important aspect of community life both for social and practical reasons.”⁷

Cohousing in the United States

Cohousing first came to the United States during the late 1980’s and the first community opened in Davis, California during the summer of 1991.⁸ Today, over 130 cohousing communities exist throughout North America and new communities are forming monthly.⁹ There are currently 44 cohousing communities either completed or in various stages of forming in California alone.¹⁰

Core Principles of Cohousing

In its broadest sense all cohousing can be defined utilizing the following six characteristics:

1. Participatory Process: Future residents participate in the design of the community so that it meets their needs. Some cohousing communities are initiated or driven by a developer. In those cases, if the developer brings the future resident group into the process late in the planning, the residents will have less input into the design. A well-designed, pedestrian-oriented community without significant resident participation in the planning may be “cohousing-inspired,” but it is not a cohousing community.

2. Integrated Neighborhood Design: The physical layout and orientation of the buildings (the site plan) encourage a sense of community. For example, the private residences are clustered on the site, leaving more shared open space. The dwellings typically face each other across a pedestrian street or courtyard, with cars parked on the periphery. Often, the front doorway of every home affords a view of the common house. What far outweighs any specifics, however, is the intention to create a strong sense of community, with design as one of the facilitators.

3. Common Facilities: Common facilities are designed for daily use, are an integral part of the community, and are always supplemental to the private residences. The common house typically includes a common kitchen, dining area, sitting area, children's playroom and laundry, and also may contain a workshop, library, exercise room, crafts room and/or one or two guest rooms. Except on very tight urban sites, cohousing communities often have playground equipment, lawns and gardens as well. Since the buildings are clustered, larger sites may retain several or many acres of undeveloped shared open space.

4. Resident Management: Residents manage their own cohousing communities, and also perform much of the work required to maintain the property. They participate in the preparation of common meals, and meet regularly to solve problems and develop policies for the community.

5. Non-Hierarchical Structure and Decision-Making: Leadership roles naturally exist in cohousing communities, however no one person (or persons) has authority over others. Most groups start with one or two “burning souls.” As people join the group, each person takes on one or more roles consistent with his or her skills, abilities or interests. Most cohousing groups make all of their decisions by consensus, and, although many groups have a policy for voting if the group cannot reach consensus after a number of attempts, it is rarely or never necessary to resort to voting.

6. Community Does Not Share an Economy: The community is not a source of income for its members. Occasionally, a cohousing community will pay one of its residents to do a specific (usually time-limited) task, but more typically the work will be considered that member's contribution to the shared responsibilities.¹¹

Co-Housing and Sustainability

By their very nature, cohousing communities tend to be sustainably designed. The parcels are smaller, denser and the dwellings more modest in size than is typical in most of America's large, sprawling subdivisions today. Although environmentally-conscious green design and building are not defining characteristics of cohousing communities “most people who seek cohousing have a high level of environmental consciousness.” Communities will often “incorporate green building materials and techniques in the design and construction to the extent they can afford them, and are attentive to minimizing their impact on the natural environment.”¹²

While each cohousing site is unique, McCamant & Durrett Architects have successfully utilized some of the following green building features in their cohousing projects (This is a partial list): Urban infill, sustainably harvested lumber, passive solar orientation and shading, radiant flooring heating systems, fly ash in concrete, low water and energy use appliances and fixtures, sustainable flooring materials such as wool carpet and linoleum, wet blown recycled cellulose insulation, gypcrete flooring systems to provide thermal mass, pervious pathways and paving, passive cooling, permaculture landscape principles, active solar heating and waste stream management.¹³

Site Design

There are a variety of site designs utilized in the development of cohousing communities. “Some feature a large common house with smaller private homes clustered in pedestrian-oriented, ecologically designed communities uncut by city streets.” Others might consist of apartments configured around a common meeting and dining area in a large, remodeled warehouse.¹⁴

In most cohousing communities, “the common house is the social center of a community, with a large dining room and kitchen, lounge, recreational facilities, children's spaces, and frequently a guest room, workshop and laundry room.”¹⁵ As mentioned previously, while “each home is entirely self-

sufficient, complete with a kitchen, residents often prepare common meals together in the kitchen of the common house.”¹⁶ These meals may take place 2-3 times per week¹⁷ and “are very appealing to those with busy lives” so most residents choose to participate.”¹⁸

The individual homes in a cohousing neighborhood are also designed with the goal of creating community functionality. Kitchens, an area where a great deal of family time is spent, “are often located at the front of houses so that residents can look out over their porch or garden” and out into the common meeting areas. This is referred to in co-housing design terms as the “soft edge” and allows community members not only to keep an eye on their children, but the design also encourages social contact.¹⁹

Societal, Economic, Ecological & Neighborhood Benefits

Cohousing’s advantages can extend across many different areas of societal concern. Benefits can be accrued at both the micro and macro level as is outlined below.

Social benefits: In our mobile and fast-paced society, cohousing can offer support and sense of unity to people who are often geographically separated from their traditional families. Shared childcare arrangements, a community of caring adults, friendship, peer support, help with chores and assistance during life’s stressful times are but a few benefits.²⁰

Economic benefits: While Cohousing can sometimes be slightly more expensive on the front end (10-15% premium over traditional housing), it offers economic savings over the life of the project. The up-front costs are often related to “generous common facilities,” higher costs of small-scale development and the integration of green building features which save money in the long-term, but cost more initially.²¹ Cohousing can generate a lower cost-of-living for its members through sharing of items (tools, gardens, transportation, laundry facilities), savings on childcare, and through bulk buying of food and other necessities.²²

Ecological benefits: As mentioned previously, because cohousing members generally have a higher level of environmental awareness, communities often focus on incorporating green design elements and try to lighten their impact on the environment. Some cohousing communities upgrade existing structures by retrofitting with solar panels, weatherizing and utilizing permaculture landscape design.²³

Neighborhood benefits: Cohousing communities, far from being insular, are often involved in a broad range of neighborhood sustainability projects such as tree-planting, community gardens, speed bump and bicycle lane safety advocacy, affordable housing, recycling, rideshare programs and greenspace preservation.²⁴

Conclusion

Cohousing has shown its value as a successful approach to sustainable housing development over the past 35 years. It assists in creating more cooperative, ecologically-sound and socially-just communities and helps to minimize our impact on the earth. Cohousing’s success may offer one alternative to helping our world sufficiently meet the needs of an ever-burgeoning human population.

Local Examples of Co-Housing

Muir Commons Cohousing – Davis, CA – Exhibit I

Type: New Construction
1st Occupied: Spring 1991
Site Area: 2.9 acres
of Units: 26 attached homes

Description: Muir Commons was the first newly-constructed cohousing community in the United States. Its clustered homes look out onto a central pedestrian path and backyards face the exterior edges of the site. Amenities include a garden, orchard, children's playground, and extensive landscaping with drought-tolerant and native species. There is a large common house at the center of the community that includes a sitting room with fireplace, a children's playroom, an exercise room, recreation room, an office, laundry room and a guest room. There is also a 900sf woodworking studio and automotive shop, parking areas, bike sheds and a hot tub.²⁵

Southside Park Cohousing – Sacramento, CA – Exhibit II

Type: In-Fill / Neighborhood Revitalization
1st Occupied: September 1993
Site Area: 1.27 Acres
of Units: 25

Description: This 25-unit in-fill housing development is located in a neighborhood that had declined drastically. It is a mixed-income development with low-income (5 units), moderate-income (6 units) and market-rate (14 units) filling out the unit mix. Homes are grouped around shared facilities for dining, recreation, laundry and gardening. Because residents reduced costs by deciding on amenities early in the process the homes feature hardwood floors, wood siding and porches. The development also restored and incorporated an existing Victorian Duplex in one corner of the community.²⁶

N Street Cohousing – Davis, CA – Exhibit III

Type: Retrofit Cohousing
1st Occupied: 1986 (Homes date to 1950s)
Site Area: Unknown – Encompasses most of a block in existing residential development
of Units: 17

Description: This retrofit cohousing group began when two neighboring homes took down their fences. Since that time, the community has continued to grow adding 13 more homes on the block and 2 more from across the street. The fence removal has created a large, beautiful open-space that includes vegetable gardens, flowers, a play structure, hot tub, sauna, a chicken coop, grassy play area, pond and more. A recently renovated / rebuilt common house serves as the community center for meals, meeting spaces, informal gathering and monthly work parties. The community is almost equally divided between homeowners and renters.²⁷

Notes

1. Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant, <http://www.mccamant-durrett.com/history.cfm>
2. The Cohousing Association of the United States, <http://cohousing.org/overview.aspx>
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Jim Leach, Wonderland Hill Development Company , http://www.whdc.com/what_is_cohousing.shtml
6. Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant, <http://www.mccamant-durrett.com/project-type.cfm?cat=cohousing>
7. Ibid.
8. <http://www.muircommons.org/>
9. Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant, <http://www.mccamant-durrett.com/project-type.cfm?cat=cohousing>
10. The Cohousing Association of the United States, http://directory.cohousing.org/us_list/all_us.php
11. The Cohousing Association of the United States, <http://cohousing.org/overview.aspx>
12. The Cohousing Association of the United States, <http://www.cohousing.org/faq.aspx#faq6>
13. Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant, <http://www.mccamant-durrett.com/sustainability.cfm>
14. Northwest Report, Cohousing: A Model For Sustainable Living, Number 19, January 1996 ISSN 1040-855X, <http://www.smartcommunities.ncat.org/articles/cohouse.shtml>
15. The Cohousing Association of the United States, <http://cohousing.org/overview.aspx>
16. Jim Leach, Wonderland Hill Development Company , http://www.whdc.com/what_is_cohousing.shtml
17. The Cohousing Association of the United States, <http://cohousing.org/overview.aspx>
18. Jim Leach, Wonderland Hill Development Company , http://www.whdc.com/what_is_cohousing.shtml
19. Camille Sweeney, New York Times, 9/10/06, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9901E6DD1731F933A2575AC0A9609C8B63>
20. Northwest Report, Cohousing: A Model For Sustainable Living, Number 19, January 1996 ISSN 1040-855X, <http://www.smartcommunities.ncat.org/articles/cohouse.shtml>
21. Rick Mockler, Cohousing-L Discussion, 11/17/05, <http://lists.cohousing.org/archives/cohousing-1/msg22441.html>
22. Northwest Report, Cohousing: A Model For Sustainable Living, Number 19, January 1996 ISSN 1040-855X, <http://www.smartcommunities.ncat.org/articles/cohouse.shtml>
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. <http://www.muircommons.org/>
26. Affordable Housing Design Advisor, <http://www.designadvisor.org/frameset.html?http://www.designadvisor.org/gallery/southside.html>
27. <http://www.nstreetcohousing.org/>



Muir Commons – Davis, CA - Solar Roof Installation (2003)
www.muircommons.org

Exhibit I



Southside Park Cohousing – Sacramento, CA - www.designadvisor.org
Exhibit II



N Street Cohousing – Davis, CA – View from common backyard area
<http://directory.cohousing.org>

Site Plan – N Street Cohousing
 Exhibit III

