

Kathryn McCamant *and* Charles Durrett

*Foreword by* BILL MCKIBBEN



# Creating Cohousing

*Building Sustainable Communities*





Advance Praise for  
*Creating Cohousing*

This book, by the founders of the cohousing movement in the United States, is a must read for anybody who wants or needs to know about cohousing. It serves those who want to learn about living in one, creating one, or just better understand how cohousing is driving positive change in the broader culture.

— CRAIG RAGLAND, Executive Director,  
Cohousing Association of the United States

In *Creating Cohousing* Kathryn McCamant and Chuck Durrett have done much more than bring the cohousing story up to date with the latest reports from both pioneer new communities. They have added valuable chapters on state of the art and best practices unique to cohousing design, development, and community building, and they have defined cohousing's influence and role in the current cultural transition toward a more sustainable lifestyle.

—JIM LEACH, President,  
Wonderland Hill Development Company

Praise for  
*The Senior Cohousing Handbook*  
by Charles Durrett

Dive right into this book and be enriched by the insights and the wisdom you will find there. I'm not kidding. Go. Now. Your future is waiting for you.

— BILL THOMAS, MD, from the Prologue

Charles Durrett has written a book inviting an exciting eldership. ... Wouldn't it be great if every step of life had such thoughtful design?

— PATCH ADAMS, MD, from the Foreword

Quality of life is more and more important in the last part of our life, and there is no need to live out our later years alone or lonely. Aging in place — in community — is an opportunity waiting for development; and cohousing — the most creative housing option for seniors — is one that we can make happen for us NOW, if we, as Chuck Durrett says, "Go forth and be one with [our] own future."

— BOLTON and LISA ANTHONY, Senior activists,  
and founders of Second Journey

# Creating Cohousing

*Building Sustainable Communities*

Kathryn McCamant *and* Charles Durrett



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Printed in Canada. First printing April 2011.

Paperback ISBN: 978-0-86571-672-8 eISBN: 978-1-55092-465-7

Inquiries regarding requests to reprint all or part of *Creating Cohousing* should be addressed to  
New Society Publishers at the address below.

To order directly from the publishers, please call toll-free (North America) 1-800-567-6772,  
or order online at [www.newsociety.com](http://www.newsociety.com)

Any other inquiries can be directed by mail to:  
New Society Publishers  
P.O. Box 189, Gabriola Island, BC V0R 1X0, Canada  
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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

McCamant, Kathryn, 1959-

*Creating cohousing : building sustainable communities* / Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-86571-672-8

1. Housing, Cooperative--Europe. 2. Housing, Cooperative--North America.  
I. Durrett, Charles, 1955- II. Title.

HD7287.7.M33 2011

334:1

C2010-908103-X



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To Jan Gudmand-Høyer,  
who — with vision, endurance,  
and above all faith in his fellow citizens —  
played a critical role in the development of  
cohousing communities.

### *Join the Conversation*

Visit our online book club at [www.newsociety.com](http://www.newsociety.com) to share your thoughts about *Creating Cohousing*. Exchange ideas with other readers, post questions for the author, respond to one of the sample questions or start your own discussion topics. See you there!

*Appendices for Creating Cohousing*, not included in the published version, are available at <http://www.cohousingco.com/books/appendix/CCohousingAppendix.pdf>. They include valuable information on creating cohousing such as:  
*Why Developers Would be Interested in Cohousing*,  
*Grassroots Organizing*, *Group Process*, *Senior Cohousing*  
and *Frequently Asked Questions*.



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## Acknowledgments

For helping to make this book possible, we thank the many hundreds of people living in cohousing communities with whom we talked, shared afternoon tea, ate dinner, and became especially well acquainted over late-night glasses of wine, when some of our best research was accomplished. For their hospitality, we give special thanks to the communities of Trudeslund and Skråplanet. To the pioneer American cohousing communities, we express our deepest appreciation and respect. They have demonstrated what vision and persistence can create. The communities that follow will benefit from their efforts. Most importantly, we thank the thousands of cohousers who have worked with us to help create their communities. You have taught us, forced us really, to hone our skills. The model projects you have created have done more to move this idea forward than anything else, and we hope that we have captured the essence of your communities accurately.

For their support during the original research for this book, we thank the Academy of Art and Architecture in Copenhagen and Erik Skoven of the Danish International Studies Program, the Architecture School in Århus, and the Danish Building Research Institute (particularly Hans S. Andersen), and most importantly Jan Gudmand-Høyer, the grandfather of cohousing and our mentor.

We could not have completed what is essentially a new book without the drawing, research, and writing assistance of the staff of McCamant & Durrett Architects (MDA), in particular Jennifer Barrett, planner extraordinaire, who not only planned us into success and completion, but edited us superbly and co-wrote key case studies like Yarrow and Belfast, as well as the design chapter. She was indispensable. Laura Levenberg, architect intern, also built on Jennifer's planning and execution. It is our good fortune that they both work in our office, along with the rest of the talented MDA staff. Thanks also to

Francesca Troiani, a writing intern, who interviewed the heck out of people. And to our editor, Mike Van Mantgem, who makes us more than a whimpering noise in the woods — who gave us a direction, and a clearer voice. And to his lovely wife, Diane Durrett, for her engaging advice and consulting.

And, of course, to New Society Publishers, who knows that if we're actually going to evolve as a society or become more sustainable, we have to learn so much. That if we're

going to build the viable society we know we're capable of, and live to our full potential, then we have to grow. We've seen others do it, and we can do it too. Thanks New Society and thanks to your editor Scott Steedman.

And for general assistance, at every stage and every level, and for being the best representative of cohousing anyone could ask for, we thank our daughter Jessie McCamant Durrett.

## Foreword

By Bill McKibben

I can remember, years ago, touring some of the very first cohousing communities in the US. People had asked me to come to see the good work they were doing on energy conservation, but I was immediately struck by the fact that there was so much more going on. Indeed, the story of cohousing is not the story of energy conservation at all — it's the story of energy generation, the kind of human energy that we so badly need at this turn in the history of our country.

For fifty years, our economic mission in America, at its core, has been to build bigger houses farther apart from each other. And boy have we succeeded: a nation of starter castles for entry-level monarchs, built at such remove one from the next that the car is unavoidable. It's no wonder that we use twice as much energy per person as western Europeans.

And it's no wonder that we're not so happy, either. Because the ecological effect of that sprawl is dwarfed only by its psychological

effect, by the fact that we've allowed ourselves to become the first members of our species to have no practical need of our neighbors for much of anything. Americans say that they are not as happy, on average, as they were fifty years ago, despite a trebling of "living standards." And the reason they give is loss of community, loss of connection. This is not some sentimentality: the average American eats meals with friends, family, neighbors, half as often as fifty years ago. The average American has half as many close friends.

So the cohousing community is a wonderful challenge, the best kind of challenge: it doesn't tsk tsk at Americans for their selfish ways, it just offers them a subtly different take on how the future might unfold. The possibility of sharing some of the chores of daily life, from cooking to childcare, is enough to render them not chores at all, but the pleasures that they've been for almost every other human culture we know of. That cohousing uses architecture to accomplish that change is

no surprise either: how we arrange our daily lives defines what those lives will be like.

This volume helps define a movement — a movement we need very badly for all kinds of reasons. Some movements are hard: it's going to be a hell of a fight to take on the energy companies and change their business model before it heats the world past all

copying. But some changes are easier, because they fit so naturally with where we want to go, with what we've evolved to desire. Living in close physical and emotional proximity with other humans — that's what social primates were built for. Now we've got to make sure our built environment will support that ancient habit!

**BILL MCKIBBEN** is an American environmentalist and writer who frequently writes about global warming and alternative energy and advocates for more localized economies. In 2010 the *Boston Globe* called him “probably the nation’s leading environmentalist” and *Time* magazine described him as “the world’s best green journalist.” He is the founder of 350.org, and author of several books, including *The End of Nature*, *Deep Economy*, and *Eaarth*. For more information about Bill McKibben and his work, see [www.billmckibben.com](http://www.billmckibben.com).

## Preface: About the Third Edition

As we rewrote this book, we passed the half-century mark in our own lives, and struggled through the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. This has given us many opportunities to ponder what is really important. And we certainly are not alone in this. These last several years have caused the American population to question nearly everything. Who and what can be trusted? Will I have a job? Will my house hold its value? Will my retirement fund be there when I am ready to retire? How will climate change affect my life? What am I passing on to my children and grandchildren? Much that we took for granted only a few years ago now feels naive. But the events of the last several years have also confirmed two priorities for us:

- Relationships matter;
- The United States must reduce its use of the earth's nonrenewable resources.

We've been reminded that when it comes to quality of life, relationships matter more than just about anything else. When times get tough, you want to have people you can count on in your life. When times are good, you want to have people you can celebrate with. Numerous studies now confirm the health benefits of having close social relationships. Just as important is the need to reduce America's use of the earth's limited natural resources. In cohousing, we see how, by cooperating, we can do so much more than we could individually, be it getting solar panels on our roofs or reducing our car trips because we don't need to drive as much. Cohousing recreates communities of proximity, relationships that you neither have to drive to nor connect online with, people you get to know over time, sharing in the rituals of life as the seasons pass by.

In the first edition of this book in 1988, which only showcased northern Europe, we promised that the next edition would include

new cohousing communities in the United States. There are now nearly 120 built communities and about 58 in the planning stages. This book shares some of the stories of how these places came about. They confirm that individuals pursuing a vision can make a difference. They are important, working models

of a more socially and environmentally sustainable way to live, while living the “good life.”

We know that these stories will inspire you just as working with so many dedicated people has inspired us.





## Part One

### Introducing Cohousing

As we observed in our first edition of this book, traditional forms of housing do not address the needs of most Americans. As dramatic demographic and economic changes continue to shape our society, many of us feel the effects of these trends in our personal lives. Many people feel alone, isolated, and disconnected: they are mis-housed, ill-housed, or unhoused. Cohousing helps individuals and families to find and maintain the elements of traditional neighborhoods — family, community, a sense of belonging — that are so sorely missing in our society. Pioneered in Denmark, the cohousing concept reestablishes many of the advantages of traditional villages within the context of twenty-first century life.



*Dinner outside  
at Cotati  
Cohousing.*





## Addressing Our Changing Lifestyles

*After work, I pick up groceries while my husband picks up the kids from childcare. Once we get home, we cook dinner, clean up, and put the kids to bed. We don't have time for each other, let alone anyone else. There's got to be a better way.*

— a working mother

Over two decades ago, as a young married couple, we began to think about where we were going to raise our children. What kind of setting would allow us to best combine our professional careers with child rearing? Already our lives were hectic. Often we would come home from work exhausted and hungry, only to find the refrigerator empty. Between working and housekeeping, where would we find time to spend with our kids? Relatives lived in distant cities, and even our friends lived across town. Just to get together for coffee we had to make arrangements two weeks in advance and when the time arrived, we usually didn't really have the

time, but did it anyway. Who knew when we'd be able to get together again next? Most young parents we knew seemed to spend most of their time shuttling their children to and from childcare and playmates' homes, leaving little opportunity for anything else.

So many of us seemed to be living in places that did not accommodate our most basic needs. Even if we saw a house we could afford, we didn't really want to buy it. We dreamed of a better solution — an affordable neighborhood where children would have playmates and we would have friends nearby, a place with people of all ages, young and old, where neighbors knew and helped each other.

Professionally, we were amazed at the conservatism of most architects and housing professionals, and at the lack of consideration given to people's changing needs. Single-family houses, apartments, and condominiums might change in price and occasionally in style, but otherwise they were designed to function

*The needs of a diverse population are far better served by cohousing than by traditional single-family homes.*



much as they had for the last fifty years. In reaction, we had both already designed different types of housing. And we began to recognize that our own frustrations were indicative of a larger problem — a diverse population was attempting to fit itself into standardized housing types that were simply not appropriate for them.

### **The Loss of Community**

For the last few decades, contemporary postindustrial societies such as the United States and Western Europe have been undergoing a multitude of changes that affect housing needs. The modern single-family detached home, which makes up 69 percent of American housing stock, was designed for a nuclear family consisting of a breadwinning father, a homemaking mother, and two to four children. Today, this household type is in the minority. In fact, even the family with two working parents is no longer predominant. The single-parent household is the fastest-growing type for the first time in American history, and for the first time ever, more than half of the women over eighteen in this country don't live with a husband. Well over a quarter of the population lives alone, and this proportion is predicted to grow as

the number of Americans aged 60 and over increases. Moreover, the trend toward suburban sprawl and single-family houses on large lots has fragmented our communities. Across America, too few houses are being built in and around the cores of towns and cities, and far too many are being developed several traffic jams away from downtown.

The ever-increasing mobility of the population and the breakdown of traditional community ties are placing more and more demands on individual households. These factors call for us to reexamine the way we house ourselves, the needs of individual households within the context of a community, and our aspirations for an increased quality of life. And to create a more sustainable way of life, communities need to build within existing neighborhoods to link land use and development with municipal services, public transportation, and infrastructure.

Since the first edition of this book, these factors have become more apparent, as has the dire need for solutions, both environmental and social. We continue to believe that cohousing provides a model to address these issues — and now, since the publication of our first book, more than 120 cohousing communities have been built in North America, with another 50 plus in the planning phase or under construction. Cohousing provides a serious template for living lighter on our planet and improving people's quality of life in child- and senior-friendly neighborhoods.

### **A Danish Solution**

In the mid 1980s, as we searched for more desirable living situations for ourselves, we kept thinking about the developments we had visited while studying architecture in

Denmark several years earlier. After numerous futile efforts to obtain information in English about what the Danes were doing, we decided to return to Denmark and find out for ourselves. The first edition of this book, published in 1988, was about what we found. This third edition is based on our work with cohousing communities in North America and elsewhere over the past twenty years, and built on those initial Danish findings.

The first cohousing development was built in 1972 outside Copenhagen, Denmark, by 27 families who wanted a greater sense of community than that offered by suburban subdivisions or apartment complexes. Frustrated by the available housing options, these families created a new housing type that redefined the concept of neighborhood by combining the autonomy of private dwellings with the advantages of community living. It was a perfect fit for their contemporary lifestyle. Then, as now, their custom neighborhood was people- and elder-friendly. Its very design created opportunities for daily household cooperation in activities like meals and childcare. Along the way, their neighborhood placed a small footprint on the land and deemphasized the automobile — in fact divorced the automobile from the very paths that people walked, talked, and played on.

Then, like today, each household in a cohousing community has a private residence; each one is designed to be self-sufficient and has its own kitchen. But every household also shares extensive common facilities with the neighborhood, such as a large common house that includes a big kitchen and dining room, children's playrooms, workshops, guest rooms, and laundry facilities. The common facilities, and particularly common

dinners, are important aspects of community life for both social and practical reasons.

By 2010, more than 700 of these communities have been built in Denmark, with many more planned — an astonishing number considering that Denmark has a total population of five million. They range in size from 6 to 34 households, with the majority between 15 and 33 residences. In Danish, these communities are called *bofællesskaber* (directly translated as “living communities”), for which we have coined the English term “cohousing.” The cohousing trend continues throughout Europe, the United States, and Canada, with new projects being planned and built in ever-increasing numbers. In Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, Canada, and now New Zealand and Australia, more and more people are finding that cohousing addresses their needs better than “traditional” housing choices. Likewise, cohousing communities are evolving to fit our ever-changing and ever-broadening definitions of a household to

*Residents share a pleasant dinner together on the common terrace.*



accommodate single parents, single elders — even families of six.

### Imagine . . .

It's five o'clock in the evening, and Michelle is glad the workday is over. As she pulls into her driveway, she begins to unwind at last. Some neighborhood kids dart through the trees, playing a mysterious game at the edge of the gravel parking lot. Her daughter yells, "Hi, mom!" as she runs by with three other children.

Instead of frantically trying to put together a nutritious dinner, Michelle can relax now, spend some time with her children, then eat with her family in the common house. Walking through the common house on her way home, she stops to chat with the evening's cooks, two of her neighbors, who are busy in the spacious kitchen preparing dinner — baked turkey breast with mushroom sauce and mashed potatoes, with steamed carrots and broccoli on the side. Several children

are setting up tables in the large dining area nearby. Outside on the patio, some neighbors share a pot of tea in the late afternoon sun. Michelle waves hello and continues down the lane to her own house, catching glimpses of the kitchens of the houses she passes. Here a child is seated, doing homework at the kitchen table; next door, John ritually reads his after-work newspaper.

After dropping off her things at home, Michelle walks through the birch trees behind the houses to the childcare center, where she picks up her four-year-old son, Peter. She will have some time to read to Peter a story before dinner, she thinks to herself.

Michelle and her husband, Eric, live with their two children in a housing development they helped design. Not that either of them is an architect or builder: Michelle works at the county administration office and Eric is an engineer. Six years ago they joined a group of families who were looking for a realistic housing alternative. At that time, they owned

## Cohousing as a Conscious Contemporary Decision

Some say cohousing is not new. Indeed, co-ops and villages and other forms of community-oriented housing options existed prior to the advent of cohousing. But when Jan Gudmand-Høyer started cohousing in Denmark, he made a very conscious decision to react to the realities of late-twentieth-century life and emerging demographic changes. These realities included:

1. Moms working outside of the home
2. Fewer children per household
3. More single-individual households
4. The increasing desire for a convenient, practical, responsible, economical, interesting, and fun lifestyle
5. An easier way to live a little lighter on the planet

The realities of the late twentieth-century are just as real today. Then, as now, cohousing uniquely combines a sense of place for a specific set of households with a specific set of aspirations. Each project is the collective outcome of these factors, and every cohousing community is therefore unique. Yet this type of neighborhood is specifically designed for the realities of an industrially and technologically advanced society in which the residents — for the sake of their children and future generations — generally wish to see society advance in a positive direction.

their own home, had a three-year-old daughter, and were contemplating having another child — partly so their daughter would have a playmate in their predominately adult neighborhood. One day they noticed a short announcement posted on a message board at their local grocery store:

---

Most housing options available today isolate the family and discourage a neighborhood atmosphere. Alternatives are needed. If you are interested in:

- Living in a high-functioning neighborhood
- Having your own house
- Participating in the planning of your home and neighborhood

*Then perhaps this is for you.*

We, a group of 20 families, are planning a housing development that addresses our needs both for community and private life. If this interests you, call about our next meeting.

---

Michelle and Eric attended the meeting, where they met other people who expressed similar frustrations about their existing housing situations. The group's goal was to build a housing development with a lively and positive social environment. They wanted a place where children would live near playmates, where individuals would have a feeling of belonging, where they would know people of all ages, and where they would be able to grow old and continue to contribute positively.

In the months that followed, the group further defined their goals and began the long and difficult process of turning their



*A child sets the table for dinner in the common house.*

dream into reality. Some people dropped out and others joined. Two and half years later, Michelle and Eric moved into their new home — a community of clustered houses that shared a large common house. By working together, these people had created the kind of neighborhood they wanted to live in, a cohousing community.

Today Tina, Michelle and Eric's eight-year-old daughter, never lacks for playmates. She remembers their old house with its big back yard. It was a great place for playing make-believe games, but she had to play by herself most of the time. Tina liked to visit the nice old man who lived at the end of the street, but Mom wouldn't let her leave their yard by herself because she worried that "something might happen and I wouldn't know."

Now Tina walks home from school with other kids in her cohousing community. Her mother is usually at work, so she goes up to the common house where one of the retired adults, Sam, makes snacks for the kids and anyone else who happens to be around. She likes talking with the adults, especially Sam, who tells great stories. If it is raining, Tina and her friends play in the kids' room, where they can make plenty of noise if they want. Other days, when Tina has homework or just feels like being alone, she goes home after her snack, or she may visit an older girl who lives three houses down. Tina liked her family's old house, but this place is so much more interesting. There's so much to do; she can play outside all day and, as long as she doesn't leave the community, her mother doesn't have to worry about her.

*Residents stop and chat as they come and go during the day.*

Julie and John moved into the same community a few years after it was built. Their kids were grown and had left home. Now

they enjoy the peacefulness of having a house to themselves; they have time to take evening classes, visit art museums, and attend an occasional play in town. John teaches children with disabilities and plans to retire in a few years. Julie administers a senior citizens' housing complex and nursing home. They lead full and active lives, but worry about getting older. How long will their health hold out? Will one die, leaving the other alone? Such considerations, combined with the desire to be part of an active community while maintaining their independence, led John and Julie to buy a two-bedroom home in this community. Here they feel secure knowing their neighbors care about them. If John gets sick, people will be there to help Julie with the groceries or join her at the theater. Common dinners relieve them of preparing a meal every night, and the community's common guest rooms accommodate their children and grandchildren when they visit. They are a part of a diverse community of children and adults of all ages. John and Julie enjoy a household without children, but it's still refreshing to see kids playing outside, or to share the excitement of finding a special flower in the garden with them.

### A New Housing Type

For Michelle, Julie, and their families, cohousing provides the community support they missed in their previous homes. Cohousing is a grassroots movement that grew directly out of people's dissatisfaction with the more estranged existing housing choices and drew its inspiration from more connected traditional small towns and an interest in shared resources. Yet cohousing is distinctive in that each family or household has a separate







dwelling and chooses how much they want to participate in community activities.

It is important to note that cohousing is not the intentional communities or communes we know of in the United States, which are sometimes organized around ideological beliefs and may depend on a charismatic leader to establish the direction of the community and hold the group together. Many intentional communities function as educational or spiritual centers. Cohousing, on the other hand, offers a “new” approach to housing rather than a new way of life. Based on democratic principles, cohousing developments espouse no ideology other than the

desire for a more practical and social home environment. Cohousing communities are unique in their extensive common facilities and, more importantly, in that they are organized, planned, and managed by the residents themselves.

Intergenerational cohousing developments do not target any specific age or family type; residents represent a cross section of old and young, families and singles. The great variety in their size, ownership structure, and design illustrates the many diverse applications of this concept. Similarly, cohousing is evolving to address the needs of different types of households, from single-parent

*Reading to kids in the hot tub about Malalai Joya, the 31 year old, first female member of parliament of Afghanistan and her extraordinary trials and tribulations. Growing up in cohousing, children learn from the variety of adults around them.*



*A mother and her son spend a quiet moment together on their back patio.*

cooperatives to congregate housing for the elderly with private rooms arranged around shared living spaces.

In our first book, we focused on cohousing in Denmark because of the depth and diversity of the Danish experience, and because we believed it was the most applicable to the American context. Over these many years, our thinking about cohousing and our designs for creating cohousing communities have evolved considerably. Cohousing is a thoroughly American experience today, as the case studies in this third edition show.

### **Our Field Work**

In 1984 and 1985 we spent 13 months studying 46 cohousing communities in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden, and observing another 40. We talked with residents, architects, planners, developers, builders, lawyers, and bankers, and worked with the Danish Building Research Institute and the Royal Academy of Art and Architecture in Copenhagen. But the most valuable part of our work was living in cohousing and

experiencing day-to-day life through different seasons and personal moods. Many of the communities served as our home for short or long periods of time, from several days to six months. We ate most of our dinners in the common houses, and took our turns cooking just as the other residents did. People shared with us many of their most profound insights during late-night conversations over a bottle of wine. Since that time, we have visited more than 285 cohousing communities around the world.

We have found these communities immensely inspiring. From the moment we entered any one of them, it was apparent that we were in a special place. It was palpable. Residents took great pride in what they had created. They were also aware of the fine tuning needed, and what they had yet to accomplish.

Our evaluation of cohousing focused on its ability to create a positive and humane environment, evident in the feelings of those who live there, the experiences of those who have left, and our own observations and comparisons of the different developments. While we found the most innovative developments very exciting, the many more ordinary examples demonstrated the broad acceptance of the cohousing idea.

For the past 25 years, we have designed, co-designed, and/or co-developed over 50 American, Canadian, Danish, and New Zealand cohousing communities, working at every stage of organizing, designing, financing, entitlement and recruiting. Since embarking on our quest to introduce cohousing to the United States, we have lived in two cohousing communities: Doyle Street Cohousing Community in the Bay Area of California

(for more than 12 years) and now Nevada City Cohousing (for five years), also in northern California. These experiences have offered new insights. Working with groups night after night, week after week, year after year, designing their communities with them, has taught us more than anything else, especially about helping these communities reach their potential.

And what we've learned more than anything else is that a home is more than a roof over one's head or a financial investment. It

can provide a sense of security and comfort, or it can elicit feelings of frustration, loneliness, or fear. The home environment affects a person's confidence, relationships with others, and personal satisfaction. These aspects of housing cannot be measured by cost, rates of return, or other real estate assessments. Although this third edition, like the two that preceded it, discusses financing and market values, our chief concerns are the people themselves and the quality of their lives.

### A Voluntary, Organized Community

Sometimes community happens simply because a few people take the initiative to organize block parties and other get-togethers. It is a community that depends on chance — the right combination of people at the right time in the right location. By contrast, cohousing institutionalizes “community” on a long-term basis with events like common dinners, childcare, maintenance



work groups, and the like. Also, by virtue of environmental design, the forces that influence behavior are centripetal as well as centrifugal, facilitating community as well as privacy. It is not a process founded on chance. This is to say, everyone who lives in a cohousing community wants to give cooperation the benefit of the doubt. By deciding to live there, they are consciously choosing to participate.

Cohousing is also firmly grounded in “place.” Community-building quite literally happens between the buildings and on garden pathways. Indeed, the physical spaces are designed to encourage a sense of place and belonging that engenders cooperation and supports relationships. A cohousing community is grounded in the practical and individual tasks of daily life.

*People play sports together, walk, and chat between the buildings of a cohousing community in Tucson, AZ.*



## How Cohousing Works

### *Nevada City Cohousing*

**Nevada City, California**  
**34 Units**  
**Architects:**  
**McCamant & Durrett Architects**  
**Completed: 2006**  
**Tenure: Owned**  
**Common House: 4,000 sq. ft (372 m<sup>2</sup>)**  
**[www.nccoho.org](http://www.nccoho.org)**

*Common dinner  
at Nevada  
City out on the  
common terrace.*

People drift into the common house. The few minutes before dinner are a

time to relax and catch up on each other's lives. Aromas of pesto and apple pie lift the senses. A toddler with golden curls stands on a kitchen chair, helping his mom put bread in baskets for the tables. An elder is telling a story to her twelve-year-old granddaughter while folding napkins. By six o'clock the dining room is bustling with life as people find their seats. It's mealtime at Nevada City Cohousing.

For the 34 families who live in the cohousing community of Nevada City, California, this is a typical evening. At first, new residents are not certain how they will adjust to eating regularly with 35 or 45 people, but any wariness is soon dispelled. After experiencing the convenience and pleasantness of common dinners and community life as a whole, they often wonder why they lived any other way.

Common meals at Nevada City Cohousing take place about six times a week. Each of the private houses also has a full



kitchen, of course, so residents can always opt out of common dinners. Many residents eat in the common house three or four times a week, and have more intimate family dinners at home the other evenings. Some eat less often in the common house and some more, and many relish spending the time they save from shopping, cooking, and cleaning up with their kids. Regardless, every adult who lives in the community is expected to help cook a common dinner at least once every five weeks. Two adults plan, shop, prepare, serve, and wash up after dinner. Cooking for 40 may seem like an enormous job for two to three people, but with a well-equipped community kitchen, it's not much more complicated than cooking for six in a normal kitchen — cooks just learn to use ten times as much of everything. Residents sign up for dinners at least two days in advance on the community's website, or on an easy-to-find clipboard that hangs in the common house. The cost of a dinner at the common house is about \$3 or \$4 per adult and \$2 to \$3 per child. Each household receives an invoice at the end of the year that balances expenditures with costs for the meals they've cooked or participated in.

The true benefits of the common dinner, however, are difficult to quantify. Common dinners allow residents to get to know one another in a way that is otherwise all but impossible. Together they create a culture of value around meals. They are opportunities for each individual to give and to receive, to contribute and to be recognized. Breaking bread together is as timeless as the idea of community itself.

On a practical level, residents quickly come to appreciate having several extra hours

each day. Community dinners are not only convenient, but also pleasant social gatherings filled with interesting conversation. On any given evening, about 30 to 50 percent of the residents take part. Common meals lead to other activities after dinner, such as playing pool or enjoying a glass of wine and a game of Scrabble with one of your neighbors.

Invariably, a new resident feels a little intimidated the first time he or she cooks. But just as invariably, the satisfaction they feel at the end of the evening makes up for all their anxieties. Their next efforts are considerably easier as new residents quickly discover that cooking one day every month or so is well worth the time and trouble when they can just show up for dinner the other 29 days.

### Cooking for 25 — and Loving It

Tony is a geologist with a Ph.D. in geological physics. Recently he and I (Chuck) cooked dinner for 25, which is a smallish showing for dinner in our common house. We made coq au vin over quinoa, a fresh garden salad with lots of tomatoes, and fresh baked bread — he and I both decided to bake bread so diners had a choice of potato bread or whole-wheat sourdough. Tony is single and confessed that he never enjoyed cooking before moving into cohousing:

What was the point, for just one person? Cooking with others is fun. I learn from them and I like to experiment with more exotic recipes when cooking for thirty. I would never cook these complicated two-hour recipes when I just cooked for myself. And I like doing something for my neighbors that is so tangible.

Tony also likes to serve homemade bread with his savory dishes. He is the only person I know in our community who cooks more often than the required once every five weeks.

*The clustered houses of Nevada City Cohousing are surrounded by trees of the Sierra foothills.*



### Designing an Optimal Common House and Terrace

The Nevada City Cohousing common house is situated between the parking lot and the houses and overlooks the pool and central walkways. This is no accident. This design forces people to pass through or by the common house and terrace on their way to and from home. From the very beginning, the common house and terrace were designed to be the central meeting place of the community. And so it is in practice. This is a place for sitting, eating, lounging, exercising, playing music, for serious or light-hearted discussions, even dancing. The central walkway facilitates people running into each other.

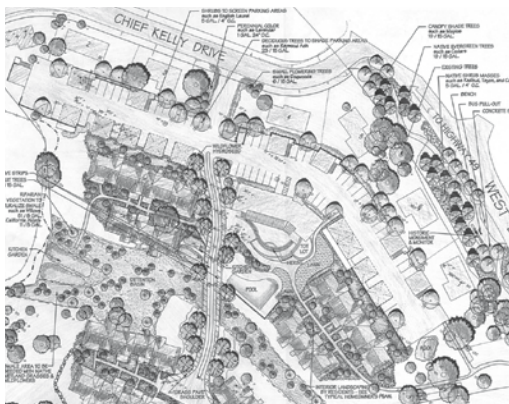
### The Place

We call Nevada City Cohousing home. We were among the founding households. After four years of hard work, the 34 residences and large common house were completed in the spring of 2006.<sup>1</sup> Our community is in the town of Nevada City, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada gold country, about half-way between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe in northern California. Utilizing the natural features of the sloping, 11-acre wooded site, the clustered residential blocks straddle a wide pedestrian avenue, with the common house situated at the head of the avenue. Cars are kept at the edge of the site close to the common house and the houses are clustered together, leaving much of the lower end of the property as a tree-filled area (known as “the back six”) that is a favorite place for children to play, and for adults to take a meditative walk.

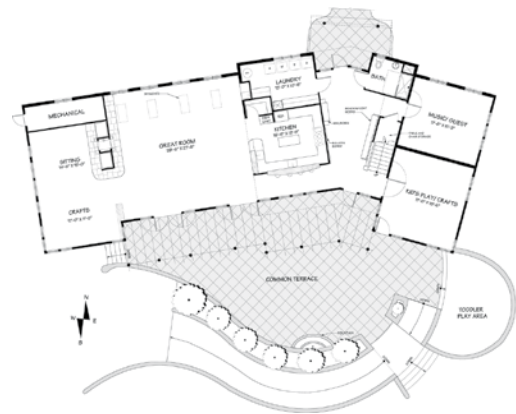
### Shared Resources

Common dinners are only one of the practical advantages of living in Nevada City Cohousing. Aside from a common dining

Left:  
Nevada City Cohousing landscape plan.



Right:  
First floor plan of the common house and terrace.



room, the common house contains guest rooms, a children's room, a teen room, a sitting room, a music room, and a laundry room. We also have a swimming pool and hot tub, tool sheds, and a large workshop. Households have equal access. Residents attend sewing groups, conduct music recitals, and hold any number of formal and informal events, from ping pong tournaments to races in the swimming pool. Residents take their vegetable gardens and fruit trees somewhat seriously. Several highly capable gardeners live here and share their skills liberally; as a result, many folks have a better appreciation for gardening or are learning more about it all the time. Residents will tell you that their lives are better now than when they lived in traditional single-family housing. Life is easier when borrowing a cup of sugar or a party dress is a matter of walking 30 feet from their front door to the front door of a neighbor. Catching a ride to a doctor's appointment is as difficult as asking, as is getting help with a sick child. Newspapers and magazines are shared, carpooling happens, camping equipment is borrowed. One resident has turned his garage into a ski shop, with dozens of skis, poles, boots, snowshoes, and all things snow-related available for borrow. The sharing of resources gives all residents access to a wider variety of conveniences at a lower cost per family than is otherwise possible.

All of the adult members of Nevada City Cohousing are expected to contribute to the ongoing maintenance of the property and community life through committee participation. We hold general meetings once a month and host the occasional weekend maintenance workshop. Committees are formed by interest groups — outdoor areas, special children's



*Parking for Nevada City Cohousing is on the edge of the site, near the common house with a central path leading to the private homes.*



*Center:  
The  
neighborhood  
kids patrol.*



*Bottom:  
A cluster of  
houses in a snowy  
setting.*

*Neighbors putting the finishing touches on a path together.*

activities, website and financing, minutes of meetings, general maintenance, social events, and others. Every adult is a member of at least one such group.

Twenty-six of the thirty-four households share a large laundry room with three

high-performance washing machines and three dryers. When one resident takes his laundry out, he puts in the next load in line, so no one has to wait around for an empty machine. Detergent is bought in bulk as part of the common budget. While all houses were designed to accommodate a washer and dryer, only eight families have chosen to install their own — and this is in the context of a fairly middle-class American community with eleven engineers and twelve schoolteachers. The common laundry is the only place that grey water recycling is possible, and it benefits the community as a whole — it generates the second highest number of people hours in the common house after dining and is therefore a community builder.



*Children at Nevada City Cohousing.*

## **Advantages of Cohousing for Children**

The 37 children who live in Nevada City Cohousing never lack for playmates. The pedestrian-oriented site gives them lots of room to run without worrying about cars. They have a sandbox, supervised access to the pool, swings, tree forts, a playhouse, and a large play area with natural features like rocks and logs. The community almost serves as a large, extended family for the children; they have many people besides their parents to look after them, to whom they can turn for assistance, or just for a chat. It becomes second nature for the older kids to keep an eye on the smaller ones, and the adults know every child by name.

After school, older children may hang out in the common house, play outside, or go home. The evening's cooks are usually working in the community kitchen and other adults are around if a child needs help. The



common house and terrace provide a meeting place for both children and adults every afternoon.

## A Social Atmosphere

The obvious practical advantages — childcare, common dinners, shared resources — are not the main reasons why people choose to live in Nevada City Cohousing. One resident, Dyann, said:

We moved from Oakland to the town of Nevada City about a year before the Nevada City Cohousing core group formed. We left family behind in Oakland, and right away we missed the sense of community our family gave us. It was more a part of us and more essential to us than we knew. And we didn't discover that until we didn't have it. We also discovered that our rural neighborhood did not allow for the daily, casual interaction with neighbors that is so important to us. The rural quiet helped to clarify a greater need, which was met when we moved into cohousing.

After living in the cohousing for a few years, Dyann notes the similarities to when she was growing up. "When the kids take off on their scooters, I call after them: *come back for dinner!* It's a lot like what my mother did when I was a child." She truly enjoys the community gatherings and celebrations. Recent events included a Harvest Festival, a chili cook-off, and an apple pie baking contest. But more than anything else, Dyann is hopeful — for her family, her children, and her larger community. "By living in cohousing,



Children play safely in the car-free site.



The sandbox is a popular hot spot.

we all learn the lesson of how to listen to others, take their views into consideration, and treat people with respect and kindness."

Another Nevada City Cohousing resident best sums up the social atmosphere of the community:

Our membership is a diverse group in age and occupation. We are single, married, young families, kids, grown-up couples, middle-aged, and retirees. The diversity of age is one of the treasures of living here. We have no common political or religious orientation, only a common desire to live in a neighborhood of our own design

*Residents enjoy a community event, of which there are many.*



and to know our neighbors. We are not a stagnant community, nor are we perfect. We are a work in progress. We find we do our best when we consult our collective wisdom and listen to everyone in our decision-making process.

The rich social atmosphere at Nevada City Cohousing is most evident on a warm day along the walkways between houses. Here children play, people relax with a beer or a tea after work, and families enjoy leisurely Saturday morning breakfasts on their front porches. All the dwellings have private patios in back, but people seem to prefer sitting in front along the main paths that separate the housing clusters, where they can visit with neighbors or just watch the activity.

The community's design encourages social interaction by providing small open spaces along the walkways, complete with sheds to store bicycles. Porches and garden areas are located directly outside each house, and residents can see many other houses from their

### The Community Gift ...

When we walk onto the site after a hard day at work and find ourselves in an unplanned chat with one of the older kids, or see a three-year-old smiling in his mother's arms, well, the troubles of the day begin to fade. It is in this moment that we know we're home. When we walk into the common house an hour before dinner, and the cooks tell me they can easily accommodate our Danish guests, life in cohousing seems like one long party.

We appreciate every neighbor who has watched our daughter so we could dash to the store, escape to a

movie on a "date night" with just each other, or simply go to work to meet a big deadline. We are thankful for all the times when a neighbor knew just the right ear-ache antidote, the inside line on cheap airline tickets, or the best place to buy organic potatoes. But ultimately we are indebted to cohousing — our friends and neighbors — because they have never failed to reinforce our faith in how people can be with each other to create a functioning society. For this we are truly grateful. 🍷

front door. People sit on their front porches whenever weather permits, enjoying the comfortable vantage point just outside their front door. Neighbors tend to congregate around sandboxes and other equipment to supervise the children at play.

In the houses, the kitchen and dining area — the room most families “live” in — looks onto the walkway. This design allows parents to watch children playing outside, or to ask a passing neighbor about a recipe. Residents tend not to draw the curtains. To do so would indeed prevent others from looking into their house, but it would also stop people inside from seeing what their friends and neighbors are doing outside. Of course, residents draw their curtains when they really need some household privacy.

The houses, although not luxurious, are quite comfortable. Ranging in size from 860 to 1,683 square feet, they feature vaulted ceilings and wood floors, and are organized along four walking lanes interspersed with bicycle sheds. Each house has a living area, and often

a back porch, away from the walkway. This design affords complete privacy. The sensitive relationship between the community area



*A resident looks out her kitchen window to the common walkway.*



*Residents celebrate moving into their new home. It is simple, but comfortable and welcoming.*

### ... and The Community Tax

“While at a cohousing community in Vienna, Austria, I noticed one resident roll his eyes at a neighbor’s comment about some internal political issue. The neighbor noticed it, too. It was a tense moment. I looked at them both and said, ‘Well, of course you know about the cohousing tax, don’t you?’ I received a knowing laugh in reply. That little crack served its purpose. It broke the tension.

“So what is the *cohousing tax*? It is the thorn that comes with the rose. It’s those little annoyances that every individual puts up with in order to enjoy all the other gifts of living in a high-functioning community.

It is the price each individual pays to enjoy common dinners six nights a week; for being able to borrow a car occasionally; for the beautiful landscaping no one could ever do on their own; for great homemade food, sauces, cookies; for incredibly rich and wonderful conversation that grows richer and deeper over time as you get to know your neighbors better and better. It is the tax that makes all of the benefits of cohousing possible.

“Can you have community without people? No. Can you have people without occasional annoyances? No. And there you have it.”

— Charles Durrett

and the private dwellings allows for many kinds of socializing. In fact, contrary to many outsiders' apprehensions, we never hear a resident complain about lack of privacy. Living in a close community, people learn to respect each other's occasional need to be unsociable.

### **Private Ownership and the Larger Community**

The houses are privately owned, using a standard American condominium ownership model in which each resident owns a house and a portion of the common areas. Members pay a monthly homeowners' association fee that is based on the size of their individual home.

Cohousing is generally more affordable than single-family housing, and Nevada City Cohousing was no exception. As we were starting the project, an above-the-fold article

on the front page of the local paper stated that the average home in Nevada City cost a little over \$500,000 — and that many of these were fixer-uppers.

The community is situated on valuable property near a forested recreation area, lakes, and the historic town of Nevada City. The cost was further increased by the soaring property values of the mid-2000s. Upon completion, the price of a house and a share of the common facilities ranged from \$255,000 to \$425,000, in 2006 US dollars.

Residents contend that their other living expenses are less than those of isolated households. One explained:

Over and over again we hear how people who used to spend \$3,000 a year on gas now spend \$1,000, and how folks who used to spend \$2,000

*Front porches provide a transitional area between the community pathway and the private home. Nothing says welcome like a friendly front porch.*



to \$3,000 on heating and cooling now spend a few hundred per year total.

## Building the Dream

Looking at Nevada City Cohousing today, it is easy to forget the difficult process it took to transform the initial ideas into reality. We wanted to move to Nevada City, California, ourselves. Six previous groups had come and gone, and never found a site. Finally we decided to come look for a spot ourselves, and within a week we identified an 11-acre site next to downtown. The site itself has historical significance. It is the location of the world's first hydraulic mine, circa 1860. It is also the site of the first cohousing community in Nevada County, California.

It's worth noting that the many previous organizing groups had never considered this site — despite the fact that it is 11 acres, in a downtown location, and was hidden in plain

sight by a four-foot-by-eight-foot piece of plywood that read “For Sale.” In other words, finding and securing a site is typically one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult, steps for a group set on starting a cohousing project, despite the fact that it is so obviously essential.

After identifying the site, we met with the mayor of Nevada City. This meeting had a solemn beginning and a sobering conclusion. He stated, while quite literally pounding the table, “We only build four or five houses a year in Nevada City, and that's the way we like it.” And here we were, proposing a 48-unit project (a 34-unit cohousing community and 14 surrounding houses on seven lots). Walking out of that small meeting room at city hall it was obvious that our project was going to be a challenge. Seventeen public hearings and nine months later, we were approved by a vote of three to two. The mayor did not vote in our favor, though he now commends

## Seniors Citizens in Nevada City Cohousing

Just stepping out their front door in cohousing provides seniors with ample opportunity for socializing. They might go farther from home to the community garden and strike up a conversation with a neighbor. While gardening, they might find a surplus of fresh vegetables and present these to a friend next door, or take them to the common house as a gift to the community. While there, they might strike up a conversation with someone they happen to meet. And that chance encounter might turn into dinner later, or shopping tomorrow.

In addition to daily social interactions, seniors benefit from the activities of the larger community. If someone is going into town, they can easily catch a ride

to the pharmacy, for example. When family or relatives come to visit, seniors don't need to worry about preparing a room in their home because guest rooms are always ready in the common house. And if they need some help getting around the community, someone is always there to lend a helping hand, which is made all the easier thanks to the pedestrian-friendly design of the community itself.

This said, intergenerational cohousing is not for all seniors. For those who would prefer to live in a senior-oriented community, senior cohousing provides an established, viable alternative. For more information, consult the *Senior Cohousing Handbook*, available from New Society Publishers, the publishers of this book.

## Private Unit Design

Expense is always an issue with any construction project. The more types of house plans, the more variety, and the more expressive each individual house is, the more every square foot of construction will cost. Once

the group understood this, they restricted the floor plans to four basic designs: Model A (two-bedroom flat), Model B (two-story, two-bedroom plus a room), Model C (two-story, three-bedroom, plus a room), and Model D (two-story, four-bedroom). The homes are clustered in blocks that contain three to six homes each. This standardization reduced construction costs considerably — a lesson learned over many years of building cohousing. It also allowed for expansion plans that included attic and basement areas. The savings also allowed the group to invest in bigger and better common facilities.



*One of four clusters of houses at Nevada City Cohousing.*

## Common Areas: More Are Better

A common refrain of cohousers, after they move in, is that they wished they had created bigger common areas. Experience has taught us to help a group see the advantages of standardization and large common areas.



*Nevada City Cohousing having dinner together in the common house.*

us often for creating what he thinks is a great neighborhood.

Despite the issue of affordability, the residents are quite a diverse group. The adults range in age from 25 to 92 years old. There are 15 households with no children, four single parents (two of whom are fathers), and several singles. Professionally, the residents include 11 engineers and computer programmers and a dozen elementary and secondary schoolteachers. Fluctuating from year to year there may be a few full-time parents, someone going back to school or temporarily unemployed, and, soon, a few more retirees.

At first residents feared that with such an interesting group and so many community activities, they might feel little need to participate in the surrounding neighborhood. Quite the contrary, Nevada City Cohousing residents are active in local theater, politics, schools, and sport teams. The common house is often used for meetings, including a garden association, photo club, local music club, and many others.

Overall, Nevada City Cohousing is an outstanding model for US cohousing communities. Old problems remain unresolved and new ones appear. There are sometimes

irritating meetings, but that's how you build a functioning society. Cut the tree down? Don't cut the tree down? Rarely is an issue solved with a binary question. Residents also ask: When? How? Who? Why? Even so, usually things that are supposed to happen, happen. Together, the residents of Nevada City Cohousing have built a special place. These special qualities can be observed most every night in the common house when children are playing and the adults sip their tea, talking long after dinner is finished. Between 250 and 450 (and sometimes as many as 600) people hours are spent there every week, and the residents have put thousands of meals on the table since they moved in just five years ago. The majority of the common activity at the cohousing happens in the common house, an amenity that almost none of the households had access to before moving to cohousing (only one couple had lived in American cohousing previously), but now no one can imagine living without. And after years of organizing, planning, overcoming oppositions, and finally building, Nevada City Cohousing has become a neighborhood to aspire to — and an ongoing collaboration to admire.



## An Old Idea — A Contemporary Approach

*Cohousers are simply creating consciously the community that used to occur naturally.*

— Hans S. Andersen, Cohousing organizer

In many respects, cohousing is not a new concept. In the past, most people lived in villages or tightly knit urban neighborhoods where they worked together to build a schoolhouse, raise a barn, grow crops, and celebrate the harvest. Similarly, residents in cohousing enjoy the benefits of collaboration, whether by organizing childcare, attending common dinners, or participating in social activities. Through cooperation and some proximity, the members of cohousing communities build social relationships and work together to address practical needs. This kind of relationship demands accountability, but in return provides security and a sense of belonging.

Although cohousing developments are primarily residential, daily patterns develop that help to weave work and home life, and

public and private life, back together. Most cohousing residents go outside the community for their professional work, but there is also informal trading of skills within the community. One resident, who is a doctor, tends to the cuts of a child who has fallen. Another helps repair a neighbor's car. Several residents make wine together. A woman who makes pottery finds her best customers are fellow residents who buy her goods for gifts. These neighbors know each other's skills and feel comfortable asking for assistance, understanding that they will be able to reciprocate later.

While cohousing includes many of the best elements of traditional neighborhoods, the design of cohousing communities has also adapted to our changing society. Technological advances are making it increasingly common for people to work part-time or full-time from home. In the past, requirements such as zoning or lending practices meant that cohousing communities were restricted to residential



uses only. This has changed. With a trend toward sustainable neighborhood design, transit-oriented development, and planning for mixed-use neighborhoods, towns and cities have expanded zoning regulations to accommodate a broader range of functions. For example, a recently completed cohousing community in northern California includes office and retail space next to the common facilities, including a coffee shop, a hair salon, and other small neighborhood establishments. Several members of the community are able to work and live in the cohousing without the isolation of working from home. Such a community illustrates how cohousing can be designed for its context and to meet our current needs.

While cohousing incorporates many of the qualities of traditional communities, it offers a distinctively contemporary approach. Residents enjoy the benefits of living with a diverse group of people, but can choose when and how often to participate in community activities. Cohousing offers the social and practical advantages of a closely knit neighborhood within the context of twenty-first century life.

### Common Characteristics

Cohousing developments vary in size, location, type of ownership, design, and priorities. Yet in our research we identified six common characteristics:

**Participatory Process:** Residents organize and participate in the planning and design process for the cohousing community, and are responsible as a group for all final decisions.

**Designs that Facilitate Community:** The physical design encourages a strong sense of community.

**Extensive Common Facilities:** An integral part of the community, common areas are designed for daily use, to supplement private living areas.

**Complete Resident Management:** Residents manage the development themselves, making decisions of common concern at community meetings.

**Non-Hierarchical Structure:** Responsibility for decisions is shared by the community's adults.

**Separate Income Sources:** Residents have their own primary incomes. The community does not directly generate income for its residents, nor (with rare exception) do its residents share income from community-owned retail or office spaces. All the residents pay a monthly fee, in addition to membership dues, to a homeowners' association to cover shared costs, as is typical of a condominium arrangement.



*A cohousing group discusses the final design decisions for their community.*

Each of the six components of cohousing is elaborated on below.

### Participatory Process

One of the key strengths of cohousing is the active participation of residents, from the earliest planning stages through construction. The desire to live in a cohousing community provides the driving force to get it built, and in most instances the residents themselves initiate the project.

The number of residents who participate throughout the planning and development process varies from project to project. Often a core group of six to twelve families hires the architect, establishes a development program, finds the site, and then seeks other interested people.

Typically, all of the houses are sold or rented before the project is finished. In some

cases, the resident group collaborates with a nonprofit housing association or a private developer; but even then, the residents make all major decisions.

The participatory process has both advantages and disadvantages, but no cohousing has ever been built any other way. Even with the proven success of cohousing, developers hesitate to build it on their own. Experience shows that only people who seek new residential options for themselves have the motivation to push through the planning and design process without compromising their initial goals.

Organizing and planning a cohousing community requires group meetings, research, and decision-making. Residents are willing to volunteer their time because they desire and are committed to a more satisfying living environment. The most active members are likely to attend one or two meetings a month for a year, or sometimes a couple of years. The process can be frustrating at times, but those now living in cohousing communities all agree that it was well worth the effort. And creating cohousing is a much easier process than it used to be. There are several consultants who not only make it simpler and less risky for residents but, perhaps most importantly, know how to optimize the success of the experience and the results. And to some extent, like life itself, the experience is the result. The process is part of the product. The there is how you got there.

A feeling of community first emerges when residents are working together to reach their common goal. Typically, few participants know each other before joining the group. During the planning and development phases, they have to agree on many

### One Burning Soul and Six Dedicated Participants

In reality every cohousing project starts with one person. It takes one person with the initiative to introduce other people to the concept, to look for a site, and to hire a professional to come to town to give a public presentation.

But no matter how dedicated and hardworking one individual may be, we recommend that this person work in the context of a group of at least six individual participants. Theoretically, six participants provide a group with a breadth of diverse opinions. And empirically, we have found this to be true.

In practical terms, a cohousing group with six or fewer members can foster a minority opinion that can, in turn, stall the project or compromise its direction. We have found no such problems when a cohousing project contains six or more individuals.

issues that are closely tied to their personal values. Despite the inevitable disagreements, the intensity of this planning period forms bonds among the residents that contribute greatly to the success of the community after move-in. Having fought and sacrificed together for the place they live builds a sense of pride no outside developer can “build into a project.”

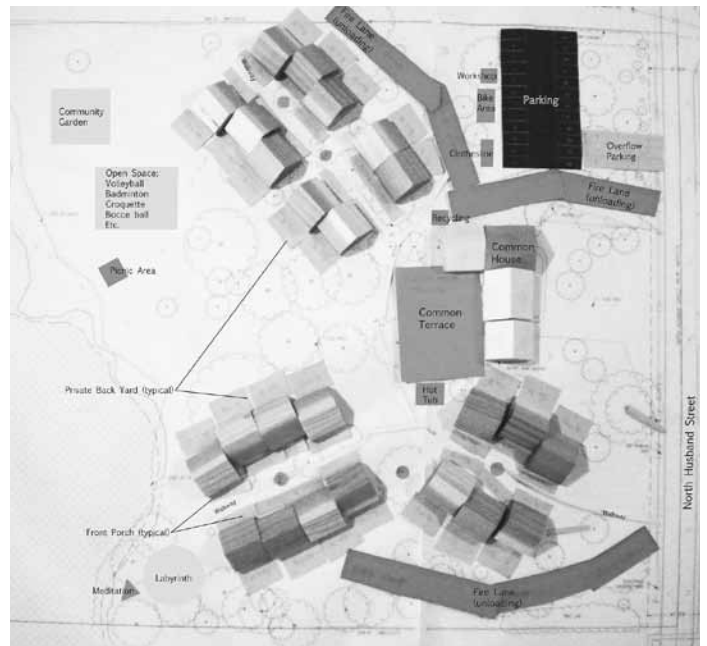
### Designs that Facilitate Community

A physical environment that encourages a strong neighborhood atmosphere is a second characteristic of cohousing. Beginning with the initial development plan, residents emphasize design aspects that increase the possibilities for social contact. The neighborhood atmosphere is enhanced by placing parking at the edge of the site, which allows the majority of the development to be pedestrian-oriented and safe for children. Informal gathering places are created with benches and tables. The location of the common house determines how it will be used; if residents pass by on their way home, they are more likely to drop in. Play areas for small children are placed in central locations that can be watched easily from the houses or by other people in the vicinity. For these same reasons, they also become meeting places for residents of all ages.

Physical design is critically important in facilitating a social atmosphere, and in fact largely choreographs the behavior of the residents. While the participatory development process establishes the initial sense of community, it is the physical design that sustains it over time. Whether it succeeds or not depends largely on the architect’s skill and experience in accomplishing community



*Designing a place that encourages a sense of community and allows for casual interaction among residents is an important characteristic of cohousing.*



*This site plan shows twenty four blocks and labels denoting front porches, back porches, gardens, gathering nodes, fire lanes, parking, bike storage, common terrace, and more. A carefully considered site plan is the key to creating a great neighborhood.*

through design. Without thoughtful consideration, many opportunities will be missed.

### Extensive Common Facilities

The common house and other common facilities are the heart of a cohousing community. The common house is the setting for common dinners, afternoon tea, children's games on rainy days, ice cream for breakfast day, Tuesday morning yoga, kids' music lessons, adult music jamming, sitting by the fire and discussing the issues of the day, Friday night movies, watching the candidate debates and the election returns, Super Bowl parties, teens doing their homework, guest hosting, crafts workshops, laundry facilities, and hundreds upon hundreds of other organized and informal activities. It is really an extension

of each private residence, and using it is an essential part of daily community life. The common facilities often extend beyond the common house to include workshops, art studios, barns and animal sheds, greenhouses, a car repair garage, even a tennis court or swimming pool.

Common resources provide both practical and social benefits. For instance, the common workshop replaces the need for every family to have the space and tools to fix furniture or repair bicycles and cars. One lawnmower for 30 households represents a huge savings over one lawnmower per household. Expensive tools such as a drill press or a table saw become more affordable when several households share the cost. Not only do residents gain access to a wider range of tools through the workshop, but while working they are also likely to enjoy the company of others who are using the shop or are just passing by. Similarly, ice chests, camping equipment, and hundreds of other items can be shared between families to save money as well as storage space.

As cohousing has evolved, the common house and common facilities have increased in size and importance. Today, private dwellings are often reduced in size to make room for more extensive common facilities. These changes were dictated by experience. For instance, many residents of early cohousing developments were reluctant to commit to common dinners, thinking they would be nice once or maybe twice a week, but not on a regular basis. Yet when common dinners are set up for success (meaning they are predictably frequent) and take place in a warm and giving physical space, they have proven overwhelmingly successful. Today



*A shared workshop in cohousing.*

most new cohousing groups plan for frequent meals in the common house, and up to half of the residents participate on any given day. Substantial space is thus allocated in the common house for pleasant dining rooms and spacious kitchens. Children's play areas are always included, and the "pillow room," reserved for infants and toddlers, is popular. High-functioning cohousing communities routinely see 250 to 450 people hours of common house use per week.

The specific features of the common facilities depend on the residents' interests, and on how well the design process was facilitated. When it's facilitated well, the group gets what they will use; when it's not, the design is too generic, or too "default." As children in the community get older, for example, play areas in the common house may be converted for other uses.

In addition to providing a variety of advantages to community residents, the common facilities are an asset for the surrounding neighborhood. A common house can be used for large neighborhood meetings, classes, group organizing, and day-care programs. We hear over and over how common facilities in general, and the common house in particular, unite residents of the cohousing community itself — and bring them together with their neighbors in town.

### **Complete Resident Management**

Residents are responsible for the ongoing management of their cohousing community. Major decisions are made at common meetings, which are usually held once a month, and minor decisions take place in committee meetings. These meetings provide a forum for residents to discuss issues and solve problems.

### **Community in Terms of Square Feet**

According to the US Census Bureau, at the start of the twenty-first century, the average size of a new home was 2,324 sq. ft. By comparison, the average private house in a cohousing community is 1,250 sq. ft. It's worth noting that the average common house for a typical 30-unit cohousing community averages 4,000 sq. ft., including workshops and other buildings.

Responsibilities are typically divided among work groups in which all adults must participate. Duties such as cooking common dinners are rotated. As with any group of people, residents sometimes feel that they do more than their share while others don't do enough. Responsibilities and duties are re-adjusted to restore balance.

Under a system of resident management, problems cannot be blamed on outsiders. Residents must assume responsibility themselves. If the buildings are not well maintained, they will have to pay for repairs. If the common activities are disorganized, everyone loses. The process of solving problems and making decisions sometimes involves a long discussion, but once an agreement is reached, it is usually respected, because everyone knows they had a say in it.

Learning how to make decisions as a group takes practice, because most people grow up and work in hierarchical situations. By trial and error the cohousers learn what works. They may adopt organizational formats developed by other groups, or create new methods themselves. It is a process of learning by doing. Residents told us that, over time, they became more effective at working

together, and applied the lessons they learned at home or in their work lives. Some residents may choose not to participate; others rarely attend general meetings but are more active in the smaller work groups. Renters in cohousing tend to participate as much as anyone else.

### Non-Hierarchical Structure

*Residents are responsible for all management decisions, which are discussed at common meetings, usually held once a month.*

Although individual residents might have opinions about certain issues (people who frequently use the workshop, for example, might champion the merits of investing in more tools), the larger community is responsible for its own choices. The community doesn't depend on one person for direction. A "burning soul" may get the community off the ground, another may pull together the

financing, and another may arrange the venue for each meeting. This division of labor is based on what each person feels he or she can fairly contribute. No one person, however, dominates the decisions or the community-building process, and no one person becomes excessively taxed by the process.

### Separate Income Sources

The economics of most cohousing communities are more or less like a typical condominium project. There is no shared community effort to produce income. When the community provides residents with their primary income, as in some intentional communities, the dynamics among neighbors changes — and it adds another level of shared resources beyond the scope of cohousing.

### A Unique Combination with Diverse Applications

These six characteristics — participatory process, designs that facilitate community, extensive common facilities (including common dinners), complete resident management, non-hierarchical structure, and separate income sources — have come to define cohousing. None of these elements is unique, but the consistent combination of all six is, especially in combination with a conscious intent to be responsive to twenty-first-century lifestyle realities (smaller families, both parents working outside as well as inside the home). These elements make cohousing itself unique. Each characteristic builds on the others and contributes to the success of the whole. Although these characteristics are consistently present, their applications have been diverse. Each community is different (and similar at the same



time) because each custom neighborhood was developed by the residents to fit their particular needs and desires.

The following section outlines some of the basic aspects of the design process and other aspects of cohousing communities. More detail on the design process and important design considerations are discussed in Chapter 28: The Participatory Design Process and Chapter 29: Cohousing Design

## Size

The average cohousing development accommodates 15 to 34 households. We have found that cohousing groups smaller than six households that share common areas and facilities tend to function similarly to households in which a number of unrelated people share a house or apartment. However, living in such a small community is more demanding because residents depend on each other more. If one person temporarily concentrates on professional priorities, for example, thereby limiting their community participation, the others feel the loss. Residents must be good friends and must agree on most issues in order to live this interdependently. In addition, residents in small housing groups often find it difficult to maintain the energy to organize common activities over a period of many years. Larger communities can more readily absorb varying degrees of participation and differences of opinion. By trial and error, the Danes have figured out and are adamant that you should **“never build a cohousing community with more than 50 adults.”**

We have found that American cohousing communities tend to give inadequate consideration to the size of the development. Size

is subjective, and therefore malleable, right? Not really. Communities of different sizes have very predictable patterns and the number of households has a profound impact on the community created. The size and composition of households must be closely considered with regard for common facilities, division of responsibilities, desired activities, and the social environment.

We take seriously the advice on community size from the Danes because they have a long history of making cohousing work. A cohousing community that contains 20 to 50 adults seems to be an optimum size. In

## Population Mix

Two types of cohousing communities have arisen since the 1970s: intergenerational cohousing and senior cohousing. Intergenerational cohousing communities typically focus their energies in places where seniors have already been — building careers, raising families, and the like. Suffice it to say that younger cohousers are not usually as concerned with the health issues associated with aging and the activities that retired or nearly-retired folks all seem to enjoy. Some seniors find the youthful vigor of intergenerational cohousing community to be refreshing, while others feel like they’ve “been there, done that.”

For the “been there, done that” crowd, seniors-only cohousing offers a living environment that supports their health needs and encourages the activities they enjoy. People often debate which cohousing type is “better” for seniors. We see this debate as being pointless. Some seniors love intergenerational cohousing, others swear by senior cohousing. Only you know which is right for you. This difference is exemplified at Nevada City Cohousing. When the kids start getting rowdy at the pool, three curious seniors will migrate over and see what is going on — and three others will get out of there as fast as possible.



*The community kitchen at Nevada City Cohousing is designed for efficiency. Meals for very large groups can be prepared here, yet the kitchen has a comfortable residential feeling.*

our experience, “51 and above” challenges the capacity for a cohousing community to operate in the spirit in which it was built, and when a community contains fewer than 20 adults, the likelihood that every resident will form solid social connections is challenged. In other words, every adult in a cohousing community should ideally have four or five others that they really connect with. But the community should not be so large that residents become, in effect, strangers.

This “50 adults” ceiling came about after one Danish cohousing community (Vejgaard Bymidte) with 40 households faltered. The residents trimmed their community down to 34 households (less than 50 adults) by selling off six units as regular condominiums. The cohousing community then came back to life. Then another community of 36 households (more than 50 adults) also perceived the challenges of too many people. Residents

built a second common house, effectively halving the cohousing community. Both cohousing communities are doing well today. Chastened by these two examples, the Danes never again built a cohousing community that contained more than 33 households.

The Danes have learned to take numbers seriously. Many years ago they chose to make classrooms no larger than 22 kids in primary through middle school. This makes them small enough to have “teacher time” and large enough to assure a number of peers per child. And they’ve never looked back — if budget cuts happen they choose to eliminate something that is less critical than the child to teacher ratio.

Further explanation of the logistical, physical, and emotional aspects of community size and its effects on design are discussed in Chapter 29: Cohousing Design, and Chapter 31: Happily Ever Aftering in Cohousing.

## Location

Locations of cohousing developments are limited only by the availability of affordable sites and where residents want to live. The majority are in town, where land is affordable and within reasonable distance from work, schools, and other urban attractions. There are cohousing communities in rural settings, some using an old farmhouse for the common house. While these developments have a “rural atmosphere,” most residents still commute to nearby cities to work. Still other cohousing communities are located in inner cities.

## Site and Building Design

The site design will shape the social opportunities in a cohousing community, and will



therefore determine the overall viability of a project in the long term. A car-free living environment, appropriate circulation, and adequate places for social engagement — both formal and informal — are key design characteristics of a successful site plan. The common house should be centrally located between the parking and individual homes. Usually a central path connects all private houses. Often, a common terrace in front of the common house provides enough area to seat all residents for dinner or other activities. Gathering nodes along the walkway, such as a picnic table or sandbox, are also important features that support socializing and collaborative activities. Such nodes are typically associated with every five to nine houses. Optimally, residents can see at least one gathering node without leaving their homes.

Most cohousing communities have attached dwellings clustered around pedestrian streets or courtyards, although some consist of detached single-family houses. Some complexes have dealt with northern climates by covering a central pedestrian street with glass, so residents can move between their homes and the common house without going outside. In warmer climates, deep eaves, front porches, tree growth, and other vegetation help mediate hot summer days while providing livable outdoor spaces and pathways.

The architecture of individual houses also plays a role in supporting both privacy and community. Houses often have front porches, providing a middle ground between public and private spaces. Private kitchens are oriented toward the common side of the house, with a countertop and sink facing the

community so residents can see people coming and going as they cook or wash dishes. More private areas (such as living rooms and bedrooms) face the rear, or private side, of the house.

Cohousing is generally new construction because it is difficult to create the desired relationships between spaces in an existing development or neighborhood (where the default to privacy tends to hide the front of the house with a garage). Nevertheless, there are cohousing communities that have been created from existing buildings. Examples include the reuse of historic factory buildings, such as Doyle Street Cohousing and Swan's Market in northern California and Jernstoberiet and Vejgaard Bymidte in Denmark. In the case of Southside Cohousing in Sacramento, California, two existing single-family houses were incorporated with 23 new units to form the community.

*Kids at the community pool.*



## Real Energy Savings with Off-the-Shelf Innovation

Project after project, cohousing demonstrates that ordinary and readily available construction techniques can achieve the highest standards of energy conservation. To use a practical and personal example, our yearly electric bill in Nevada City Cohousing averages minus \$50. You read that correctly: negative fifty dollars per year. This is to say, that we, and almost every other resident at Nevada City Cohousing, are a net electricity provider — not bad for a community located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains where a couple of feet of snow falls each winter. And yes, Nevada City Cohousing achieved this level of energy efficiency using readily available construction techniques.<sup>1</sup>

### Environmental Advantages

Throughout the years it has become apparent that, in addition to its social advantages, cohousing offers numerous environmental benefits. On average, residents of cohousing communities consume less energy (meaning they spend less on utilities), own fewer cars, and drive less than people who do not live in cohousing. These savings aren't simply a matter of convenience. Walking next door to visit your friend is less expensive in terms of time and fuel than driving across town. Less obviously, because individual households can combine resources to share some essential goods, each household saves the environmental cost of owning "one of everything." Sharing a lawnmower among twenty households is simply less "expensive" than every household owning one. This is conservation at its most basic level: fewer durable goods means less raw materials are required on the manufacturing side, fewer miles are traveled

to deliver those goods, and less energy is required to install and operate them. We save when we share, and sharing is easy, sensible, and normal in a cohousing community. For example, Nevada City Cohousing residents pour about 1,000 fewer tons of carbon dioxide per year into the atmosphere than they did collectively before move-in.

Additionally, in a typical cohousing development the houses sit on a small footprint relative to the larger site. This proximity not only engenders a sense of community but also uses less land. Both are good things. Where individuals once drove, they now walk; where a house would have stood, a garden or a playground stands in its place, and people are happier for it. But cohousing also allows for economy. Clustered housing requires less building materials than stand-alone construction. Households can combine resources during the construction phase such that each house is created with sustainable, better-quality materials. High-ticket items like solar arrays and super high-efficiency heating and cooling systems become affordable in this way, too. As an added benefit, because items like laundry facilities and parking are located in a common space, individual households can devote more living space to actual living space — the ultimate environmental advantage.

### Economic Advantages

Cohousing makes sense for a variety of economic reasons. Private homes may be slightly more expensive to design and construct in cohousing than a comparable single-family home, but the difference in cost is offset by extensive common facilities — and the community these facilities foster. By purchasing a home that is smaller and easier to maintain,

residents limit their expenses day to day. Smaller units cost less to furnish and clean. Smaller, more efficient homes are also less costly to heat and cool, thereby lowering a household's operating costs. Also, residents typically pare down their possessions upon joining a cohousing community. Not only do they cooperate on the upkeep of shared amenities, such as a woodshop or a sauna, but many welcome the opportunity to get rid of expensive appliances, tools, and equipment. From an economic standpoint, it makes sense for community members to share items like deep freezers and table saws. Having friends and activities on-site also means less driving and less spending for off-site entertainment. In all of these ways and many more, cohousing allows its residents to reduce many daily cost-of-living expenses.

### **Types of Financing and Ownership**

In different cultures at different times, cohousing developments have utilized a variety of financing mechanisms and ownership structures: privately owned condominiums, limited-equity cooperatives, rentals owned by nonprofit organizations, and a combination of private ownership and nonprofit-owned rental units. Most of the early communities in Denmark, and the large majority of communities in the United States, have used a condominium financing model with a homeowners' association. The preconstruction development costs have generally been borne by the community members, who invest in the development of their own project.

To date, most communities built in the North America have used private bank financing. Beginning in 1982, Danish communities

have been able to take advantage of government-sponsored, guaranteed construction loans that structure the developments as limited-equity cooperatives. In addition, many dozens of projects in Denmark have resulted from collaborations between nonprofits and resident groups to build rental units. This scheme is now available in the United States, where the first all-rental cohousing community for low-income households (less than 60 percent of median income) was completed in 2009 in Sebastopol, California. It's worth noting that this community was created in collaboration with a nonprofit organization.

The financing available often determines who can afford to live in the community, but cohousing is not defined by a specific financing arrangement. In this way cohousing differs from other housing categories, such as cooperatives and condominiums, which are defined by their type of ownership. Cohousing refers to an idea about how people can live in a high-functioning neighborhood, rather than any particular financing or ownership type. Our experience has been to finance your community in the easiest way possible — and not belabor it.

### **Priorities**

The priorities of cohousing developments are as varied as the residents themselves. In addition to seeking a sense of community, some groups emphasize ecological concerns such as solar and wind energy, recycling, or organic community gardens. In other developments, residents place less priority on community projects and spend more time on individual interests such as local theater groups, classes, or political organizations. Priorities often change over the years, reflecting the desires

of the residents. But for the most part, key priorities are widespread and topical among cohousing communities. Conversations about health and diet abound. Education and child-rearing are timeless concerns. Discussions about how to be more civilized as a culture never fail to engage.

The cohousing communities discussed in this book evolved from the efforts of many people and reflect different times, situations, and settings. These examples illustrate

different approaches and outcomes, and by no means should be seen as the best or only way to build cohousing. Rather, each project evolved from a process of weighing different options, learning from past experience, and compromising to get it built. This evolution continues today. The only constants in high-quality cohousing communities are the residents themselves, in partnership with experienced guides who play significant roles in developing every project.



## Part Two

### Cohousing Communities in Europe: An Inside Look

Over the years, European cohousing groups have taken many approaches to building their individual communities. But they always do so with the same aim: to figure out how to make a high-functioning community in the context of a budget, funding possibilities, and other restraints. The following chapters examine eight Danish communities: the places, how each one developed, and the consequences of different strategies and solutions.

People may wonder why we continue to publish stories about European cohousing in general and Danish cohousing in particular. The answer is simple: this book is about building and maintaining successful communities in North America, and Danish cohousing remains the gold standard for cohousing worldwide. Not only do these places represent the pinnacle of site design, common house design, and private house design, they do so because the residents have proactively set themselves up for long-term success. They have organized regular functions, like daily common dinners, that preserve and invigorate community life. They have created and maintained policies that familiarize potential residents with the community long before moving in. And they have been doing



so — successfully — for more than thirty years. In other words, they have proactively designed a successful organ and worked hard to learn how to play it.

Over the decades, these communities have provided inspiration and practical lessons for people who wish to create cohousing developments in the United States and other countries. Moreover, these Danish communities demonstrate how cohousing can remain vital and relevant from generation to generation. They are living expressions of cohousing at its best. And we want our North American readers to aspire to the best.





## The Evolution of Cohousing in Europe

*As more people move into cohousing communities, more people — friends, neighbors, and relatives — find out what this way of living is all about and see its advantages. Then they want to try it themselves.*

— Hans S. Andersen,  
engineer and cohousing resident

The first attempt to build what Danes refer to today as *bofællesskaber* (“living communities”) began between 1962 and 1966, when Jan Gudmand-Høyer and five friends met to discuss new ways of living — housing that was an antidote to the ills of the industrial age; housing that embraced the needs of human beings; housing that created a joyful and thriving community.

Gudmand-Høyer described this as “moving from *Homo productivos* to *Homo ludens*” — from “man the worker” to “man the player.” It was an idea that sought to reintroduce the play element into our function-obsessed culture. In practical terms,

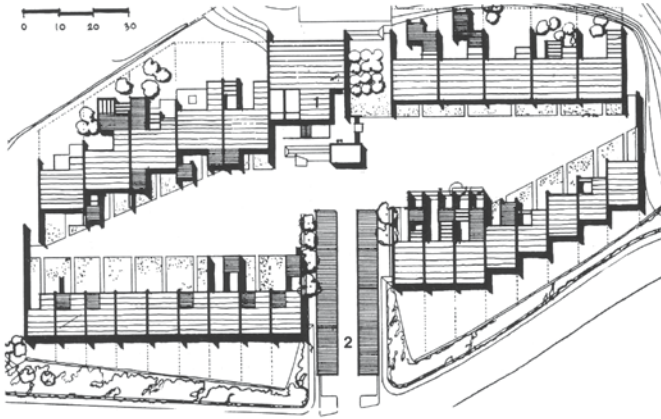
these Danish thinkers sought to combine the qualities of a village life with the freedom to pursue the cultural and professional opportunities of a nearby city.

They agreed that neither the suburban single-family home nor the multi-story apartment building were acceptable alternatives, because both lack the common facilities needed to create a true sense of community. Agreeing that cooperation was as necessary

*30 years later Trudslund is still going strong. The kids who grew up there (now 25 or 30 years old) are now moving back.*



at home as it was in the workplace, the group decided that their housing complex should be small enough to allow residents to know each other and to feel comfortable using the common area as an extended living room.



*The site plan of Saettedammen, the first cohousing in Denmark:  
1. common house 2. parking*

## Meeting the Needs of Our Modern World

It is no surprise that families, particularly young families, have embraced cohousing. The reason is simple: the community environment of cohousing takes the pressure off the individuals in a family. Gudmand-Høyer was right: in cohousing, children are more secure. And because residents know each other and share a community that is larger than any one household, crime is non-existent.

But cohousing isn't just for young families. As populations age in both the European Union and the United States, cohousing communities have more and more residents who are single parents, empty nesters, and singles. This is no surprise. Cohousing addresses the social ills of loneliness and isolation, and provides an effective social-services network that our larger society is unable to provide.

The housing program should be designed to encourage social interaction among neighbors and, significantly, "should not be carried out for people, but with people."

This concept addressed the concerns of contemporary Danish women who, since the 1950s, had started to work typically outside of the home. The group believed that children would be more secure and crime and juvenile delinquency could be significantly decreased due to the watchful eyes of the neighbors.

In 1966 Gudmand-Høyer's ever-growing group purchased a building site in the quiet town of Hareskov on the outskirts of Copenhagen. The site featured sloping ground, which would allow for energy-efficient housing and passive solar heating. The group developed plans for 12 terraced houses set around a common house and a swimming pool.

Despite the group's conscientious approach to the planning of their housing community, their neighbors in Hareskov opposed the development on the grounds that the increased number of children would bring excessive noise to the area. After years of trying to work out an agreement, the group was forced to sell its site. The Hareskov project was never built.

Partially in response to this setback, Gudmand-Høyer wrote an article in 1968 entitled "The Missing Link Between Utopia and the Dated One-Family House." It was published in *Information*, a serious national publication with a wide readership, and elicited a tremendous response. Gudmand-Høyer received more than two hundred letters from people interested in living in such a community. There was suddenly interest, "to build not only one community, but three or four."



In 1968, Bodil Graae, Jan Gudmand-Høyer, and the few families remaining from the Harsekov group joined forces with others interested in building a cohousing community. They found a building site in Jonstrup, a small village outside of Copenhagen. Because of diverging design interests, however, this large group split into two. One group, who wanted extensive common space and a walkway where people could just tap on each other's windows, formed the Skråplanet community in Jonstrup. The other group, who wanted front gardens with bigger houses and a smaller common house, formed the Saettedammen community and purchased a suitable site in the nearby town of Hillerød.

Through much of the planning process, the two groups worked in parallel, holding meetings in the same building and sharing information. Neither faced neighborhood opposition this time, but both were hit with new setbacks such as high construction bids and therefore some delay. But in the fall of 1970, twenty-seven families moved into Saettedammen in Hillerød, and between 1972 and 1973, Skråplanet's 33 families moved into a community in Jonstrup designed by Jan Gudmand-Høyer. Both communities are still very successful today. While visiting Skråplanet in May 2010 we were astounded to see what a high-functioning community it still is. The residents were planning stairs with ramps and handrails for when they grow older.

### The Cohousing Concept Expands

Several young families on the Danish peninsula were discussing how they could form a community that went beyond the occasional dinner or child's birthday party. They heard

### A Seed of Inspiration

Another important influence on the development of cohousing was "Children Should Have One Hundred Parents," a 1967 article by Bodil Graae. In it she suggests that all adults look after all the children in the community, so that children are free to "go in and out of the homes around us... crawl under hedges... feel like they belong." Over fifty people responded to Graae's idea and began meeting regularly to discuss how such a child-supportive place could be formed.

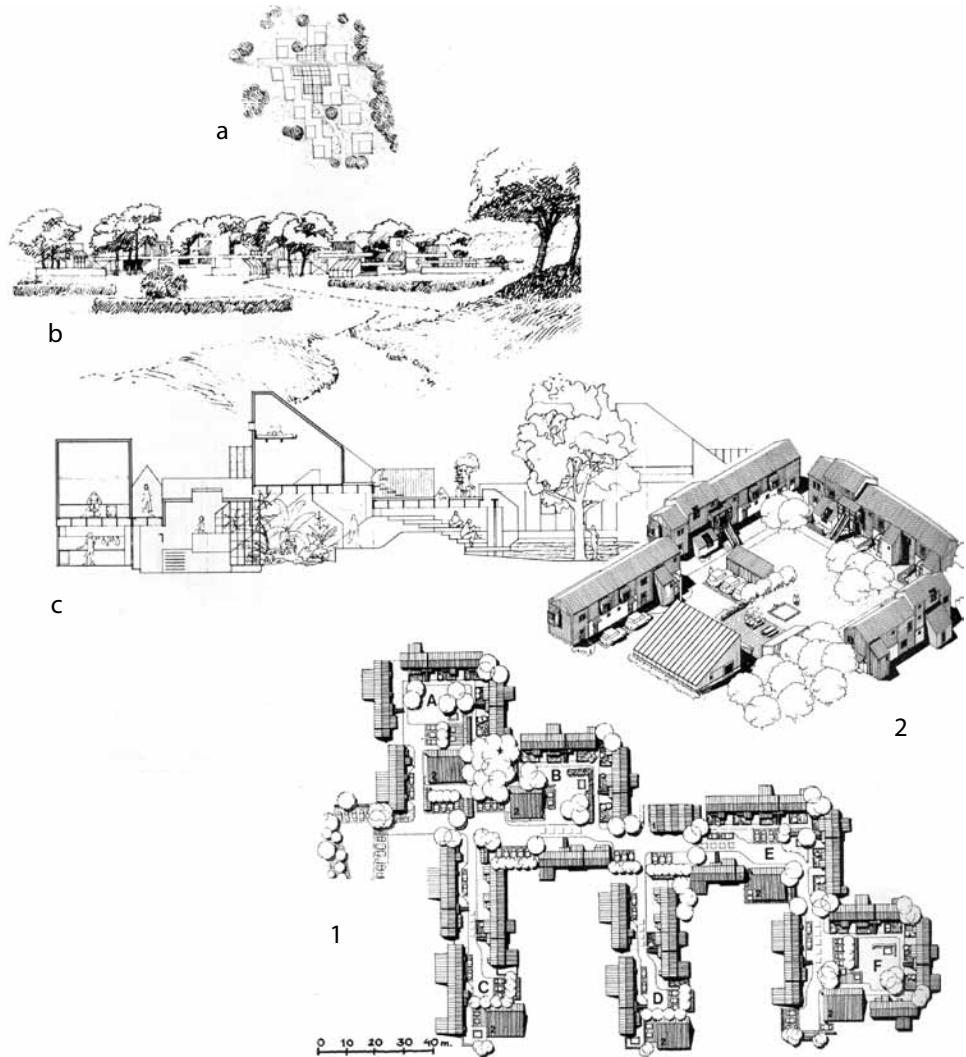


*Finished in 1972, Skråplanet is the second oldest cohousing community in Denmark. Twenty of the 33 original households still live there. These days they are upgrading the site to make it safer for elders. Children who grew up there are planning a new cohousing in the neighboring town of Ballerup.*

of Skråplanet and Saettedammen, consulted Gudmand-Høyer, and visited both projects. In 1976 this group completed the third Danish cohousing community: Nonbo Hede, near the town of Viborg in Jutland. Clearly, cohousing was an idea whose time had come.

Nonbo Hede refined the basic concepts for a successful cohousing community. It included smaller houses and a larger common

house, with big windows in the private kitchens, houses facing each other, and a style influenced by traditional Danish architecture.



Top: a.b.c: Early sketches for a new community in Hareskov.

Bottom: Modeled after private cohousing, subsidized cohousing has made great inroads in Denmark. Vandkunsten's competition entry was the basis for the design of Tinggarden, a 79-unit development south of Copenhagen, which is subdivided into six clusters (A through F). 1. Site plan 2. Common house and cluster court yard.

The majority of the residents in these first cohousing developments were two-income families who chose cohousing as an alternative to conventional single-family houses. They were attracted to the social aspects of cohousing, especially the benefits for children. It is significant that the early initiators of cohousing, though they could have afforded larger modern houses, chose instead to create smaller residences and devote both time and resources to developing the community itself. These early communities were practical first steps in a housing concept that has more than proven its efficacy.

### Cohousing Takes Hold

One by one, groups of people organized to realize their dream of building cohousing. By 1980, twelve owner-occupied cohousing communities, ranging in size from 6 to 36 households, had been built in Denmark. With one exception, all were initiated by people who wanted to live there; future residents participated in the planning and design processes for all of them. Between 1980 and 1982 the number of cohousing communities nearly doubled, increasing from 12 to 22, with another 10 in the planning phase.

Even so, it took great determination for these people to realize their dreams. Today a few seasoned development firms exist to guide future residents through the arduous development process. But this wasn't always the case.

### SAMBO: The Association for Cohousing

As a cohousing advocate, consultant, and architect, Jan Gudmand-Høyer was aware of the difficulty that new developments groups

## Cohousing as Government-Subsidized Rental Housing

Taking cues from private cohousing a government agency, the Danish Building Research Institute, examined the social implications of a housing development's physical environment. In 1971 the institute sponsored a national design competition for low-rise, clustered housing. A new architectural firm called Vandkunsten took first place with a proposal that was essentially a manifesto calling for a cooperative society and humane communities that integrate work, housing, and recreation:

When the job is no longer to rule people, but to administer things in common, the walls of the institutions — which guard us against each other without defense, without distance, naked and for the mutual aid of each other — fall down. Do we fall with the institutions, or are we to be seen in a society? Good day sister; Good day brother, Welcome, community!

The competition resulted in Tinggarden, a 79-unit development based on Vandkunsten's award-winning design that was completed five years later. (See image pg. 42)

Tinggarden is divided into six clusters of 12 to 15 units surrounding a common house that is used for dining, meetings, and any other function a particular cluster may need. A large meeting house also serves the entire community. Tinggarden is generally considered to be the first rental cohousing development. It remains one of the best examples of government-subsidized nonprofit housing anywhere and has had a tremendous impact on all subsidized housing in Denmark. Many other Danish nonprofit housing developers subsequently followed its lead.

*Translation from Vandkunsten's 1970 competition entry*

faced. To assist people through the difficult planning stages, he and a group of other architects, lawyers, building technicians, and

social scientists formed a professional support association called SAMBO (roughly translated as “live together”) in 1978.

The association was meant to add social relevance to the members’ community-building work, and provide consultation and technical skills to those who wanted to start their own communities. SAMBO was successful at hosting regular meetings and publishing information, including past experiences and current building sites. Ironically, their success in creating communities — including Trudslund and Ibsgarden — led to their dissolution in 1982; after certain members of the association achieved their immediate aims, their interest in continuing involvement with SAMBO diminished.

Since SAMBO, most intergenerational cohousing communities have been initiated by individuals, professionals, and capable bureaucrats. Cohousing has been used as a means of facilitating workforce housing, sparking urban redevelopment, inducing greater density, and fostering more ecological and aesthetic town design (less asphalt, for example). In other cases, leaders or cohousing advocates just wanted to see that the next new neighborhood built in their town was as child-friendly, elder-friendly, family-friendly, and pedestrian-friendly as possible. In other words, these individuals wanted a development that connected smart town planning rhetoric with a real community — a real community, and not simply because a marketeer declared it such.

### **New Financing Possibilities**

In 1981, the Danish Ministry of Housing enacted legislation intended to boost the sagging building industry that, because of high interest rates, had fallen to its lowest

level since World War II. This law provided an ideal method for financing cohousing. To qualify for a loan, a cohousing community had to limit construction costs per square meter, and the average unit size could be not exceed 1,023 square feet (95 square meters). Because it offered people an opportunity to create high-functioning neighborhoods instead of big houses, cohousing came to the rescue of the sagging Danish housing industry.

The Cooperative Housing Association Law was a windfall for cohousing. Ebbe Klovedal and Poul Bjere wrote:

In these provisions hides a previously unknown possibility for people who have wanted to establish a cohousing community but who haven’t had the money to do it .... If utilized appropriately, cohousing will now be for many people the cheapest way to establish a home.

Besides making cohousing more affordable, the loan requirements forced cohousing groups to clarify their priorities and encouraged them to seek greater diversity in household composition — a long-standing goal. As a result of the new law, many cohousing groups decided to limit the average unit size to ten percent below the allowed average (about 921 square feet), so they could allocate more space to common facilities. To allow them to build a few larger units for families with children, the groups had to make an extra effort to find singles and couples who wanted smaller units.

Since 1981, many Danish cohousing communities have been structured as limited-equity cooperatives financed with

government-guaranteed loans. Nonprofit housing associations also built more rental cohousing developments that permitted rent subsidies for qualifying low-income residents. Today, many communities are functioning successfully as nonprofit-owned rentals.

### **Increasing Diversity Among Residents**

Expanded financing possibilities produced a diversified mix of cohousing residents. Whereas the earliest cohousing communities consisted almost exclusively of two-income families with children, a sample of six cooperatively financed communities built in the eighties showed that 54 percent of households in ownership cohousing were couples with children, while 29 percent were single parents, 16 percent single persons, and 1 percent couples without children; in comparison, rental housing was made up of 36 percent single parents, 28 percent singles, 22 percent couples with children, and 14 percent couples without children.

Today, adult residents in cohousing range in age from early twenties to their nineties. The majority move into cohousing between the ages of thirty and forty-five, but the number of elderly participants is increasing steadily. Several communities have been initiated by seniors as an alternative to standard housing for the elderly. Cohousing is now cross-generational, attracting singles, single parents, couples with and without children, and seniors. While it is clear that some communities are growing older, others tend to attract families with small children. The average age in Danish cohousing communities is increasing, but not as quickly as one might assume.

Although residents pursue all types of occupations, teaching is one of the most common livelihoods. Most residents have a college education, and though resident diversity is increasing, cohousing is still largely a white-collar, middle-class phenomenon. It is difficult to say exactly why people in blue-collar occupations are relatively underrepresented in cohousing communities. Perhaps the values associated with the cohousing concept, such as non-hierarchical decision-making and a lack of gender-based roles, tend to be a little more white-collar-esque. (Wages for skilled workers are relatively high in Denmark, so affordability is not the issue.)

“In fact,” wrote Hans S. Andersen, an engineer with the Danish Building Research Institute and a cohousing resident, in an article for *Scandinavian Housing and Planning Research*, “the importance of practical activities favors people with practical skills, and craftsmen are highly esteemed in the cohousing communities that have them.” As cohousing continues to gain greater acceptance by the general public, it is attracting a broader representation of occupations. In 2000, the first community in Denmark that was majority blue collar moved into Korvetten cohousing.

### **Cohousing Trends**

Cohousing is now a well-established housing option in Denmark. Not only do new communities continue to be built, but the concept has also been incorporated into master plans for whole new areas of development. In 1985, Jan Gudmand-Høyer and Angels Colom won an architectural competition for a large housing development built in several stages in Ballerup, a suburb of Copenhagen.



*With 32 dwellings lining a glass-covered street, Handvaerkerparken, designed by Arkitektgruppenin Aarhus, is one of a growing number of cohousing developments that connect residences and common facilities with glass-covered walkways.*

Their proposal divided the development into 48 resident-managed cohousing communities. The first phase, completed in 1990, included 11 cohousing communities of 20 to 30 dwellings (almost 300 units in all). Of these, five are nonprofit-owned rentals, three are cooperatively financed, and three are privately financed. Three of the communities are designed around cover-streets. Gudmand-Høyer wrote that:

Our drawing studio was in the middle of the construction site so we had optimal contact with the residents and an ongoing exhibit of the design revisions. We held three to four resident meetings a day. This will be the first large community built in the world based on a collection of cooperative neighborhoods.

There is a certain irony in realizing that one of these cohousing neighborhoods is less than a mile from the original Hareskov site, where the first cohousing community was planned and defeated.

The reaction of one resident's parents is characteristic:

When we announced our plans to sell our house and move into a cohousing

community, my parents thought we were crazy. My mother assumed it would be only temporary and that in a short time we would miss our old house. But once they came to visit, attended a common dinner, and talked to other people here, they began to understand why we wanted to live like this. Now they're talking with their friends about building a cohousing community.

The concept of cohousing has evolved since Jan Gudmand-Høyer began discussing his ideas for a cooperative living environment in the 1960s. The average size of individual residences in new communities is almost half what it was at Saettedammen and Skråplanet.

Perhaps more significantly, the range of unit sizes has become more diverse. At Saettedammen, built in 1972, private residences varied from 1,500 to 1,940 square feet (140–180 m<sup>2</sup>), compared to 580 to 1,120 square feet (54–104 m<sup>2</sup>) for Thorshammer, built in 1985. The average size of cohousing residences built in Denmark at that time was about 1,000 square feet, compared to a national average of 840 square feet for multi-family housing units and almost 1,900 square feet for single-family houses.

The buildings themselves reflect this evolutionary process. Cohousing residents have chosen to cluster their dwellings closer and closer together, as is especially evident in the new communities that connect ground-level dwellings and common facilities under one roof. In 1981, the Jernstoberiet community reused the central hall of an iron foundry as a covered courtyard between individual residences and common facilities. Today, glass-covered streets or courts, are very common.

The Danish government continues to look at high-functioning neighborhoods (cohousing) to play a role in supporting individuals before they fall out of the canoe. They recognize that it's so much more difficult to get someone back into the canoe than to help keep them in along the way. Neighborhoods — like strong families, personal responsibility, and even government help on occasion — help to stitch together a viable society. At a recent conference examining the role of cohousing, architect Philip Arctander made this point in his closing statement:

A community can in many situations give better help than an institution; but the larger community, society, must supply the safety net. With this reservation, the seminar found great possibilities in the further development of the cohousing idea.... Cohousing has the possibility to be a part of a new way of handling society's problems. Not privatizing, not institutionalizing, but collectivizing.

The Danish government's support for cohousing is very consistent with its priorities for supporting the middle class. Banks were



once reluctant to loan to cohousing groups, but this sentiment has evolved and cohousing communities are now considered “a preferred risk” since most units are pre-sold long before construction is completed — a record with which few other housing developments can compete. Cohousing developments also have an excellent track record of good management and for paying back their loans.

Cohousing has greatly affected the success of new and existing nonprofit housing, as more and more projects are built to include input of future residents and be entirely self-managed. This trend continues. In publicly assisted housing development, the best “projects” are divided into clusters of 20 to 30 units sharing a common house. Common facilities now include much more than the conventional laundry room — there are kitchen and dining areas for dinner clubs and parties, meeting rooms, and children's play areas. These designs recognize the advantages of breaking large developments into smaller groups to encourage a stronger sense of communal responsibility. This results in lower maintenance and management costs, less resident turnover, less graffiti

*Jernstoberiet  
common meal in  
the glass-covered  
central hall.*

and vandalism, and just better housing in general.

Speculative housing developers have also found cohousing design concepts to be very marketable. Danish condominium developments, which for decades were designed for maximum individual privacy, are increasingly incorporating site-planning concepts that encourage casual interaction among residents. One high-priced development placed the parking at the edge of the site to leave the rest of the area open for pedestrians, and had individual terraces facing the walkways and children's play areas. In an article about the project, the architects explain: "People want some sort of community, or they wouldn't pay so much money to live so closely together."

Even in older neighborhoods of single-family houses, groups organize dinner clubs where three to four families eat together once a week, rotating among houses. It is impossible to say whether these ideas were taken directly from cohousing, were learned from friends or the media, or are simply responses to social and economic realities. Nevertheless, it is obvious that as people see the advantages of a more practical and social living environment, they assign higher priority to design and planning that encourages these qualities.

## The Future of Cohousing in Denmark

As the first generation of Danish children raised in cohousing comes of age and moves out on their own, it is becoming clear that this approach is more than a passing fad. The teenage residents of the first cohousing communities generally want to experience other housing environments, such as student dorms, shared houses, and inner-city

apartments, but most of them expect to live in cohousing again. "I can't imagine raising children any other way," one teenager told us. Better than anyone, they know the benefits of growing up in cohousing. And you can see the children who grew up in cohousing thirty years ago starting new communities.

The trend toward working part or full time at home is already apparent. Having a greater number of residents at home during the day can further enrich community life and eliminate the social isolation that often results from working alone at home. The provision of office space in the common house, where several people can share resources such as a copy machine, a computer, or secretarial support, is very much on the increase. Neighborhood work centers and the "electronic cottage" will become more and more attractive as commuting becomes more difficult, less desirable, and less necessary; something will replace the workplace community, and cohousing may play a role. This is very relevant in the US, where a recent report calculated that if every American drove 30 miles less per week we'd reduce our oil consumption by 20 percent. There is also a growing trend toward building new communities next to existing cohousing developments.

## Cohousing in Other Countries

While cohousing was pioneered in Denmark, and it remains the country with the largest number of cohousing developments, other European countries — most notably the Netherlands — have established cohousing communities. Dutch *centraal wonen* ("central living") communities incorporate the same primary characteristics as Danish cohousing — common facilities initiated and planned



by the residents, intentional neighborhood design, and complete resident management — but have added a few Dutch features.

The first cohousing project built in the Netherlands was the 50-unit Hilversum community (divided into several smaller housing clusters), designed by Leo de Longe and Pieter Weeda. When it was completed in 1977, the residents received so many outside requests for information that they organized a national organization of *centraal women* to help new groups. More than thirty years later, approximately two hundred additional cohousing projects have been completed in the Netherlands, and about forty more are planned.

Sweden has also seen a renewed interest in the *kollektivhus*, literally “collective housing” or “housing with services,” a model first developed in the 1930s. The *kollektivhus* differs from Danish cohousing in that it is usually instigated and developed by non-profit housing developers, resulting in more institutional approaches. Several of the Swedish examples are high-rise buildings; the Swedes have been very successful in rehabilitating problem-ridden high-rise complexes built in the 1960s and 1970s by adding common facilities, involving residents in management, and inviting in new residents who choose to cooperate and establish a new tone. One of these is Stacken, a 33-unit, nine-story high-rise located outside of Göteborg, which was more than 60 percent vacant just ten years after it was built. Stacken was converted to cohousing with the addition of a common dining room, a childcare program, workshops, and laundry facilities. Although the common facilities have greatly improved Stacken’s livability,



Cohousing in Sweden is most often in one building, as it is here at *Tre Portar*.



residents still express frustration with living in a high-rise building.

A common house kitchen in Sweden.

Cohousing projects have also been built in Norway, Germany, and England. One Norwegian architect we met commented, “When it comes to housing, we like to let the Danes do the experimenting. When it is clear that an idea works, then we try it.” If they haven’t already, every other European

country is striving to get cohousing off the ground, with notable projects going forward in France, Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland.

All the Western industrialized nations are facing similar changes in demographics and lifestyles, and all have the means to not only reap the benefits of a high-functioning neighborhood, but also attain real sustainability. Nearly four decades ago, Danish cohousing initiators faced many of the same barriers we face in the United States today. But by building on their experience, we have avoided many of the pitfalls, and now have

clear methodologies that make it just as straightforward to build projects in the US as it is in Denmark. The only real difference is that almost everyone in Denmark is familiar with cohousing, and therefore more people choose it — that, of course, makes it easier.

And while today everyone in cohousing can address *all* of their neighbors with one *send to all* message, and hang out with them and others on Facebook, it's much more fun to walk over to the common terrace and to hang out with whoever happens to be there — and have a *real* social experience. Cohousing has survived Twitter.



*Kid friendly,  
bike friendly,  
community  
friendly. Bakken  
cohousing.*



## Trudeslund

### *The Definition of Cohousing*

**Birkerød, Denmark**

**33 Units**

**Architects: Vandkunsten Architects**

**Completed: 1981**

**Tenure: Private ownership**

**Common House: 4,475 sq. ft. (416 m<sup>2</sup>)**

*I know I live in a community because on a Friday night it takes me 45 minutes and two beers to get from the parking lot to my front door.*

— Trudeslund resident

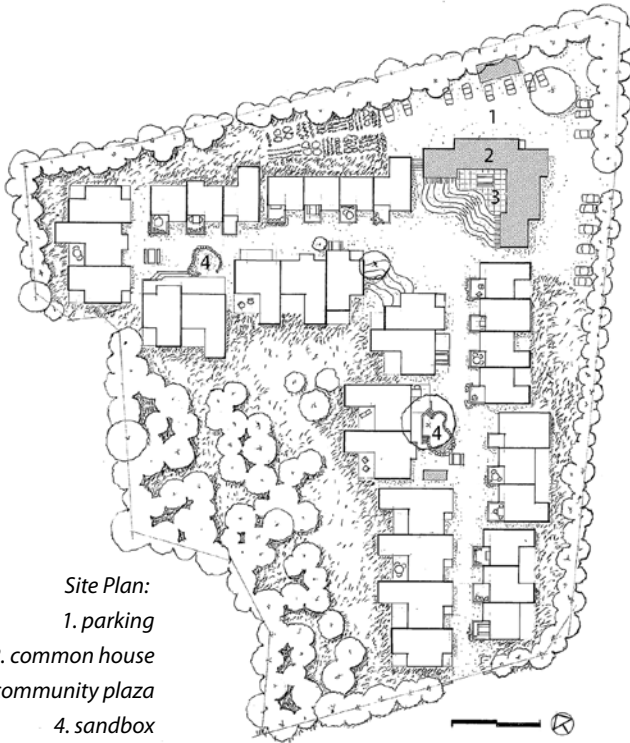
**E**nough general discussion; let's take a closer look at some real places and the people who live in them. The following case studies give a small sampling of the variety of cohousing we encountered in our research in Denmark from 1980 to 2010. They include an old renovated factory building; a mixture of renters and owners in the same development; and a glass-covered street that extends the opportunity for social interaction. Each

case study emphasizes the place's special character.

We begin with a close look at the first community we visited in our in-depth tour of the country. Trudeslund was our primary base for six months during one of our trips researching Danish cohousing for this

*Dinner time at Trudeslund's common house.*





Site Plan:

- 1. parking
- 2. common house
- 3. community plaza
- 4. sandbox

book. Our experiences there made us question why we had ever considered living in another, more conventional manner.

### Introducing Trudeslund

Trudeslund is situated in the town of Birkerød, just north of Copenhagen. Utilizing the natural features of the sloping, wooded site, the residences line two pedestrian “streets,” with the generous and sculptural common house located at the highest point where the streets meet. With cars kept to the edge of the site and the houses clustered together, much of the lower end has been left wooded, making it a favorite place for children to play. Architecturally, socially, and practically, this community has palpably succeeded in creating a very “livable” neighborhood.

### The Participatory Process

Originally, 20 families formed a group to build a cohousing development on a site

*Row houses with small front gardens line the pedestrian streets where much of the community's socializing takes place.*



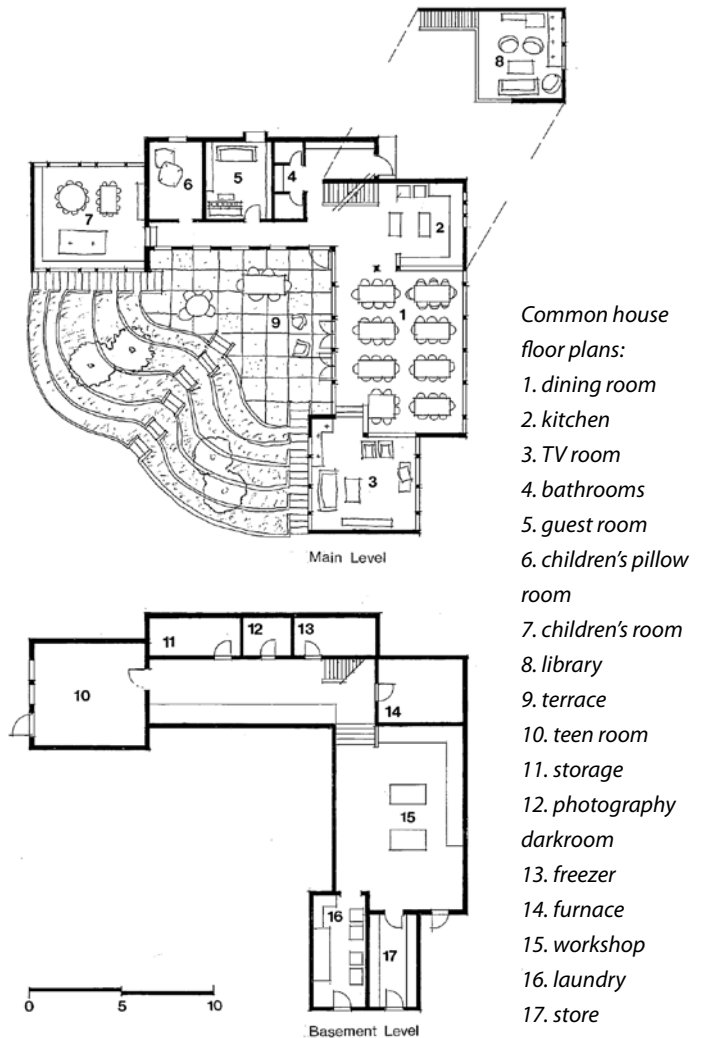
that was for sale, but zoned for single-family houses.

Once they had agreed upon their goals and formulated a development plan, the group hired architects with the most experience in community-oriented design. The development is beautiful, but just as important are the socially friendly environmental design details: if two people start talking and want to continue for more than two minutes, for instance, there is always somewhere close by to sit down for a longer discussion. The design reinforces the natural social nature of people: Trudslund is a place that encourages spontaneous interaction while allowing for more long-term social connections. An attention to the actual needs of the residents, as social beings, is present throughout Trudslund; in fact, the desire to accomplish this was the major driver behind the design decisions. Economic pressures, especially climbing interest rates, disciplined the group's ambitions and kept them to a tight schedule.

But while many of the participants were well-educated professionals who had strong opinions on the planning and development of the project, few had previous experience with group decision-making. Luckily they had an advisor who did: Jan Skifter Anderson.

Most residents involved in the planning process agree that their participation was vital to the project's success. Not only did it produce a design that fit their specific needs and desires, but it helped to define the group's ideals and to strengthen community spirit: "We learned each other's strong and weak sides, and to be open with each other."

In retrospect, residents acknowledged that they would have done some things differently.



*In the common house residents never have to watch the game alone.*

Many feel they overemphasized the design of the individual houses in relation to the common areas. One participant explained:

It's difficult to imagine what you want in a common house because you've never had anything like it before, but the architects understood it well, and that helped. Everyone knows what they want in their

*The teenagers' music room.*



*Each dwelling has a private back patio, but residents have found no need for fences.*

own kitchen, or at least thinks they do. Our common house is a grand success.

## Community Life

Although the group attempted to restrict the floor plans to four basic designs, individual preferences — particularly with regard to the kitchens — resulted in several more variations. Today, most residents agree that standardized kitchens would have been fine, since they eat dinners so often in the common house. Standardization would have reduced construction costs — a lesson from which many subsequent communities have benefited.

The houses are privately owned, using a financial structure similar to that of American condominiums, where each resident owns a house and a portion of the common areas. Cohousing is generally more affordable than single-family houses, but Trudeslund's location and the era it was built in make it one of the more expensive developments. Situated on valuable property near the train station with a direct line into central Copenhagen, Trudeslund is also close to a forested recreation area, lakes, and the pleasant town of Birkerød. The cost was further increased by 1980–81 interest rates, which had reached an all-time high of 21 percent. Upon completion, the price of a house and a share of the common facilities ranged from 777,000 to 1,000,000 Danish Kroner (DKK) (approximately \$91,400 to \$117,600 in 1982 US dollars, or \$350–\$400,000 in 2010 US dollars). These prices were comparable to single-family residences in the surrounding area that had no common facilities. A resident explained:

Although our monthly house payment increased, our total lifestyle costs decreased significantly because of the common facilities and shared resources available here. Common dinners in particular have cut down the amount we spend on food and the frequency with which we eat out.

A cooperative store, located in the common house, is stocked with household goods, from toothpaste to cornflakes. Each household has a key, so that residents can pick up goods at any hour. They write down what they take in the account book and receive a bill at the end of the month. We wondered if goods ever disappeared without being noted in the account book. Indeed, there are occasional discrepancies (probably because people forget to write items down, rather than purposely steal), which must be made up from the community budget. Residents know that serious problems with the accounts would cause the store to be closed.

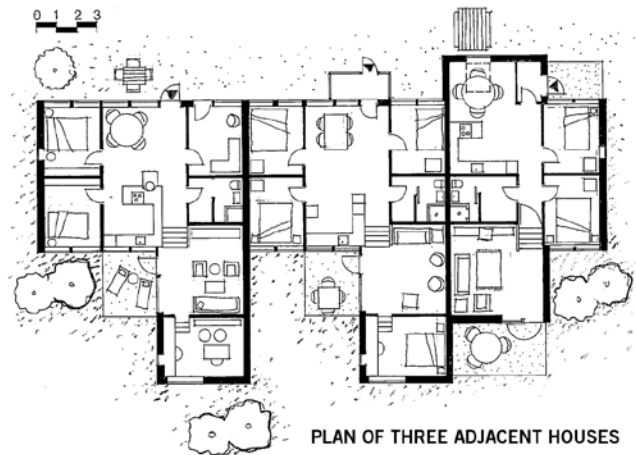
The store is run by one of the nine “interest groups.” Every adult participates in at least one interest group. These groups are responsible for coordinating and maintaining all community activities.

The common house also contains a workshop, a large kids’ room, a sitting lounge, a television room, a walk-in freezer used by the community store and individual families, a guest room, a teenage room where teenagers can “jam” on drums and electric guitars without bothering anyone, a music room, and a computer room.

These facilities are only a small part of Trudslund’s practical advantages. As is typical in a cohousing community, residents

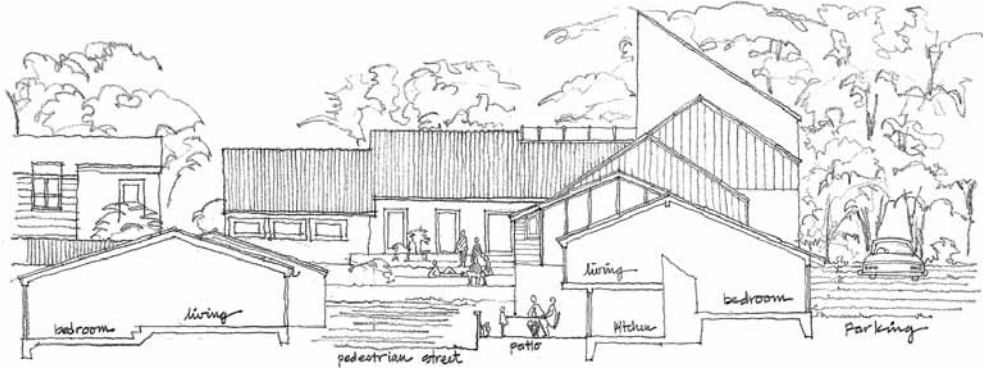


*A private residence. The sanctity of the private dwelling remains well respected.*



*Floor plans of three adjacent dwellings. A four-bedroom unit with direct access to a front bedroom makes it ideal for a home office, 1,185 ft<sup>2</sup> (110 m<sup>2</sup>). A four-bedroom unit with green house entrance. A two-bedroom unit, 970 ft<sup>2</sup> (90 m<sup>2</sup>).*

*A section through the site shows the relationship between private, semiprivate, and common areas.*



occasionally borrow items from each other or share ownership of particular objects. In Trudslund, for instance, two families share a car, while five others own a sailboat together. There is only one lawn mower. Twenty-nine of the thirty-three households have also pooled their resources to buy a 17-room vacation house in Sweden. The sharing of resources gives all residents access to a wider variety of conveniences at a lower cost per family than is possible in traditional single-family housing.

### **The Residents — Then and Now**

One of the objectives stated by Trudslund's initiators in the development program was to create a social network that would provide more support for the nuclear family over the long term:

We want to open the family up toward the community, but still have it [the family] as a base. We want to have the necessary daily functions in the private dwellings, but transfer as many as possible of the other functions to the community, thereby encouraging social interaction.

No child has ever lacked for playmates in Trudslund and therefore it continues to attract new families. The founding residents knew that childcare was needed during the daytime, when most of the parents were at work. After considering many possibilities, including local public facilities, the community decided to start its own after-school program and to send preschoolers to existing childcare centers in the neighborhood.

Initially, a "childcare corps" of five to seven adults rotated responsibility for 12 to 15 youngsters from noon to early evening. Other adults were also expected to help out at least five days a year. During the first two years that this program was in place, this system was adjusted several times, losing structure each time until it dissolved almost completely. Because the children had grown older and were more familiar with the community and each other, they no longer required such structured care.

When we wrote the first edition of this book back in 1988, the adult residents of Trudslund ranged in age from 28 to 90. There were four households with no children, nine single parents (seven of whom were fathers), and several singles. Professionally,



there were thirteen engineers and computer programmers, eleven elementary and secondary school teachers, four doctors, one economist, two accountants, two dentists, two nurses, a journalist, and a manager of a chain of radio equipment stores.

We have returned to Trudslund six times over the last three decades, most recently in the summer of 2010. We have watched it change. At the same time we have watched how the cohousing concept endures. Trudslund is still going strong — 29 years later, dinner is still being served seven nights a week. Folks raised their kids there, and those same kids are returning and moving into the community.

Some people wouldn't live anywhere else. Uffa moved in when he was two. His father worked in a local factory. Now he lives, along with his two children and wife, next door to his parents in Trudslund. The residents say that his two boys are as different as Uffa and his brother were as youngsters. Uffa is now the manager of the factory where his father still works.

The story of Uffa and his family, and many others like him with ongoing links to Trudslund, speaks to the longevity and intergenerational connections of this community. This legacy is the true gift of Trudslund, not just to its residents but to the movement as a whole — and the reason why we include it in this book.

Residents put in well over 450 people hours in the common house each week. They have put over half a million dinners on the table since they moved in. The individual appreciation for their community is very real. And, as a group, they solve problems old and new. The residents of Trudslund built a



community, and today they continue to build a community.

Trudslund shows that while there is nothing exotic about these consciously created, high-functioning neighborhoods, the support that they can supply, at the neighborhood level and at the community level, cannot be reproduced today in a haphazard fashion; it has to be forged, crafted really, and then maintained. Trudslund residents never take what they have for granted and continue to tweak old assumptions and methods for maintaining community for new ones. And they continue to operate on the basic premise, "If it doesn't work socially, why bother?" So they still have dinner at each other's houses once a month in small groups. The notion is that, if you have dinner in someone's house, you will listen to them better. Similarly, the cooking committee matches up people who don't know each other or who often don't agree with each other. They have found that once folks have cooked together (or done anything practical together) they give each other the benefit of the doubt when it comes

*Residents in charge of the community store meet once a month to discuss business and individual responsibilities.*

to discussing the merits of a new sand box for the kids. It is this aggressive mating of the design goals with not only social goals but

active social consciousness, that makes it all work.

The community has proactive incentives to get everyone participating on work days and committees, and has a very aggressive policy to familiarize potential buyers with the community long before they move in. Serious buyers are required to attend a couple of common meetings, a couple of dinners, and two common work days. In these ways, the residents proactively set up their community for long-term success.

Trudslund is considered a model cohousing development in Denmark. It achieved that status by employing the best organizer of cohousing, Jan Gudmand-Hoyer, and the best architects, Vandkunsten.



*Residents enjoying each others company over dinner in the common house.*



CHAPTER 6

## Sun and Wind + Overdrevet

### *Saving Energy Together*

#### Sun and Wind

**Beder, Denmark**

**30 Units (27 original units; three have since been subdivided into two units)**

**Architects: Arkitektgruppen Regnbuen**

**Completed: 1980**

**Tenure: Private ownership**

**Common House: 5,920 sq. ft. (550 m<sup>2</sup>)**

One hundred slightly anxious and genuinely curious people filled the high-school meeting room one cool March evening, casually assessing each other as potential partners in the creation of a new kind of neighborhood. Three single mothers chaired the meeting. They sought a living environment that would serve the needs of women raising children alone, be convenient and emotionally gratifying for parents, and be safer for children. Their quest had begun a month earlier when they placed a notice in a daily newspaper.

The newspaper notice brought a deluge of phone calls. After discussing the possibilities with interested callers, the three women set a meeting date at the high school. The majority of those attending favored a residential development that would include private dwellings, a multiuse common house, and, above all, promote a sense of community through design.

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#### **Cohousing Community**

We are looking for people who are interested in beginning an owner-occupied cohousing community with a common house and common areas. We hope for residents of all ages, singles and families. Through common activities we would like to create a closer community that crosses age and education boundaries.

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Although single adults, married couples, and families with children represented

*Solar panels and sloped roofs are amongst the sustainable features of Sun and Wind.*



different socioeconomic points of view, an effort was made to identify common needs and desires. A tentative proposal evolved that included shared facilities, common outdoor areas and vegetable gardens, an emphasis on community, and the use of renewable energy. By the end of the evening, it was obvious that

there was enough overlapping interest to proceed with the new cohousing community.

### **The Community Today**

Sun and Wind (*Sol og Vind*) is best known for its use of renewable energy sources. Its solar panels and windmill fulfill a considerable percentage of the community's energy requirements. The houses themselves are proportionately tall to allow maximum use of solar energy and to conserve heat, but they also echo the colors and human scale of the old quarters of nearby Århus, Denmark's second-largest city and largest port.

We visited Sun and Wind on several occasions and we were particularly impressed by the community's many weekend projects. One afternoon residents were clearing the north side of the site to create a soccer field. Six or seven adults led the activities, while

children joined in to unearth and wheelbarrow out the rocks. One resident commented:

I sometimes envy my friends who are lounging around on the weekends sipping coffee and perusing the Sunday paper. Of course we still do that too, but there's always some project to lure me from my easy chair. Some projects are fun, others are hard work, but they all seem to foster community and help people generate their own creative energy like nothing I've ever seen before. The important thing is not to get burned out. We learned to make sure that everyone does a minimum share so that no one feels taken advantage of.

## The Planning Process

From the initial newspaper notice to the completion of construction, the proposed community underwent a lively process of definition and design. Because of the group's labor and the great design, Sun and Wind is a very lively place today. But one cannot really describe it without first discussing the planning process — for it was this process that formed the heart and soul of Sun and Wind.

## Defining Group Goals

It went something like this: define goals; clarify intentions (activities and places); bring new people up to speed on decisions already made. The participants remember the preliminary work as an optimistic and productive time. They started a newsletter, *The Wind Bag*, and formed seven work groups (site, fiscal, energy, ecology, common house, children's interests, and later, architecture).

That summer, the group held a weekend retreat to decide, among other issues, where to locate the community. The participants were divided on this question. Half preferred the more rural area north of Århus; the other half preferred the suburban area south of the city. Ultimately, because of this disagreement and others, the larger group split into two groups. The northern group went on to create the cohousing community of Overdrevet; the southern group created Sun and Wind.

The fiscal group looked into financing and legal arrangements. The Sun and Wind site committee met with county authorities to discuss purchasing county-owned land. The county proposed several sites, which the committee then comprehensively researched by visiting each site and discussing its price and location.

## Sun and Wind's Development Goals

1. Approximately 25 households (with and without children) will participate in the planning process for the community and their own individual houses.
2. Reasonable house payments to accommodate a diversity of incomes.
3. Two-story houses (to use as little land as possible) situated along pedestrian lanes and squares. Cars parked at the periphery.
4. Minimum energy consumption through planning and design.
5. Use of renewable energy.
6. Relatively small dwellings that can be easily modified and added to as needed.
7. Generous shared facilities and open space to accommodate common activities and encourage social interaction.



*Site Plan:*

1. common house
2. bicycle and tool storage
3. vegetable garden
4. soccer field
5. playground

### The Programming Process

The process of translating development goals (community, renewable energy, privacy) into objectives (common facilities, solar panels, individual houses) is known in architectural jargon as “the programming process” and detailed elsewhere in this book.

In the fall of that year, an attorney was retained to help with real-estate negotiations, agreements among residents, and other legal questions. Each member paid 5,000 DKK (\$1,000) to cover consulting expenses. The group continued to invest along the way in order to retain architects, lawyers, and engineers.

Residents interviewed architects experienced with cohousing and participatory design. In the end they selected the firm, Arkitektgruppen Regnbuen. They proved extremely adept at working with the residents throughout the design process and while mistakes were made, none compromised the basic intentions of the group. The group established a committee to seek grants to help fund the extensive renewable energy systems they hoped to build.

That spring, the architects and members of Sun and Wind arranged to hold design classes as part of the county school district’s adult education program. And indeed, these proved to be a learning experience. Meeting over several months, the participants programmed and schematically designed the site plan, the common house, and private houses.

A final agreement, endorsed by everyone involved, was created in order to prevent people from raising old design issues or claiming

later on that they had not liked the design in the first place. Work could now continue in smaller groups, with all refinements based on the site plan.

## Filling Out the Group

Commitments needed to be made to secure a guarantee for a construction loan. A recruiting campaign attracted a broad variety of people, and as the project began to appear more realistic, many of those who had been



Sketch  
of the  
courtyard.

## Initial Organizing Agreement

**Purpose of the Group.** To form the *Sun and Wind Cohousing Organizing Group*, which is a partnership for the purpose of developing a cohousing community. The group's functions include, but are not necessarily limited to, exploring the scope of the proposed project as to be determined in future meetings; recruiting and orienting new members to the group; preparing a development program; seeking and examining potential sites.

**Membership.** Interested persons become active members of the group by attending three meetings, paying membership fees, signing the organizing agreement, and joining a working committee.

**To Leave the Group.** Stop attending meetings and paying membership fees. [Other groups found it useful to ask for written notice from people leaving the group.]

**Meetings.** Minutes of discussions and decisions made will be distributed to attending and absent members before the next scheduled meeting.

**Decision Making.** To protect minority rights, a consensus-seeking process will be used. A formalized decision-making process (usually a majority, three-fourth or two-thirds vote) will be used only to avoid an impasse. All decisions are to be discussed thoroughly

before a decision is made. Decisions can be queried by members who were absent in the next meeting only, but only if they have discussed the topic with several people who were there.

**Financial Obligations.** The finances of the group shall be the respective obligation of all individual members. Members agree to pay a nominal "organizing fee" each month for incidental costs that include paper, postage, photocopying, and meeting room rental. If the group dissolves, any surplus dues will be returned to the members in proportion to the length of their participation.

**The Next Step.** When property is bought or other activities are undertaken that demand greater economic responsibility to the group or to a third party, the organizing group will incorporate itself accordingly.

**Once Incorporated,** members reserve a house in the community by investing in the corporation (or partnership). Persons not able or ready to invest in the corporation may follow the project as members of the "organizing group" with the potential of buying in later if units are still available.

hesitant earlier on took a renewed interest — especially when they reviewed the incredible designs that the group and the architects had created together.

Given the amount of work their predecessors had accomplished, newcomers felt somewhat at a loss. To ease orientation and assimilation, each new family teamed up with an original family. One of the residents who joined at that point remembered the pluses and minuses of coming in late. A personal “plus” was that he did not have to sit through the planning meetings, but he did miss participating in the early decisions. “I would have done things a little differently,” he felt, “but that’s the trade-off.”

For the larger group, the now biweekly newsletter became a critical avenue of communication and cohesion. The work groups, the architects, and other consultants were

asked to report in each issue on their progress, for better or for worse.

In May 1979, encouraging news arrived from the European Union (EU) and the Danish government. Sun and Wind would receive a grant of 500,000 DKK (\$100,000) for their prototype energy system. The only stipulations were that the community install a monitoring system to record energy savings to determine the system’s applicability to other housing projects, and that they be open to visitors interested in renewable energy. Unfortunately, the cost of the monitoring equipment was nearly half of the total grant. Still, this was a big lift for the group, and facilitated both recruitment of members and obtaining the construction loan. In the end, the group decided to include solar panels for space heating and domestic hot water, a windmill to generate electricity, and a solid-waste incinerator for supplemental backup heat.

### Publicity Matters

The Sun and Wind group used every means imaginable to publicize their project to increase membership and create community goodwill. But in truth, they mostly relied on free grassroots organizing techniques. They made sure to get a mention in every free local community calendar listing. They created one-page fliers and posted them in preschools, churches, grocery stores, and elsewhere. They wrote radio PSAs (public service announcements) that radio stations broadcast for free. They wrote articles for their newsletters, local papers, and so on. Most importantly, they committed themselves to the long view and never gave up.

The free grassroots organizing techniques that Sun and Wind used are relevant for any cohousing group today. They work. Had the group had access to today’s internet, one can only imagine what sort of publicity campaign they would have waged.

### The Houses

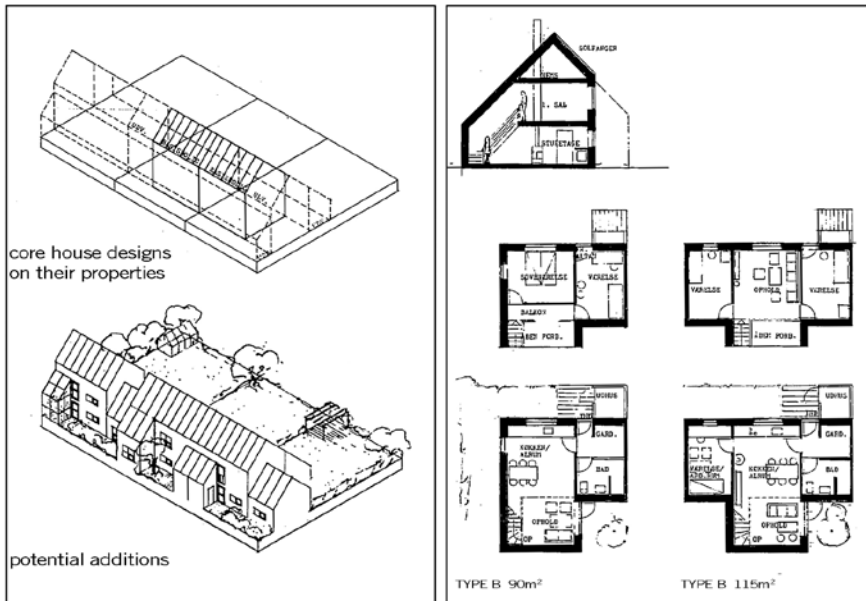
The architects worked with the residents on the design of the dwellings. Although they had initially contemplated using the same design on all houses to reduce construction costs, the group decided that this would compromise their ability to accommodate different family sizes and incomes. Custom-designing a house for each family would be too expensive, so instead they sought to create a basic core plan that would meet various household requirements.

Most people preferred a small house, capable of later expansion, with one and one-half (one level plus mezzanine) or two levels, an open floor plan (combined kitchen and dining room), and natural materials like wood and





The private dwellings are simple, but well designed. Here we look into the kitchen from the living area of a one-bedroom house shared by a mother and her young son.



Five basic floor plans were developed from a “core house” (one is shown here), which could be expanded at the time of construction or later as the household desired. Designing for the future changes allows the units to be adapted as a household’s needs change, a requirement for long-term stability of the community. In recent years there have been so many additions to the houses at Sun and Wind that a resident carpenter works nearly full time on commissions from his neighbors.

brick. Five basic house floor plans evolved. Residents then divided into five “house plan groups” who worked with the architect as a unit to develop each of the models further.

## The Budget

Owing to ambitious design revisions and rising interest rates, the costs came in too high. But rather than reduce construction standards to cut back costs, the residents began to favor doing part of the construction work themselves — primarily interior finishing such as cabinets, flooring, and painting. They also decided to build 27 rather than 25 houses, as two families were already waiting to buy in.

The next step was to compare the incomes of the individual families with the financial consequences of what they were designing. The financial committee wanted to estimate as closely as possible the impact

on monthly house payments of design additions like greenhouses. Aggressive mortgage counseling was necessary to help everyone squeeze in.

By this time the design for the common house was also more clearly defined, with a large well-equipped kitchen and attached scullery, a dining room to seat all the residents, workshops, study rooms, playrooms, laundry, auxiliary rooms, and storage rooms for the solar equipment.

To avoid conflicts, the group decided that households would choose their parcels in the order in which they signed the partnership contract. The house designs were made final in meetings between the individual house-type groups and the architects, based on which core house they had chosen and which additions they planned to incorporate.

The city planning department could not imagine that the residents would not want to drive to their own front doors. But when the authorities questioned the car-free access roads, the residents rebutted, “We can drive our cars to the front door if it’s essential, but it’s more important to have a safe environment for the kids and a place for us as a community to live in outside rooms.” Eventually their convincing arguments and a barrage of letters to planning authorities and local council members won Sun and Wind their building permit.

That same month the resident group of Sun and Wind employed a building management firm to oversee the construction — not only to help avoid costly mistakes, but also to make sure that the architect and the proposed contractor were fulfilling their responsibilities. According to the architect, the project went smoothly until the management firm



*Common dining space that accommodates all residents.*

was introduced: “We were uncomfortable with them [the management firm] looking over our shoulders. Small problems arose that would have worked themselves out naturally, but were reported back to the group as bigger issues.”

## Construction

To save money, the group borrowed an old blueprint machine and reproduced the construction drawings for the bidding themselves. Over three weeks, working in shifts, they produced fifty thousand blueprints — an immensely satisfying accomplishment that saved them almost three thousand dollars.

The group asked contractors to submit construction bids. When the bids came back, the lowest bid was substantially above the

budget the group had agreed not to exceed. The project was feasible only if more cut-backs were made. Again, the group turned to their consultants for guidance. The architects and building management firm began intense negotiations with the lowest bidder. Construction materials, techniques, and quality were thoroughly reconsidered, and the resident-build portions were discussed. One conclusion became clear — even more standardization was required, both for the contractor and the owner-builders who would finish the houses.

The group did not find any large budget items to cut, but rather small bits here and there. After a week’s work they were able to wrestle the project back within budget. Now the entire group needed to decide which cut-backs were acceptable. Could they do all the

## Sun and Wind’s Energy System

**Solar:** The active solar system consists of 7,000 square feet (600 m<sup>2</sup>) of liquid-filled solar panels. As many panels as possible were placed on the common house, with the rest on 15 of the houses. Two heat accumulation tanks totaling 2,600 cubic feet (76 m<sup>3</sup>) capacity are located under the common house. The 45-degree roofs are the optimum angle for solar collection at this latitude (56 degrees North) and climate (cloudy winters). The heated liquid is transferred via underground pipes to the tanks under the common house. The accumulated heat is returned to the homes in the form of hot tap water and radiant space heating, again through underground pipes. The solar panels satisfy 30 percent of the community’s total energy requirements.

**Windmill:** The 55-kW windmill satisfies 10 percent of the total energy requirements and is located one and a half miles (2 km) away atop a windy hill, mounted on

a 72-foot (22-meter) tower. For a variety of reasons, it is more economical for the community to sell the electrical energy to the power company and buy it back rather than consume it directly from the windmill.

**Incinerator:** A solid-waste (mostly wood) incinerator was designed to provide supplemental heat when the outside temperature drops to 23° F (–5° C). Located in the basement of the common house, the incinerator transfers heat directly into the accumulation tank via a heat exchanger to warm domestic hot water. It was not used after the first year because it took too much work to operate.

**Central Gas Furnace:** A gas furnace replaced the incinerator as backup to heat water for radiant space heating and domestic hot water.

**Electricity:** The local power company provides electricity for Sun and Wind’s remaining energy needs.

landscaping themselves? Could they accept their second choice for floor materials, agree to similar kitchens, and standardize the owner-build finish work? Today we know to embed all of this standardization, in order to be efficient and cost effective.

After three years of organizing, planning, and designing, construction finally began with the digging of the trenches for the foundations and underground plumbing on March 21, 1980. The residents' role now shifted from active to passive as the bricklayers and carpenters took over. The architects were responsible for daily contact with the contractor and the resident building committee communicated concerns and criticisms in meetings with the architects and the construction management firm. Information was relayed to owners through resident meetings and the newsletter.

## Resident Construction

As planned, once the contractors finished their portion, the residents could begin to lay

wood floors, finish ceilings, install kitchen cabinets and appliances, and paint.

To avoid having inexperienced people working alone, three to five homeowners worked together. Each team finished one house at a time and then moved to the next house in their group. Some people became adept at installing floors or painting. Although it wasn't easy, this phase fostered camaraderie and self-confidence as the residents perfected new skills.

The common house was scheduled to be completed first, so that it could augment the unfinished private houses while people were working on their individual houses. This scheme also meant that residents could get into the new habit of using the common house to supplement their private homes for important uses like dinner.

## The Dream Is Realized

After move-in the residents were proud of their efforts, but they had no time to sit back and enjoy. The muddy, stark landscape had to be transformed into the park-like gardens they had envisioned. In addition, the job of feeding the solid-waste incinerator for supplemental heat was a greater task than they had imagined, and it was abandoned in favor of a gas-furnace hot water heating system.

Sun and Wind is a rich and vibrant community today because the residents' process left few stones unturned, and they overcame whatever obstacles arose. A more experienced cohousing architectural firm might have reduced the project's schedule by a year and a half, and all agree that it would have been less costly and smoother. However, in this case the entire town profited from the experience. The primary architect, Kai Mikkelsen,



*Although no community dinner was planned this Sunday evening (because so many people were away on vacation), residents brought their family barbecues into the courtyard for a spontaneous gathering anyway.*

said that “as a firm, we learned much from the experience; now we know how to design schools *with* the teachers, and churches *with* the congregation.”

### Conversation at Sun and Wind

Thomas, 38 years old, married with a five-year-old son, says:

The biggest disadvantage to living at Sun and Wind is the outside attention. We get busloads of visitors, every week in the first years — Germans, Japanese, Americans, journalists — uninvited and

unannounced. On some weekends there were more people wielding cameras than there were residents. What they don’t understand is that cohousing is not such a radical idea; it’s a little better way to live, but it does require a little extra effort to make it happen.

Tom says that the best thing about living at Sun and Wind is the sense of community. He was formerly a ship’s engineer. When he returned to his hometown from tours at sea, he found that his friends and acquaintances were moving away one by one. “Finally, when

### Unintended Benefits

This case study has focused on the planning process — one of the longest for any cohousing community. The group’s pioneering efforts showed how *not to do it* from a process point of view, and inspired a handful of other architects to really organize and streamline a process that would make the work of subsequent groups much easier, much less risky, less costly, and in less time. Not only did later neighboring cohousing communities take less than half the time to organize and build, but the residents of an adjacent development of 21 privately owned condominium units were so inspired that they decided to build their own common house. The Sun and Wind project made an impact on cohousing development, but even more importantly it had a profound influence on the lives of the twenty-seven households over the last thirty years.

If you spend lengthy quality time with the residents they will tell you how the development has made it so much easier for children from single-child households to feel like they can have deep and meaningful relationships with other kids who are in and out of each

other’s households, relationships just as rich as with siblings. Kids, on average, got much better grades because there was always someone to mentor them about Shakespeare or the difference between sine and cosine. A young mother could find someone to help with earache medicine advice, preschool tips, babysitting, or a plethora of other parenting issues. A bicycle, camping equipment, a waffle iron, an electric skillet or occasionally an automobile could be borrowed if needed. Someone would be there to provide job advice, elderly accommodation guidance, doctor’s advice, or simply to engage with in a long (bordering on spiritual) conversation. Help would be there to tackle the endless, real-life topics that can only really be addressed by someone you have known for a long time and who knows you — someone who is in the right place at the right time. Not to mention the benefits of a helping hand to seniors, a caring moment, a cup of tea, a ride, or a dinner together. These hundreds of thousands of events made it all worthwhile.

I decided to settle down, I realized that I didn't have a place to return to that felt like home," he said. Sun and Wind provided a ready-made neighborhood.

Tom says that living at Sun and Wind provides "a renewed freedom. When you have children you lose some of your freedom. To move into cohousing is to regain it." He says that if he and his wife suddenly decide to go out one evening, they simply ask a neighbor to care for their son. "If they can't," he explains, "then we ask the neighbor on the other side — it's quite simple. And of course we watch others' kids, too."

Tom says that Sun and Wind was entirely too much work, especially the final stages of finishing the interiors and the landscaping: "We should have planned more fun activities along the way."

Eva, a social worker, moved into Sun and Wind with her husband and seven-year-old son several years after it was built. They had previously lived in a shared house with six others. She commented:

There were disadvantages with our previous shared house, especially the high turnover — it was inherently unstable. It might be OK for an adult, but it's difficult for children — our son would just start to get close to someone when they would move. It was almost like divorce for him. And when there was a tension between a couple, the entire house felt it. Furthermore, most single-family houses aren't designed for adults to live together equally. That's why this is such a good idea. I can ignore the others if I want.

They lived in an apartment for several years but it was too isolating, especially for their son, who lacked playmates nearby:

Here we're not isolated, nor do we have to deal so much with the personal problems of others. The first year was a bit difficult getting to know everyone, but not for Soren; kids just fit right in. Nor do I have to worry about him when he's playing outside — he has more freedom here than he would anywhere else. But, as you might expect, it takes time to get to know fifty other adults.

## **Overdrevet**

**Hinnerup, Denmark**

**25 Units**

**Completed: 1980**

**Architects: Arkitektgruppe "E"**

**Tenure: Private condominiums**

**Common House: 6,840 sq. ft. (632 m<sup>2</sup>)**

Emerging from the same initial organizing group as Sun and Wind, the community of Overdrevet was founded by participants who favored a more rural site. Located approximately eleven miles north of Århus, the 25-unit community was able to retain a rural atmosphere by clustering the buildings toward the upper edge of the 6.7-acre site and leaving the rest as open space. The community maintains a large organic garden that covers one-sixth of the site and raises chickens, sheep, and rabbits. Residents have also restored an old farm building to house crafts, woodworking workshops, and a youth hangout.

Like its sibling Sun and Wind, Overdrevet utilizes renewable energy sources and energy-conserving design to minimize energy

## When Cohousing Is Not Cohousing ... And When It Is

One of the beauties of the cohousing concept is its flexibility. Cohousing is expressed in a dazzling array of variations — no two sites or resident groups are exactly the same. However, a few truths define the boundary where cohousing stops and other housing types begin.

Overdrevet, while it is indeed a cohousing community, rests on this boundary. If this community had any more intentionality (ideology), it would be better called an “intentional community,” not cohousing. As mentioned in Chapter 1, cohousing is based on democratic principles and normally doesn't espouse any ideology other than the desire for a more practical and social home environment and, perhaps, the wish to live out the values of living lighter on the planet — something that usually grows during the planning phase. On the flip side, suburban-style housing

huddled around a cul-de-sac can indeed engender a voluntary sense of community that imitates cohousing. However, it is not cohousing either.

Let's get our terms right. Suburbs are suburbs. More ideology-centric communities are intentional communities.

People who choose cohousing do not seek the isolation of ideological purity, no matter how liberal or conservative its orientation. Rather, they seek a sense of place fostered by regular dinners together; common space with cars parked at the periphery; consumer goods (lawn mowers, washers and dryers, and the like) and property shared in common or owned individually as each makes sense, in an effort to create a high-functioning neighborhood where people know and care about each other.

requirements. A wind generator and solar panels provide electricity and hot water. The houses are designed to minimize exterior wall area and temperature fluctuation. Grouped in twos, threes, and fours, they employ brick thermal walls, triple-glazed windows, concrete-slab floors, and super insulation to keep heat loss 30 percent below the maximum permitted under Denmark's stringent building regulations. These measures enable Overdrevet's households to pay less than half of what their neighbors (with comparably sized houses) pay for their energy bills.<sup>1</sup>

To the best of our knowledge, Overdrevet is the only Danish cohousing community with a somewhat ideological orientation, as reflected in the political cohesiveness of the group and its concern with external causes, such as national elections and international conflicts. While this ideological commitment

nurtures a strong community sentiment in most of Overdrevet's residents, for some it becomes too much. A former resident commented, “You have to be strong to live in Overdrevet; there are big discussions about the ‘right’ way to raise children and the ‘right’ way to live.”

In no other cohousing community we have ever visited (over 300 communities now) did residents have such strong feelings. For those who like Overdrevet, “it is the best place in the world.” But of the 46 cohousing communities in Denmark that we researched exhaustively, it is one of the only ones to have difficulty selling houses. The rest of the privately owned cohousing houses in Denmark had considerable appreciation and no units for sale; these were always snapped up immediately. Four were for sale in Overdrevet when we were there last.

Overdrevet has limited its pool of potential residents. They have made this choice consciously, and are determined to work out their difficulties without compromising their ideological stance. While Overdrevet's

commitment to its founding ideals is commendable, its experience demonstrates the difference between asking residents to share facilities and asking them to share a world perspective.





## Jerngarden

### *Improving on City Life*

**Århus, Denmark**

**8 Units**

**Architects: Finn Nørholm and  
Ole Pedersen**

**Completed: 1977–78**

**Tenure: Private condominiums**

**Common House: 2,010 sq. ft. (187 m<sup>2</sup>)**



*With a lot of imagination and two years of sweat-equity, the residents of Jerngarden transformed an inner city junkyard and eight deteriorated row houses into an urban paradise. By combining their backyards, they created a small park in the middle of the city block.*

Many older neighborhoods in the city of Åarhus once suffered from the woes of urban decay. Row houses and apartment blocks built in the nineteenth century desperately needed repair. Traffic clogged city streets. Families that could afford it moved to new suburban developments on the outskirts of town, leaving behind the old, the young, and the poor. In the working-class quarter of Frederiksbjerg, residents decided something had to be done. They organized to demand commercial-traffic restrictions, new playgrounds, and loans for building renovations. Several members of the new neighborhood organization began to discuss getting a weekend cottage in the country together — “a place to escape the noise and congestion of the city.”

“But why should we be content to improve only our weekend life? It’s our daily life that should be improved!” one of them recalls thinking. And they found their opportunity. New ordinances restricting truck traffic and scrap pressing within the city limits had forced the closing of an old junkyard (*jerngarden*) in the middle of the neighborhood. The junkyard’s owner, who also owned eight small tenement houses surrounding the junkyard, was ready to sell.

## Transforming the Junkyard

Although the group was able to purchase the site for a very good price, a vivid imagination and a lot of faith were necessary to envision what it could become. The lot was filled with the debris of forty years as a junkyard and the adjacent apartments, rented to seniors, students, and retired sailors, had not been repaired for almost as long. Not wanting to put the present tenants out on the street, the group first directed its efforts to finding them other housing in the neighborhood. Then began two years of rebuilding.

The group, primarily young families, had no common goals other than to create a nicer place to live and a cohousing community. The older neighbors were initially skeptical about this group of young people and their “collective” ideas. But the building process attracted their interest, and many of the locals would stop to see how the construction was coming along as part of their daily routine. A resident recalls that work on the street side took twice as long as work in the back because of all the visitors. Eventually, their impressive construction efforts earned Jerngarden the respect of even the most suspicious neighbors, some of whom still drop by.

## Jerngarden Years Later

Walking into Jerngarden today is like entering an urban paradise: Charming houses with custom interiors share a park-like backyard, right in the middle of the city. Of course, what one sees today results from a lot of hard work that hasn’t always gone smoothly. Focusing initially on the practical aspects of construction, the group took many years to develop its social cohesiveness. They describe their early meetings as “downright undisciplined and

*After rebuilding the exteriors of their houses, residents transformed their interiors with their own custom craftsmanship.*



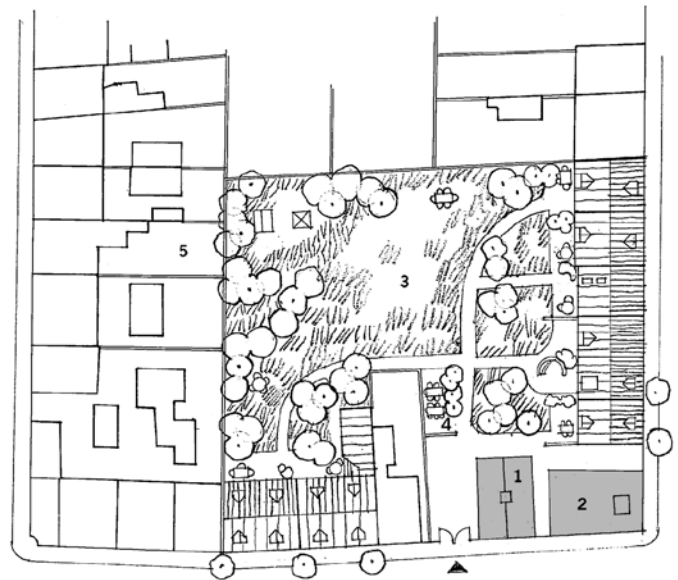
boisterous.” Because of the organic nature of their process, the Jerngarden group did not hire enough professionals with experience organizing cohousing efforts efficiently. More professional guidance would have helped the group solve big problems rapidly and build community along the way. Instead, they argued about the small things that they didn’t need to discuss at all, which not only wasted time but was quite deleterious toward making Jerngarden work as a community, at least in the short term. Although hard feelings stemming from disagreements caused at least one family to move out almost immediately, five of the original eight households remained thirty years after move-in.

The junkyard’s office building was converted into the community’s common house, with kitchen, dining room, laundry facilities, television room (only a couple of households have their own TVs), children’s playroom, photography darkroom (now a craft room), and workshop. Nightly common dinners were begun on a purely practical basis during the building process, and have continued ever since without any debate. Residents are currently discussing the addition of a couple of guest rooms to accommodate the grown kids who like to come back for extended stays.

Although all of the houses have front doors facing the street, residents usually enter through the backyards, passing the common house on their way so they can see who’s around. Jerngarden has little more yard space per house than its neighbors, but by combining the tiny individual yards into one big yard, the group created a much more usable space. Having a large yard where neighbors can sit in the sun and children can play greatly enhances city living.



*The community painted their houses traditional Danish colors to blend with the rest of the street.*



*Site plan: 1. common house 2. storage building 3. open space 4. outdoor eating area 5. typical yard of neighbors*

Jerngarden residents are active in the neighborhood-wide organization they helped to start. Since most of them lived in the area



*In contrast to the hard streetscape in front of the houses, in back residents have combined their yard space to create a small park in the middle of the city block.*

before, they had many friends nearby who often participate in the community's parties. A community center was built a few blocks away, and many buildings have since been renovated. Many people say Jerngarden was the impetus that inspired other improvements.

Although Jerngarden works fine, for dozens of reasons, the group has taught would-be residents and co-developers to never build that few houses again. A few of the lessons learned are:

- ♦ Rule number one: if it doesn't work socially, why bother? While it works fine now, the small number kept the group from getting organized in the design/development process, which remained too conversational and not deliberate enough. This approach frustrated all of those who favored a clear plan and fair group process skills.

- ♦ Second, amortizing the common house is difficult. Instead of 10% of the cost, it is 20% or 25% of the overall cost.
- ♦ When the group is not organized and the process is not deliberate, it simply takes longer. Ironically, it always seems to take the smaller projects longer.

But the most important lesson that Jerngarden taught the cohousing movement is the bigger kind of question/dilemma of inner city redevelopment, i.e. fixing up bad neighborhoods with existing infrastructure where no one wants to live. No one doubts that cohousing is the best redevelopment scenario. It brings in motivated citizens and capital from the residents, as well as a developer that has faith in *them* — much more than *that* part of town.

So many town neighborhoods languish from a lack of funds because of a lack of faith and a lack of security. In other words, it takes a cohousing group to make people feel secure, to grow faith, and so on. Jerngarden was the first cohousing project to go to the worst neighborhood and build a community, and many have successfully followed suit, in both Europe (Vejgaard Bymidte, Jernstørberieth) and North America (Emeryville, Berkeley, and Sacramento, California, to name just a few).

One woman told us: "Every day when I'm riding my bicycle home from work, I think how nice it is to come home to this place. I don't know what we would do if we ever had to leave." Frankly, we wouldn't mind coming home to this pleasant community ourselves.



## Jystrup Savværket

### *Glass, Color, and Community*

**Jystrup, Denmark**  
**21 Units**

**Architects: Vandkunsten**  
**Tenure: Cooperative**  
**Common House: 4,350 sq. ft. (404 m<sup>2</sup>)**  
**plus 8,560 sq. ft. (795m<sup>2</sup>) of covered street**

Like the country itself, cohousing in Denmark has two personalities — summer life and winter life. For most Danes, socializing decreases significantly during the long, cold winters. People huddle indoors, and the inconvenience of having to don boots and coat to go outside makes travel a chore. The architects of Jystrup Savværket (“the Jystrup Sawmill”) responded by designing a cohousing community where a glass-covered pedestrian street allows life to blossom in the winter.

But the street! Nobody can imagine how we could function without it — here there is life all year round. Here we sit, talk, and drink coffee ‘til one in

the morning, here the kids play when it rains and snows. The glass-covered street is simply one of the best parts of our house.

As one resident enthusiastically commented, the narrow, blue-walled, glass-covered street at Jystrup Savværket is a great success. This community has 21 residences arranged along two covered pedestrian streets that meet at the common house, making not only the common house but the whole street an extension of the private living spaces. The





*The covered street creates a rich, new living pattern resulting from the overlapping of private and community space. Residents have placed their extra furniture from larger previous houses in the street for all to enjoy.*

street is essentially the community's living room. Including it and the common house, more than 40 percent of Savvaerket's developed area is allocated to common use.

The location of the mailboxes, placed near the entrance from the upper parking lot, ensure that many residents filter through the common house on the way home from work. Residents leave coats and boots in the vestibule before entering.

Located at the junction of the two perpendicular residential wings, the common house is separated from the covered street by a glass wall. This means that one can see into the common space from either wing. From the covered street inside, one enters directly into the common house's kitchen/dining area. On the ground floor, a fireplace and sitting room overlook a south-facing terrace. A professionally equipped kitchen and a comfortable dining area complete the ground floor. Four upstairs rooms accommodate a variety of uses: one is used for a childcare program, another is a youth hangout, and another has a billiard table. In the tower is a library.

Other common facilities — a workshop, a laundry room, and guest rooms (referred to as “supplementary” rooms) — are located along each of the two covered streets. One workshop is used for wood and metalworking, the other for textiles. Despite the residents' initial skepticism, one washing machine for each wing has proven quite sufficient. A previously existing building is used for an auto repair shop and storage.

The supplementary rooms are one of Savværket's innovative features. Each one is just over two hundred square feet with its own bathroom. These “S-rooms” are used as guest rooms, office space, or teenagers' bedrooms. For instance, one family found that living with three children in their small dwelling was too cramped. By renting the S-room next door for a few years, they gave their teenage daughter more privacy, and everyone retained their sanity. A mother of two used another S-room to study for her architectural exams. “This way dad can respond to every little emergency at home for two weeks. I can pass the exams and we can live happily ever after — after that.” The covered street makes access between the S-rooms, the dwellings, and the common house as easy as walking down the hall, and the flexibility of these rooms allows maximum use of the extra space every household occasionally needs. In fact, the group has found that “even four guest rooms are not enough for our 21 houses.”

The community's young children participate in the childcare and after-school program. The parents hire teachers (none of whom lives there) to run the program but supervise it closely themselves. Not only is full-time community childcare convenient,

but it makes use of the common facilities during the otherwise quiet daytime hours, when most adults are away at work.

Common dinners available nightly (yes, that's seven nights a week) were one of the priorities of Savværket's initiators. Steffen, an enthusiastic resident, comments:

Our dinner system has functioned perfectly from the beginning. We get a good and varied diet. Everyone's ideas and gastronomic abilities can be tried — with varying success, of course. But it functions well and we eat inexpensively.

Five or six adults are responsible for planning and preparing dinners for a week at a time. With seven rotating groups, each resident helps prepare dinner for only one week out of five or six. Within the group, people trade responsibilities to fit their interests and schedules; someone who gets home early might do the cooking, while another who gets home late cleans up.

Our own experience at Savværket further confirmed the success of common dinners. Because of the summer holidays, the evening we arrived in August was one of the few nights no common dinner was planned, yet everyone spontaneously decided to bring their dinners out to eat together in the covered street. After dinner, we enjoyed our glasses of wine and conversation late into the summer night.

### The Private Dwellings

Early in the planning process the initiators decided, for affordability purposes, to maximize the common areas and minimize private residences. As a result, the one-, two-, and

three-bedroom dwellings range in size from 680 to 1,045 square feet (63 to 97 m<sup>2</sup>); their average size is 10 percent less than the maximum allowed under cooperative financing laws at the time of Savværket's construction, with the extra space going to the common areas.<sup>1</sup> Two-story units line the outer sides of the street, with one-story units on the inner sides. Private decks extending over the covered street and ground-level patios provide every house with a sunny, private outdoor area.

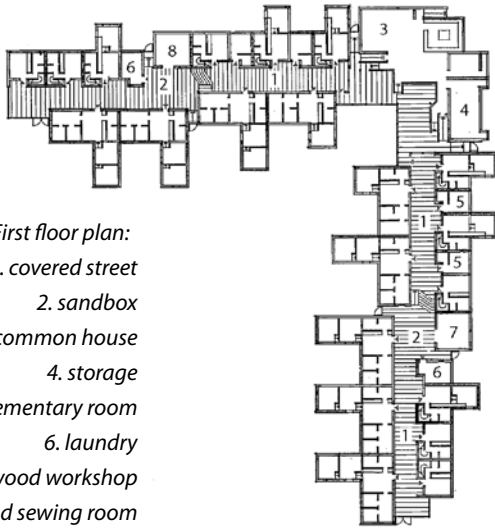
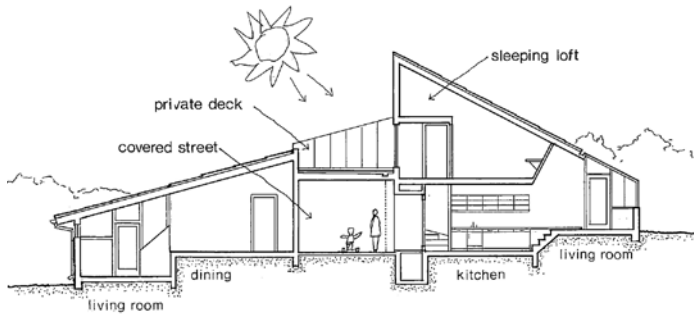
The architects did an exceptional job of utilizing every square foot of space, as well as designing spatially interesting living areas. High ceilings allow for extensive use of sleeping and storage lofts, which add as much as 15 to 20 percent to the usable floor area of the house. Although small, these high-quality dwellings offer a variety of enjoyable spaces, both indoors and out.

### The Development Process

The group found an ideal site in the small town of Jystrup, 30 miles from central Copenhagen. County officials encouraged

*Small kitchens equipped with two-burner stoves are sufficient because residents eat many of their dinners in the common house.*





*First floor plan:*

1. covered street
2. sandbox
3. common house
4. storage
5. supplementary room
6. laundry
7. wood workshop
8. craft and sewing room

them but the town's residents, keeping true to a no-growth sentiment, were suspicious of the project. But when the townspeople realized that 21 new households would bring enough children to keep the school open, their protests quieted. When the government decided not to sell the building site originally chosen, it took another year to secure and redesign for a second site.

The unconventional design of Savværket made it difficult to get the necessary approvals. The covered street had to be explained and justified to the building department and financing institutions. Fortunately the

group's architects and lawyers were familiar with the cohousing development process, having worked together on many other cohousing projects. This experience helped to push the design through the bureaucratic hurdles. In the end the town and the region considers this to be a showcase project.

Architect Jens Arnfred, of Vandkunsten Architects, who had designed half-a-dozen communities previously, led the group through a dynamic design process. Arnfred, always a strong advocate of resident participation, did not play a passive role. He remembers:

I told them [the Savværket group] that they had to take the consequences of what they were doing, that they were pioneers, and that if they really believed in their ideals, they had to live up to them architecturally.

From the other side, a resident recalls:

Jens [Arnfred] pushed us very hard. Many of us had doubts and resented him pushing ... but he earned our respect and we learned to trust him. He could not have taken such a strong approach if we didn't trust his judgment.

It was not until late in the design process that anyone knew which house they were going to live in. This eased the process because decisions were based on the common good rather than on individual desires.

### **Jystrup Savværket Today**

Was it worth it? Absolutely, the residents agree. The advantages of their design far outweigh the disadvantages. During our visits



we persistently looked for evidence that the residents might be uncomfortable with the interior street and the resulting proximity of private and common areas. But no one seemed to doubt the success of the design. “We respect each others’ needs for privacy and time alone. There are unspoken signs to show that you want to be alone, like closing the curtains, and those signs are respected by the others,” one resident explained. Of course the impulse to socialize can itself create a problem: “It is difficult when I have to get some work done. If I know people are out in the street talking and drinking coffee, naturally I’d like to join them,” commented one resident.

### Conversations at Savværket

Annie and Steffen Lenschau-Teglers first discussed living in a community decades ago: “How could we help each other more? We turned the thought over many times with friends, but it never became realizable. We bought a little house and then a larger one, had two children, and finally resigned ourselves to only dreaming of living in a cohousing community.”

Then one day a friend called to say his family has joined the Jystrup Savværket group in planning a new cohousing community. Would they like to sign up? It was a dream come true. As one of the core families, they participated in more than three years of weekly meetings and spent many long nights working out the details of the project.

Asked if they have any regrets about moving from a large single-family house to a 1,045-square-foot residence, Annie says, “No, we’re really glad we did it and this community is a wonderful place to live.”



*Residents come and go, enjoying the interior street, just “outside” of their front doors.*



*Annie, a librarian, and Steffen, a journalist, currently working for a public-relations firm, with their two children, Mikkel (14) and Signe (11), were one of the first eight families to join the Savværket group.*

### Lessons Taught

Jystrup taught cohousing many lessons early on, but the most important one is to be who you are as a group. The Jystrup group was comfortable taking architectural, even artistic risks with their blue and black colors. They took chances with their new fangled covered street. Too often Americans will say to us “there’s no way I’m going to live in

a building like that, there's no way I would live under a glass-covered street, and no one I know likes them either." But that's not the point, we reply. Get in there and codesign and codevelop the project for *you*. The point is to find the overlap in who you and who your group is — not who someone else is. Be who you and your subculture are — don't worry about what someone else did.

The second important lesson is to push what *you* want through the bureaucrats. Be persistent, they are there to help (while that

may not always be obvious), but when their suggestions don't help, politely press forward. Bureaucrats are sometimes frustrated by cohousing, because you have done the work. Also, they don't need to protect the group from a developer — you are the developer, and bureaucrats don't like to try new things. But since what you're doing is working from a sustainability point of view, from a neighborhood point of view, and from a cost point of view, they usually end up supporting the project.





CHAPTER 9

## Tornevangsgarden

### *Small Can Be Beautiful*

**Birkerød, Denmark**

**6 Units**

**Architects: Arkitektgruppen**

**Tenure: Private ownership**

**Common House: 2,045 sq. ft. (190 m<sup>2</sup>)**

Tornevangsgarden, “the Thorny Field Farm,” is the smallest cohousing community discussed in this book. As mentioned in the case study on Jerngarden, no cohousing communities have been done at this scale since these two early projects, mostly for social reasons and costs. Small projects don’t work nearly as well socially as projects of 20 to 30 units, and they cost too much per house at this scale. That said, we include this community not only to point out some of the characteristics of small-scale cohousing — six units is considered to be as small as cohousing gets — but also because it was one of the inspirations for this book. Here is how Chuck (Charles) remembers it:

While attending university in Copenhagen, I [Chuck] walked past a group of houses on my way to the commuter train station each day. Each day, I wondered what made them different, and why I enjoyed them so. The houses were grouped into three pairs and faced a common courtyard. Almost every day I saw people talking to each other, whether in the courtyard, the parking lot, or a picnic table in front of one of the houses. Kids were running in and out of different houses. They were picking apples together or chatting in the garden. People came and went from a fourth, larger building where no one lived but which everyone used. They might be carrying laundry, wheeling a bicycle, or simply empty-handed. I could see youngsters running about. Some nights the lights were on inside the larger building, and it appeared

that all of the residents were having dinner together.

I marveled at the contrast between this group of houses and everywhere else I passed on my daily walk. When I walked by single-family houses, I noticed that there was no life between the homes. Then I walked past an apartment complex. No life there. Then past condos, no life. Right past an assisted care facility. Again, no life. Then another block of single-family houses. Nothing but cars and trees — virtually no people.

Finally, curiosity prevailed and I walked into this vibrant little cluster of houses and approached one of the homes. Through the window I could see a middle-aged woman working in the kitchen. I knocked on the door and, in my best Danish, asked if she would tell me something about this place. Amused by my attempt to speak Danish, she graciously took an hour to tour the grounds and the common facilities with me. She explained, in perfect English, that the people who built this little group of houses wanted to live in a high-functioning neighborhood. They felt that a neighborhood was too important to leave to chance. In her own house, she explained that the “busy” side of the residence (the kitchen side) was toward the courtyard in front, and the private side (the living room) was toward the rear.

It occurred to me that this group was conservative, or at least traditional, in the

emphasis they placed on neighborhood. I was impressed by how they chose to raise their children in a safe place — in this urban setting where their cars were parked at a distance. The term “ultra-responsible” came to mind.

Like many other cohousing developers, the residents were motivated to develop Tornevangsgarden because conventional living arrangements were impersonal and did not provide a refuge from the bustle of contemporary life. The woman told me:

It got to the point that we had to make appointments to see our friends: “Let’s get together some time next month.” Even that became increasingly infrequent; we were drifting away from the very people that we appreciated and enjoyed being with most. Friendship, a more spontaneous environment, and the notion of shared child-rearing motivated us most.

Tornevangsgarden (or “Torn” if it’s easier) was my introduction to cohousing, and we returned to get the whole story.

## An Ambitious Beginning

Originally, the four organizing families had attempted to find a site large enough for twenty to thirty houses. Each site they looked at had a flaw — it was too far from town, or it needed to be rezoned, or had some other problem. “The risk was already high,” said one resident. “Normally a builder attracts buyers who can afford what is already built. We, on the other hand, had to build what we could afford, based on fixed incomes and prices that were rising monthly during those high inflationary times [about 12 percent

annually].” The four families finally bought the site after a one-and-a-half year search. “We didn’t choose to have only six houses,” said one resident. “We simply became impatient with looking for a larger site and settled, quite literally, on what we could find.”

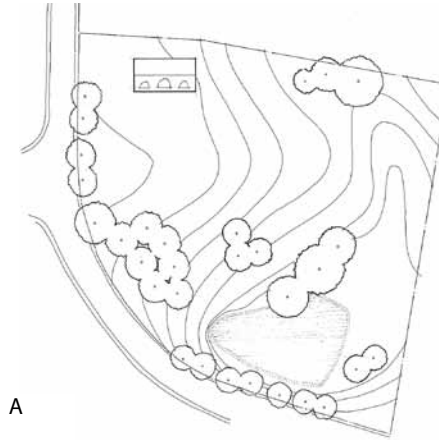
Located only five blocks from the center of the small town of Birkerød, Tornevangsgarden was once the site of a farm. The lush grounds had a bucolic nineteenth-century charm, including a half-timbered, thatched-roof farmhouse (now the common house), old fruit and shade trees, vegetable gardens, a pond, a common terrace, and more. It is just a ten-minute walk to the commuter train station.

## The Design

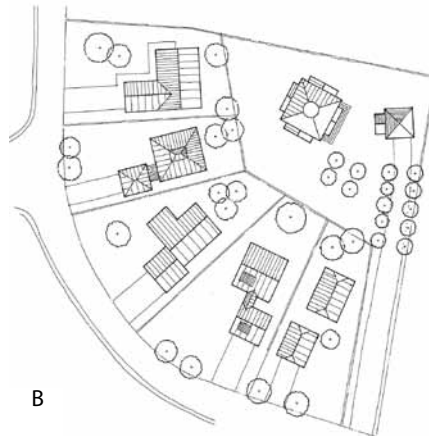
The initiating group selected Arkitektgruppen, a firm with plenty of previous experience designing cohousing communities, to do the design. Being childcare-friendly was a major consideration in the site layout. The houses are oriented around a small court, which allows parents to keep an eye on small children playing there. When Torn’s small children became teenagers, a second picnic table and flower boxes replaced the sandbox, and real teacups have replaced the toy ones once filled with sand.

Each of the six houses has its kitchen/dining room facing the court. The more private living areas and bedrooms look out on private rear yards and gardens, beyond which lie the pond and the larger common garden areas.

Each house is situated on its own 1,500-square-foot (140-m<sup>2</sup>) lot. The rest of the area is owned in common; by agreement, families may build additions on one



A

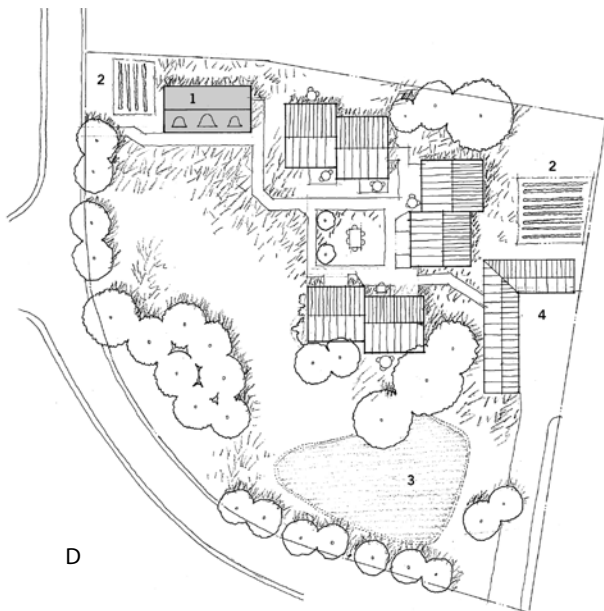


B



C

*The site plan illustrates how cohousing differs from typical development. The original site, A, could have been developed as single-family houses, B, which rarely foster community life, even if they utilize solar energy or incorporate beautiful aesthetics. C, Condominiums or apartments, attempt to emulate the privacy of single-family houses. D, The site plan, which the residents chose (page 86.)*



*The site plan retains the site's assets for all six households to enjoy.*  
 1. common house 2. vegetable gardens 3. pond 4. carports

another's lots or onto the common area. As in almost every built cohousing community, resale is no problem in Torn — demand outstrips supply, even in a small town.

### **Saturday at the Carport**

As in every cohousing community, parking is kept to one side, using as little land as possible and keeping the living/playing area safer, cleaner, and quieter. At Torn, the residents built a carport after they moved in. Having all the cars in one place promotes casual interaction. One Saturday afternoon, as one resident labored under the hood of his malfunctioning auto, others chanced upon him on their way to and from their vehicles. The first offered a hand, the second advice, the third some better tools, and the fourth — perhaps most importantly — a cold beer.

If the frustrated mechanic didn't manage to repair the car, at least he had a better time trying.

Over the years, the residents have renovated and restored the timber-and-mud structure that was formerly a farmhouse. Working weekends and holidays, they transformed the run-down two-story structure into a comfortable common house. In addition to the large kitchen and dining area, it also houses a laundry room, a children's playroom, a workshop, a storage room, a music room, a cozy living room, and a guest room.

The common house has been particularly popular for music practice, especially with the teenagers. When we visited Soren, an accomplished drummer at seventeen, practiced there a couple of hours each day without disturbing his family or neighbors. "As you get older," Soren explained, "you need a place like the old farmhouse to hang out in — not under the feet of your parents." His next-door neighbor added, "If he didn't have such a place, either his creativity or our peace of mind would be compromised."

Besides eating together twice a week, the community plans other joint activities about once a month — a trip to the zoo or the museum, hiking, swimming, a picnic, or just harvesting apple trees. Holidays are often celebrated in the old farmhouse, where other friends and relatives can join in.

Tornevangsgarden shows how cohousing often results in development that helps preserve the historical and natural amenities of an area. Had the site been developed as apartments or sectioned into typical single-family lots, the farmhouse (declared uninhabitable by county officials), the pond, and many of the old trees would have been lost. "The old

farmhouse would have been torn down like all of the others that used to be in the area; it just wouldn't pay to keep it," said a resident.

There are advantages and disadvantages to such a small cohousing community. We had thought, as with a shared house, that such close emotional quarters might encourage a high turnover rate. But after 12 years, only one household — a single father who found house payments difficult on only one income — had moved out. Even after moving, the father and his son still come back for common dinner one night a week.

While acknowledging the benefits of what they have built together, a number of residents expressed reservations about the small size of their community. "I don't think six families is the perfect number," said a father of two. "Maybe twenty is the right number. We might have compromised on our site selection too quickly. Six households limit the level of activity, and if someone doesn't take part for a while, you feel it. If someone doesn't do his share (common work days are about once a month), you notice it."

As in all cohousing communities, spontaneous socializing is just as meaningful as the planned activities. The beer-making club, for example, provides a number of unscheduled tasting parties. The courtyard scheme allows neighbors to meet casually as they come and

go through the day. Kisse (a schoolteacher, mother, founding resident — the woman Charles met back in 1980) describes the pleasure of spontaneous summer dinners in the courtyard:

Some days we'll just be working in our own vegetable gardens and someone will say, "Hey, I've got some potatoes," and another will add, "I've got some salad makings," and so on, until before you know it we have a potluck dinner in the courtyard and end up talking and drinking wine late into the night.

You can't really imagine what it will be like before you actually move in, and certainly all of our visions have not come true. Still, we wouldn't dream of moving out. It's practically heaven here, especially in the summer.

We include these projects still, because one of the most common questions asked of us as lecturers is "how are these communities aging over time?" Chuck visited Tornevangsgarden in the summer of 2010 and found that, like any excellent neighborhood, the life can ebb and flow, but the bones are such that there is a great deal more flow than ebb.



## Bondebjerget

### *Four in One*

**Odense, Denmark**

**80 units in four clusters**

**Architects: Fællestegnestuen;  
Sten Holbæk, Erik Christiansen,  
and Frede Nielsen**

**Tenure: Rental**

**Common Houses: Four at 3,875 sq. ft.  
(360 m<sup>2</sup>) each**

One small group of people knew what they wanted — to develop a housing complex that would emphasize community and would involve the residents both in the planning and ongoing management. The group took their proposal to the local nonprofit housing organization in Odense, the third largest city in

*Children play in front of one of Bondebjerget's four common houses which each have a kitchen and dining room, living room, children's playroom, workshop, and crafts room. Although all 80 units are rentals, the complex was initiated, planned and is now managed by residents similarly to owner occupied cohousing developments.*





Denmark — and the birthplace of poet and storyteller Hans Christian Andersen. Several of them were familiar with cohousing and one had been involved in the planning of the nearby Drejerbanken community. At the time they organized, cohousing was almost all privately financed and owner-occupied, and these people could not afford that option. During their first meeting, they asked the Odense Cooperative Housing Association (OCHA) to work with them to build a rental cohousing community. To their surprise, the association was not only receptive, but had a formal policy to support the development of participatory planning, self-management, and a heightened sense of community.

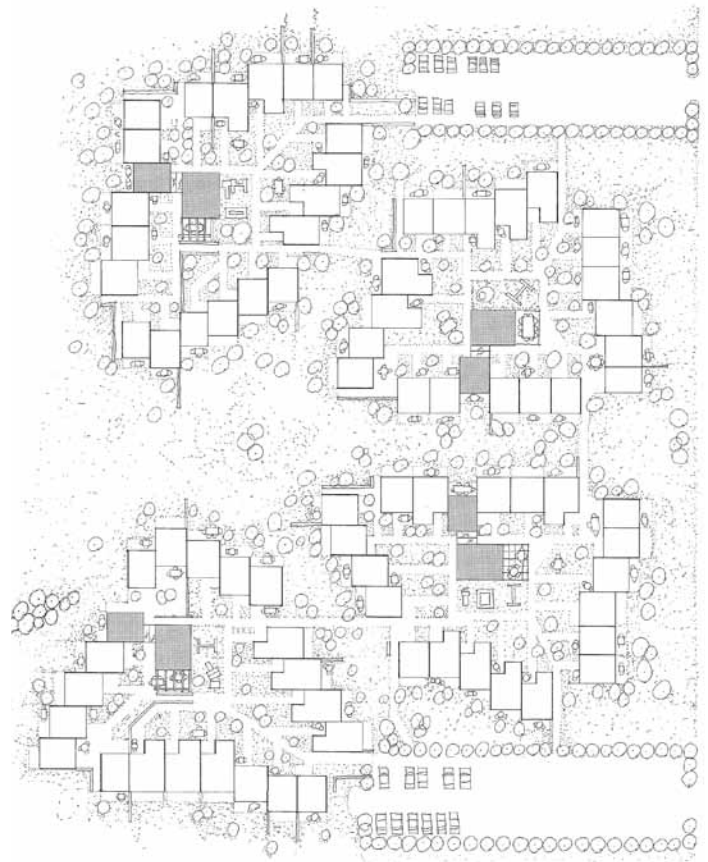
OCHA had learned over the years that a supportive, convivial environment contributed significantly to resident quality of life, ease of management, and many other goals such as energy savings (residents would hold meetings on the topic) and ways of reducing vandalism, through accountability. Despite increased resident involvement, however, most housing associations continued to control most development decisions. OCHA knew that if the cohousing experiment was to succeed, their role must be restricted to overseeing the project's financial and administrative plan. OCHA therefore accepted the group's proposal that the residents themselves determine the program and help choose an architect with extensive cohousing experience.

The organizing group's initial goal was to develop a community of twenty to thirty units, but when they found a large site that fit their other criteria, they worked out a plan for four groups of twenty units each, all rental. While OCHA handled the red tape involved

in acquiring the site and financing the project, the resident group visited existing cohousing communities, clarified its goals, and interviewed architects. After some debate, the residents convinced OCHA to accept their choice of architect, Sten Holbaek.

From the earliest discussions, Holbaek used an extremely organized and deliberate design process to guide the group. In discussing site plans, residents learned to articulate their opinions about the relationship between community and private areas because they themselves helped establish criteria. Holbaek even met with individual

*Bondebjerget  
site plan.*



households to discuss their specific needs. Looking back on the design phase, several residents credited the architect with helping them through the difficult stages of the process. He was also able to articulate the group's desire for a safe and supportive housing environment with a four-cluster design that far exceeded OCHA's goals.

### The Four Clusters

Although the four clusters at Bondebjerget (which means "the farmer's hill") have similar common facilities, each has its own personality. Group One's residents were the most involved in the planning process, and count among them the project's initiators. These residents knew each other before they moved in, which is why community turnover is rare. Only one family from Group One moved out during the first three years of occupancy, and the reason was job related. Common dinners are available three to four times a week, with an average participation of 40 (75 percent) on any given evening. Today common dinners are still very popular.

*Residents eat a common meal in the common house dining room of Group One.*



Of the four groups, the first group functions best, because of the pre-construction participation. The other three function pretty well because:

1. They have the model high-functioning community next door.
2. The minimum rules are expressed to each person who moves in, including:
  - You have to cook for your neighbors in the common house at least once a month. (People don't choose to move in if they don't want to take part in common cooking.)
  - Your participation is required in a minimum number of committees (such as landscaping or similar) — based on what you like to do.
  - You participate in a minimum number of hours each year to help with landscape, maintenance, or grounds clean up.
3. To set new neighborhood members and residents up for success, there is a thorough conversation about what it took to make the neighborhood a success in the first place, what are the minimum expectations of residents (see above), and what will make this place a success for years to come (i.e. participation). And while this is not stated overtly, it becomes clear to new residents that if they don't want to

participate in a neighborhood like this, if that is not important to them — there is a whole world out there to live in.

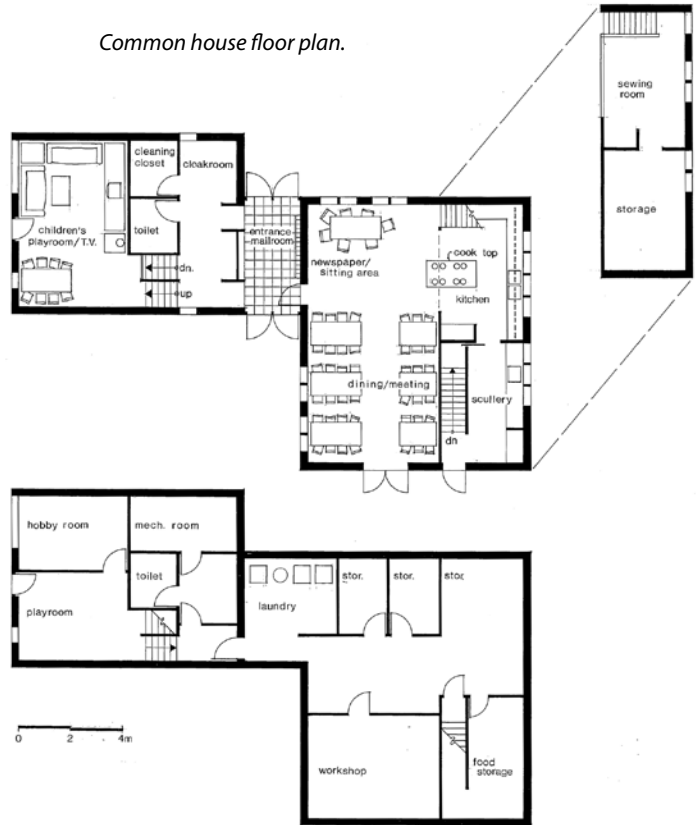
But the experiences of the four groups illustrate the importance of the participatory planning process in clarifying residents' expectations and developing open communication among future neighbors. When residents move in without knowing each other, their ability to work together is a matter of chance. Sometimes it works, as it did for Group Four, and other times it is more difficult, as it was for Group Two (as measured by people hours in the common house alone). The strength of Bondebjerget's initiating group was undoubtedly the key to the success of the community as a whole. And these patterns have played out over and over again, here and elsewhere.

One of the advantages of such series of adjacent communities is the wide range of activities made possible. The Cultural Committee organizes a monthly film club, theater classes for children, special lectures, and musical events. The Buying Association allows residents to purchase many items at a discount. Bondebjerget is also directly across from a school that many of the children attend and whose facilities they can use.

### A Mutually Beneficial Partnership

The nonprofit developer and resident partnership makes a lot of sense. Working in collaboration, they were able to make this neighborhood the sort of community that everyone alludes to and talks about when they say *community* — but rarely happens in Western industrial societies outside of cohousing, or cohousing-inspired

Common house floor plan.



neighborhoods. Too much humanity, too much human capacity, too much potential for mutual support is left on the table when we plan neighborhoods without the future residents. Too many human hours will be lost to the television, good folks separated by walls watching separate televisions, rather than, for example, two people sitting on one front porch, talking about the issues of the day, large and small, figuring out how to make each of their lives easier. In other words, this is the sort of partnership that makes sense — an experienced nonprofit housing developer working in collaboration with future residents, who, in turn, make sure that their

neighborhood will work over the years. This community functions well because real people, who had real lives, put their values into action. Also, and perhaps just as important, residents jump-started it with the relationships they brought along when they moved in — relationships built through participation during the creation of the project.

We are struck by similarities between the all-rental community of Bondebjerget and

entirely owner-occupied cohousing communities. The common houses are well used at Bondebjerget, and dinners are well attended. The degree of resident involvement, the types of common activities, and the interaction among neighbors are all very similar. The primary difference is the relatively low monthly cost to residents, which is what ultimately allows them to live there.

*The private house and the backyard are key to balancing community and privacy.*





## Drejerbanken

### *Half Owners, Half Renters*

**Skalbjerg, Denmark**

**20 Units**

**Architects: Arkitekgruppen**

**Tenure: Private ownership and rental**

**Common House: 5,100 sq. ft. (474 m<sup>2</sup>)**

On a Friday afternoon while some of the residents erected a huge tent, the children and teenagers built booths for tossing darts at balloons and other carnival games. Now, early on Saturday afternoon, folk



## Drejerbanken's Initial Organizing Agreement

- The organizing group will begin planning work with the current 25 adult members.
- New persons can join only if someone drops out; otherwise they will be put on the waiting list. Those on the waiting list can help with planning, but cannot vote.
- Membership entails an initial fee of \$100 (500 DKK), monthly dues of \$50 (250 DKK) up to a total of \$1,000 (5,000 DKK), and agreement to assume planning responsibilities. The non-refundable fees are to be spent on advertising, printing, and mailings. Any surplus will be used to furnish the common house.
- A "buddy system" will be utilized to welcome new members and explain the history and status of the group.

musicians circulate from house to house, enticing people out. By evening nearly two hundred guests and residents fill the tent, drinking, laughing, and feasting on the ox that has been roasting in an open pit all day. Vaudeville skits and musical performances follow the meal, with dancing and conversation continuing into the early hours of the morning. This is Drejerbanken's ninth annual summer festival. "It's an excuse to invite everyone you've wanted to see but haven't had time to," a man shouts over the music.

Drejerbanken is situated on the top of a clay hill (hence its name, "the potter's resource") in the small town of Skalbjerger (population 400), only 12 miles west of Odense.

### Defining the Dream

Drejerbanken's initiating group emerged from a seminar on housing alternatives for

people who were reconsidering their lodging situations. Participants from the seminar formed an organization called "Alternative Housing Types" whose purpose was to provide support and coordination for people who wished to develop a "local community," as cohousing was sometimes called, "where there would be meaningful relationships among residents and where the future inhabitants would design and manage the dwellings and community buildings using direct democratic principles." Inspired by media articles about the inappropriateness of available housing options, and by the increasing awareness of new cohousing developments, they set out to improve their own residential situation.

The eight to ten founders advertised to reach others who shared their interests. Using flyers, radio announcements, public meetings, and, most effectively, word of mouth, their group soon increased to 25 adults (seven singles and nine couples). None had previous experience as planners, architects, or developers, so they hired a team with experience.

Once they participated in a seminar on how to organize a cohousing project, the participants established an initial organizing agreement. In retrospect, one resident recalls that there were only two criteria for joining the group: "First, to want to live in cohousing; and second, the desire to work for it." "Cohousers tend to be open-minded and independent people," said another. "Open-minded enough to not merely accept what exists as the realm of possibilities, and independent enough to seek out what doesn't." Given the inevitable meetings, patience and tolerance were also helpful traits. To avoid

domination by a few individuals during the planning process, the group started each meeting with a brief “round-table” discussion format in which each person could comment on a topic. “It was very successful,” remembers a participant, “especially at incorporating new or shy members.” Only when general consensus was not apparent did the group vote.

The organizing group prepared a very specific Design Program which called for “a more balanced community with private life and a community life, a private garden and a common garden, a private dinner and a common dinner.” One woman told us, “Community possibilities just aren’t available in most neighborhoods. You have a private life at home and you socialize with friends around the city, but you rarely have a community life near home. We felt that it adds to the quality of life and broadens the individual.” They wanted a variety of ages, “to aid in fostering a renewed communication between the generations.” They hoped to include a wide range of incomes, but realized that this might be a more difficult goal to attain, given that overall costs were as yet unknown. House prices needed to be as inexpensive as possible, at least below market rate, but they did not want to help with the construction themselves. They also wanted to be near Odense, where most of them worked, and several people were interested in having a large vegetable garden.

Having agreed on their intentions, the group refrained from further ideological debate and concentrated on finding a piece of property. Within months they had located a site owned by the county which was large enough for twenty dwellings.

Not everyone in the group could afford private ownership, particularly the single

parents. So the membership approached a local nonprofit housing developer, saying, in effect: “You’re in the business of developing low-income housing, and we’re in the position of needing low-income units. Can we work together?”<sup>1</sup> The organization had at that point developed only 35 new rental units, but accepted the challenge of developing housing *with* the future residents rather than *for* them.

Some residents of the town were dubious about the proposed development. Although the group held public meetings to familiarize neighbors with the project, townsfolk were still concerned about adding fifty people to the town of four hundred. “Nor was

### Values Behind the Establishment of Drejerbanken:

The founding members of the community established a set of values. Their intentions were:

- to establish a cohousing community that the majority of people can afford to live in;
- to establish an environment for children that is healthy and supports stable and close social and emotional relations between adults and children outside the nuclear family;
- to create a community where children, youngsters, and adults share everyday life, activities, reflections, and responsibilities in order to counteract the individualism, isolation, and consumerism of late modern society. In doing so, the aim is to help stabilize the nuclear family by means of cohousing communities;
- to create a self-sufficient and ecological community;
- to create a community based on social equality, shared responsibility, and open-minded interaction with outside society.

the county planning department particularly crazy about cohousing itself,” recalls one participant. “It didn’t fit neatly into their Master Plan.”

When the group presented their project proposal to county officials, it was rejected on the grounds that half of the units were rental. Feeling that this was just an excuse to reject the project, they appealed the decision. One woman remembers:

We all showed up at the appeal hearing, and all we had to ask was “Why not?” They couldn’t answer. Basically the planning commissioners realized that they were just suspicious of the unknown. But when they looked at us, they could see that we were people very much like themselves. “What real reason do we have to

deny them?” They could not refuse us.

The county approved the project with the stipulation that only ten units be rental and, in the end, proved very supportive. The group proceeded with the design of ten owner-occupied units and ten rental units.

## The Design Process

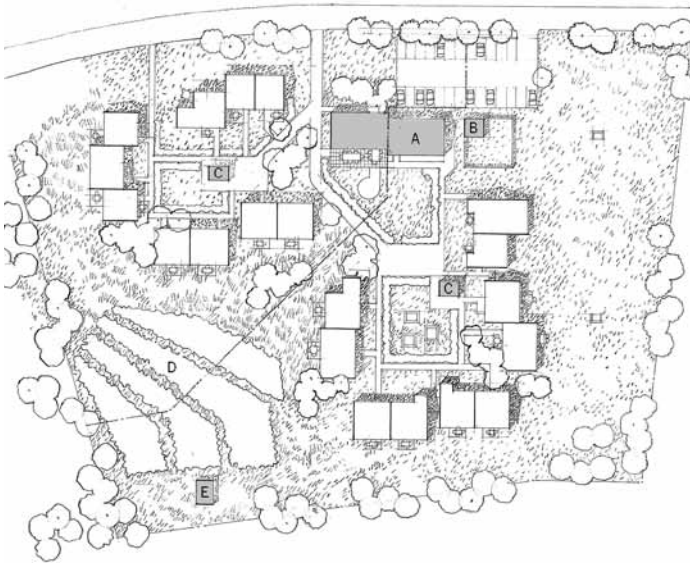
The design process was highly interactive. The design firm, Arkitektgruppen, which had considerable cohousing experience, facilitated group design meetings, helped coordinate weekend sessions and field trips, and guided the group through the complex development process. Only after creating clear and thorough site criteria did Arkitektgruppen begin the site plan.

Using blocks to represent the residences and working in small groups, the participants developed several potential site plans until a clear pattern emerged. Three schemes that best conformed to the Design Program were selected for further development by the architects.

## The House Designs

In a “house game” devised by the architects, residents arranged room, furniture, and stair cutouts onto modules to generate house plans. Because the rental houses were subject to more restrictions and therefore a longer review process, the group designed them first, according to the following objectives:

- ♦ Compact and inexpensive
- ♦ Simple geometry, consistent construction techniques
- ♦ Medium-sized bedrooms, small living spaces



Site plan: A. common house B. furnace building C. storage shed  
D. vegetable garden E. chicken house



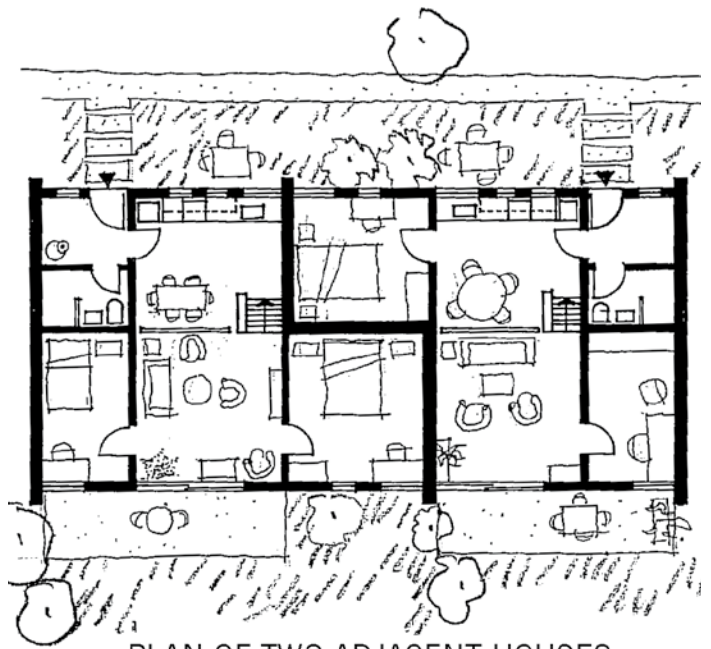
- Good exposure and accessibility between outdoors and indoors
- Large kitchens oriented toward the front of the house
- Natural materials
- Living spaces oriented toward rear of house and private gardens
- Standardized kitchens and bathrooms
- Bedrooms off of living areas
- Minimal hallways
- Possibility of installing solar panels at a later date
- Possibility of later additions

Unfortunately, because they were building publicly assisted rental housing, only limited experimentation in design was permitted (no use of renewable energy, for example). How much the cohousers could deviate from typical nonprofit requirements was entirely up to the goodwill of the officials. The process was a little easier, however, because the future residents themselves were making the requests. For example, the Ministry of Housing wanted the common house divided — one half for renters and another half for owners, separated by a fire wall — while the residents wanted it completely open, with no distinction between the two halves. After lengthy discussion the residents were allowed to go ahead with their design.

The designs of the rental units were considered to be so successful that the prospective owners decided to use the same construction standards and development cost per square foot, with the size dependent on how much the household was willing to pay. They agreed on five private house plans

### Some of the Site Plan Criteria (Design Program)

- Ten owner-occupied and ten rental houses
- One common house, 4,305 sq. ft. (400 m<sup>2</sup>)
- 32 parking spaces located at the site periphery
- Divided into two parcels: rental and owner-occupied (as required by the Ministry of Housing in order for the nonprofit-owned rental units to qualify for subsidies)
- Common outdoor sitting and recreational areas
- Common gardens and private gardens
- Common house visible from private dwellings
- Optimum solar exposure
- Relatively short distance from each house to common house



PLAN OF TWO ADJACENT HOUSES

*Two of the smaller rental houses*

and five rental house plans, with slight variations, such as partitioning the living room to create a study. The construction bids were favorable, but cost reductions were still required because of the great variety in house plans. Interior wood sheathing, some plumbing fixtures, and closets were cut back and/or replaced with less expensive materials. The residents decided as a group to make the cutbacks to the private houses but not to the common house.

### The Common House Design

Located at the northern corner of the site, the common house forms the focus of the development's layout. Because it is the hub of the community, one passes it when walking from the parking area to the individual houses, and it can be seen from the front yard of every dwelling.

The 20 houses are oriented around two courtyards, both of which embrace the common house. These one- and two-story attached houses are grouped in two clusters, one of rental and one of owner-occupied dwellings (as required by the Ministry of

Housing), each situated around a courtyard. Clustering the houses preserved space for a soccer field, common garden, and wooded "fantasy area" where the children play.

Although officially only 2,550 square feet (237 m<sup>2</sup>), the common house has a full basement, effectively doubling its size to 5,100 square feet (474 m<sup>2</sup>). Its facilities include a dining/meeting room; a kitchen, pantry, and scullery; a reading room; two children's playrooms; and a large vestibule where the mailboxes are located. One resident set up her pottery studio in the common house in exchange for some of her wares. The basement houses a workshop, storage space, a laundry room with two large washers and one dryer, and a sauna the residents built themselves.

### The Residents

Twenty-four children and twenty-eight adults (18 women and 10 men) live in Drejerbanken. Of the twenty households, seven are couples, eleven are single parents, and two are singles. Drejerbanken was the first cohousing project in Denmark in which the majority of residents were single parents, primarily because of the rental option. The mixed tenure allows people to move from renter to owner, which has been done, and from owner to renter, which, even by 2010, has not yet been done.

### Management

Renters and owners manage Drejerbanken together. Resident meetings, held every two weeks, are the forums for making community decisions. Usually the residents reach conclusions by consensus, but they occasionally resort to voting. Owners and renters sometimes have separate meetings — for example,

## Management Committees

**Budgeting** (and bookkeeping): two adults, two years

**Dinner** (scheduling cooks and assistants): two adults, one year

**Energy** (and energy conservation): three adults, time varies

**Culture** (parties, films, lectures, and outings): participation varies

**Chicken Duty:** two adults for 14 days (they built their own chicken house)

**Maintenance** (organize work days every month): four adults per year, sometimes rotates

when the renters discuss an upcoming report for the nonprofit organization or the owners discuss new property tax laws — but never for issues of mutual concern.

## Organization

“Before we moved in, we thought that everything would run smoothly by virtue of everyone’s good intentions,” a resident once wrote. He continued:

Predictably, soon afterward we learned the reality of getting things done. Therefore, rather than just assigning duties, we sought imaginative ways of accomplishing tasks. For example, five separate groups tend the five sections of the common vegetable garden. Participation is voluntary, but if you don’t volunteer, you’re drafted. The person who volunteers to be “in charge” of the section that grows the carrots and potatoes officially doesn’t have to do any of the work, but must coordinate the effort. We use this method for painting and everything. Every adult puts in a minimum of 30 hours per year, besides committee work and administrative stuff — except accounting, which counts as work time.

In fact, residents do most of the work together. “But the problem is that everyone wants to volunteer to be in charge,” one woman joked. Chores are done by small work groups with each adult participating in at least one for a specific period of time, and with the children also involved.

Dinner is prepared every night in the common house. Participation varies; in the

12 evenings we were there, 38 to 46 of the 54 residents attended. Each night, three adults and two children make dinner and clean up afterward. Each adult cooks three times a month, and each child helps twice a month, starting at age seven. The meal cost is fixed at \$3.50 (20 DKK) per adult, and half price for children.

Saturday mornings are reserved for general common house cleanup, with mandatory participation at least once every four weeks.



*A resident participates in the construction of the hen house.*



*Residents share a relaxing dinner together in the common house.*

Brunch often follows the morning chores. Four to six work days every year are devoted to less glamorous tasks: purging storage rooms of clutter, miscellaneous landscaping chores, chicken coop scrub down, and window washing. These jobs are performed on a minimum-hour-per-year basis.

In addition to monthly workdays, the community takes on one major project each year. One year they remodeled the common house, changing partitions and adding acoustic ceiling panels. Another year they built a fancy chicken house. The summer we were there they were remodeling the common kitchen. “The annual project each year helps maintain some of that positive cooperative energy we had when we were planning Drejerbanken,” one resident told us.

## **Evaluation Week**

Once a year, when the winter evenings are long, Drejerbanken has “evaluation week.” Everyone sets aside a couple of evenings and the following weekend to “air out the sheets.” The discussion ranges from practical organization to social activities, from children’s concerns to next year’s projects. This provides the opportunity to go beyond routine business to explore what might make Drejerbanken even better, and helps avoid “sweeping issues under the rug.”

The evaluation process begins with two discussion evenings, when the community breaks into four groups of six to seven adults each. The smaller meetings allow people to express themselves more effectively and without intimidation. One woman explained:

You learn a great deal about yourself in these meetings. When someone asks how you feel about this or that, then you have to ask yourself, “Well, how do I feel?”

The topics that arise become the platform for the larger discussion. The children, divided by age groups, hold separate meetings. The adults provide the young people with questions to discuss amongst themselves, and they may add to the list as they wish. After setting the agenda, the whole group spends an intensive weekend discussing topics.

The evaluation process facilitates communication, allowing differences to be heard and misunderstandings to dissipate. “People are more candid with each other for months afterward,” remarked one resident. At the week’s end — after all have discussed their points of view — the whole community holds a “winter fest.” The residents argue that this is how individuals learn to live as a community, how to cooperate, how to grow personally, how to have empathy for others. Some people approach the little and big questions from an idealistic or a realistic point of view, but no one argues — they learn from one another instead.

These days (2010) such meetings are much more rare — once every third or fourth year. Some argue that the group has grown to a place where, as any functioning culture or subculture, it is obvious what expectations are, who is strong and who is weak, who has capacity for empathetic communication and who will never have it, and how to compensate for this. One resident told us, “the key is not to let one of your neighbors ruin your day.

Once you have figured that out, you learn to appreciate the benefits of community and not worry about the annoyances.”

## **A Successful Model of Diversity**

Drejerbanken has successfully combined owner-occupied and rental units encompassing a diversity of incomes and households. “We’re surprised that more cohousing groups haven’t done it,” remarked one woman, but even their accountant admits how difficult it was to keep the books straight — a job that has now been computerized.

Several owner/renter myths have been dispelled at Drejerbanken. The first is that renters are less stable and have a higher turnover than owners: ten years after construction, three owners and only two renters have moved out of Drejerbanken. Another myth is that owners take better care of their homes and gardens than renters: the prize for the best roses goes to a renter; otherwise the homes and yards are indistinguishable. A third myth is that having rental units slows the appreciation rate of the owner-occupied houses: cohousing dwellings typically appreciate faster than comparable houses, and Drejerbanken is no exception.

When Drejerbanken was built, public officials were unsure that owners and renters could “manage” in the same project. As it turns out, renters and owners are equally involved in all aspects of management, and visitors cannot distinguish who rents and who owns, although social scientists have come from all over Europe to study the “phenomenon.”

## An Interview with Niels Revsgaard

During a fourteen-day visit to Drjerkbanken, we stayed with Niels Revsgaard, a senior lecturer in sociology (now retired) at the Odense Teachers Training College. Niels has given much consideration to communities, from the kibbutzim of Israel to rural villages and urban cooperatives closer to home, and for the last thirty-four years as a cohousing resident. While at Drjerkbanken we talked about cohousing and his community. We also asked Niels about Drjerkbanken today.

**Charles:** What do you think about living in cohousing? Who do you think chooses this lifestyle?

**Niels:** I think that it's a much more balanced way to live. Living alone, or in a contemporary nuclear family, people have lots of privacy, but often not as much community life as they want or need. In fact, I think that some people forget or even deny how important community life is.

In the past, many cohousing residents, and certainly the founders, were relatively well educated and forward thinking. But today people choose cohousing because it's pragmatic, because of the children — whether they are yours or not — and for personal

growth. Today all kinds of people move into cohousing. It's becoming mainstream. One resident now living here came to visit a friend one day and said to herself right then that she wanted to live here. She had never even considered cohousing before.

**Charles:** As a man without a family, why did you choose to live here?

**Niels:** To have more contact with children and families, with a more varied group of people than I would otherwise associate with. I get to know children of all ages without having to have my own. Typically bachelors or couples associate with people they know from work, or people with whom they share similar lifestyles. They tend to live in a "singles" world, or an adult world. Living here, I spend time with people I normally would not. It's also convenient, as it is for everyone. I help prepare dinner only three times a month, but eat extremely well the rest of the time.

**Charles:** How do you think that living in cohousing influences an individual?

**Niels:** A person can do more than they would ordinarily on their own. Living in cohousing broadens people by getting them to do things they might not otherwise have tried. You see someone cross-country skiing out in the yard, and think "Hey, if he can do that, then I probably can, too." In addition, the owner of the skis probably wouldn't mind lending them to you — along with a few words of advice — so that you can give it a try. Another example is playing musical instruments. People typically play music if they happen to have had some exposure to it in their youth. At Drjerkbanken all of the children are exposed to the few adults who play music, and as a result almost all of them play some sort of instrument.

One criticism could be that there can be pressure to do things in cohousing. Some people who hadn't previously gone abroad for their vacations might feel



*Niels Revsgaard*

some pressure to do so now, when their neighbors talk about their trips so much. But I feel that it's more of a positive influence than a pressure. In general, I feel that living in cohousing fosters independence and maturity — you learn to cooperate on a small scale, and to accomplish more as an individual.

People get to know you as a whole person in cohousing. In many ways modern society is schizophrenic. You show one side of yourself at work and another side at home; you may begin to wonder who you are. We don't demonstrate an integrated personality, a functional and emotional side; in fact, you don't even get a chance to develop an integrated personality. Cohousing can also give you a sense of reference as an individual; because people ask your opinion, you have to try to find one, and in so doing learn who you are.

I would also emphasize that living in cohousing produces a set of valuable experiences that can be used in professional life. The acquired ability to cooperate is obvious. Common meetings go much more smoothly and quickly than they initially did. A broader range of experiences and more highly developed social skills were very relevant to my teaching career; I've had more contacts and more opportunity to develop ideas. Furthermore, I think I have more professional opportunities living here than I would if I lived elsewhere.

**Charles:** As a sociologist, how do you think living in cohousing affects the family?

**Niels:** It takes a lot of pressure off the family. In general, the modern marriage is overstressed, especially emotionally. The attitudes of men and women are always changing, but not harmoniously — they are always in flux and we absolutely need healthy examples, models, readily available discussion with others to figure this marriage thing out — to figure out life, really. A cohousing environment balances marriage and offers some relief to the emotional burdens of ever-evolving family life. Living in a community provides an inherent

support system — not just someone to talk to, but also pleasant distractions from the pressures of contemporary life.

**Charles:** While living in San Francisco, one of us often has to work late, leaving the other without someone to share the day's traumas, glories, or dinner. At Trudslund [our residence for six months], if one of us was late, the other was usually found in the common house engrossed in after-dinner conversation, with the other's absence hardly detected.

**Niels:** Some might see that as a problem. For example, divorce in cohousing might seem easier than it otherwise is, because an estranged spouse can see that they can live without their partner — they have others for companionship. People who live in today's small nuclear families have to ask themselves twice, "What will I do without him, or her? Who else would I have?" A mother with two children who desires a divorce must carefully consider the dramatic lifestyle consequences. Will she be able to remain in the family home? Will she be lonely? Will it be too difficult to raise the children alone? Obviously, cohousing doesn't eliminate these problems, nor should it try to, but it does add to people's independence. They don't need a partner just for company! Yet, even though divorce might appear easier in cohousing, the statistics show that the divorce rate for people in cohousing is lower than for comparable segments of the general population in Denmark.

Today there is often a lot of strife in traditional houses over domestic chores; is everyone doing their share? Domestic responsibilities are divided more equally among the adults here, so he has to cook as often as *she* does, at least communally.

**Charles:** Back in California, Kathryn and I had agreed to rotate cooking, but somehow she ended up cooking both more frequently and more savory dinners. Yet, I loved to cook in cohousing. What's the difference? 🍴

**Niels:** Men like to cook when they can get recognition, like your American barbecues. They usually do like to cook in cohousing. They receive acknowledgment for a “job well done,” and from more than just the family. The camaraderie among the people preparing dinner not only makes it fun, but also helps prevent disaster. Perhaps even more relevant is that almost everyone here, men and women, shuffles papers all day without really producing anything. Common dinners give everyone an opportunity to actually produce something.

**Charles:** How do children feel about Drjerbanken?

**Niels:** You should ask them. We do, and they usually seem positive. I feel there are favorable conditions for children here — socially, physically, and educationally. They are exposed to many more interests and stimulations than usual — participating in meetings and learning to work cooperatively, for example.

They also have a strong sense of identity. They are not anonymous here; and like the children of any village, they know that there is a place they are recognized and have a sense of belonging. This enhances their self-confidence. Children who live in cohousing are usually “can do” people because they learn from participating in so many kinds of activities, and receive recognition for their accomplishment. The child who plays the guitar is known for that, the skier is known because he skies — it becomes part of his identity. Most of all, they can follow many more of their curiosities. If a child loves to paint, there is someone here to give them painting lessons. If they love to swim, there is a family that likes to swim and will take him or her to the pool.

**Charles:** What about the work projects?

**Niels:** The most important thing about the work weekends, the yearly work projects, the garden work, and other activities is that they give us an excuse to do something together. A project gives everyone something in common again, something to talk about. It clearly gives us camaraderie.

The work projects are also great for the children. They get to know and work with adults other than their parents, and learn to communicate with adults. Without the projects, children might not have anything to talk to adults about; dialogue might never get started. At the same time, the projects give them a sense of worthiness and acknowledgment beyond the usual, “Now, whose kid are you?”

**Charles:** What about decision-making?

**Niels:** One person, one vote. It should be as democratic as possible, even if it requires lengthy discussions. Children vote on issues concerning them. It can make a child feel “ten feet tall” to participate in meetings. It’s best not to delegate decision-making. Someone operating on implied authority makes me nervous — we have enough of that in our lives. Here we can practice direct democracy, so why not? If people feel left out of decisions, they become frustrated and move out of the decision-making process, or even worse, the community.

**Charles:** What is Drjerbanken’s relationship with the small town it is situated in?

**Niels:** The important distinction is that the residents of Drjerbanken are urbanites who work and thrive in the city of Odense, but live in a small town. We have to be conscious of the divergent value systems if we don’t want to alienate our neighbors. For example, we are careful not to wield our disproportionate influence in a provoking manner, which would be relatively easy to do because we are inherently organized. If we share an opinion about a certain issue facing the school board, we don’t show up at the meeting *en masse*. We are usually better-informed on topics than most people, however, because before a town meeting we will probably discuss the topic here. But we rarely vote or act as a whole; we are just as likely to disagree with each other as with anyone else.



I have heard that most people in Skalbjerger recognize Drjerbanken as an asset to the town. The common house is used for everything from town meetings to music practice — with or without residents of Drjerbanken. We have a soccer field that children from the whole town use, and they're almost always assured of someone else to play with.

**Charles:** What do you think about the owner/renter mixture at Drjerbanken?

**Niels:** We make very little of it, really, especially compared to all of the Europeans who come to “study” it. On occasion we do need to be sensitive to our mixed tenure. We don't locate common tables in the two courtyards. That might begin to separate us, if not now — given how well we know each other — then perhaps later, when there might be more turnover. Instead, we put tables up near the common house. The owner/renter mixture is a good idea for all the obvious reasons. I really appreciate it. But it does make financing and planning a bit more complicated.

**Charles:** What is Drjerbanken like today?

**Niels:** There are only eleven founding mothers and fathers left at Drjerbanken. Eighteen adults are newcomers. In other words, the founding mothers and fathers have become a minority at Drjerbanken.

Overall the number of children at Drjerbanken has decreased, and on the whole we have fewer family responsibilities and more time available to spend on non-family activities outside and inside Drjerbanken. The decrease in number, especially of small children, has decreased the mutual interdependence among the adults as well. This is mostly so among the owners, because in general they are older than the tenants. Also, some are retired, and therefore have much more free time than working individuals to spend on activities at Drjerbanken as well as traveling or going to the summer house.

Also, I've noticed that the residents are more differentiated according to profession now than we were when Drjerbanken was first built. Originally, most of the founding mothers and fathers had a job that allowed them to focus on raising children, or they worked in education, health, or welfare, and were employed in the public sector. Today a bigger proportion of the residents have a variety of jobs outside of the community and usually in the private sector.

Despite the general trend toward an older group of residents, we do have some new younger households, which means that we now have three generations living at Drjerbanken. This gives us the sense that we are a large family who live under the same “roof” and are emotionally attached to each other. This emotional attachment is particularly strong between the first and the third generations. It is great for adults like me, because we now have both surrogate children and grandchildren. I am sure that this attachment will have a positive long-term effect too, and will create stronger relations between all of us.

**Charles:** How has the mix of rental and owners been over the history of Drjerbanken? Does it still work?

**Niels:** It works fine. The rental households tend to be younger and to include more single-parent households. The owner units tend to include older couples and families. For this reason there are differences in social and economic characteristics between the two.

**Charles:** How do you make sure the rental households are a part of the community? How do you orient them to Drjerbanken?

**Niels:** We are of course very aware that the increased social differentiation between renters and owners, and between newcomers and original members, might dilute the fundamental values of Drjerbanken and thereby dissolve it from within. In order to counteract that, we understand the need to create and maintain

events and community involvement and responsibilities that correspond to our fundamental values and present needs. Cohousing is attractive to many people for practical reasons, especially young parents, but it is important that they can relate to the values of the community as a whole and can contribute in a positive way to everyday life in our community. For this reason we make sure that they have a thorough introduction to Drjerbanken and that we get to know them before they become part of the community.

**Charles:** How do you orient new households to Drjerbanken, both renters and owners?

**Niels:** We have a very informative homepage, which includes an invitation to visit Drjerbanken. When a house or flat becomes available, it is advertised on the web page and in newspapers. People who reply to our “advertisements” are then invited to visit us. Five bofæller (“the introduction group”) are responsible for organizing visits and providing information to potential new residents. The visits consist of an informal and thorough presentation (about an hour and a half) at Drjerbanken, including its various facilities and the dwellings that will be vacant. During the presentation, visitors have the opportunity to meet and talk to those

people who are responsible for preparing the evening meal that day. Afterwards they join us for common dinner. They eat together with their guide and the other members of the community who are not members of the introduction group. Later in the evening is an informal meeting with the introductory group in one of the private houses. The group will tell the visitor(s) about the founding values of Drjerbanken, everyday life here, and the expectations we have for new residents. Of course the visitor(s) have the opportunity to raise questions, tell us about their expectations of cohousing, whether or not they think they can identify with Drjerbanken’s values and practice, and how they think they could contribute to the community. If visitor(s) want to visit us several times before they make their decision, they are most welcome to do so.

At a general meeting, the community prioritizes who they believe should be a new resident. If it is a rented dwelling that is available, the renters’ housing association has the final say. If it is a privately owned house that is vacant, the procedure is the same except that it is the owner(s) of the house who have the final say.



## Part Three

### Two Decades of Cohousing in North America

*We have not merely a housing shortage but a broader set of unmet needs caused by the efforts of an entire society to fit itself into a housing pattern that reflects the dreams of the mid-nineteenth century better than the realities of the late twentieth century.*

— Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream*

Starting with the first cohousing community in North America, Muir Commons, built in Davis, California in 1991, cohousing has expanded across the continent as a viable, healthy, supportive housing choice for thousands of households. The 120 cohousing communities in the United States and Canada are evidence that cohousing has found a home in North America.

The cohousing concept is astonishingly flexible and dynamic. A cohousing community can arise from dense, urban revitalization efforts. It can take the form of an ecovillage that combines housing with organic farming and mixed-use buildings. It can be an antidote to suburban sprawl. Regardless, each cohousing development is a unique reflection of its members and their aspirations for a



supportive community. We invite you to read these case studies with an eye for this diversity. And if you are so inspired, we recommend that you contact and visit cohousing communities in your area. It is only through personal interaction and sharing that the cohousing movement will continue to grow.





## FrogSong Cohousing

### *Mixed Use, Smart Growth*

**Cotati, California**

**30 Units**

**Architects:**

**McCamant & Durrett Architects**

**Completed: 2003**

**Tenure: Private ownership**

**Common Facilities: 4,020 sq. ft.**

**Commercial Space: 7,500 sq. ft.**

**F**rogSong Cohousing in Northern California is a compelling case study for two important reasons. First, the project site was zoned for commercial use on only 2.2 acres and featured a city street right through its middle. Second, the group and the architects envisioned a traditional mixed-use village with housing above commercial space and no setbacks. This combination of factors created viable in-town commercial space and a real neighborhood at the same time.

The group had to begin the project by abandoning the existing street that went right through the already-small 2.2-acre

site. To do so, they applied for mixed-use zoning in place of the existing single-use commercial zoning. The site was a vestige of 1950s thinking, when most of the United States embraced single-use zoning (shopping over here and living over there). For a variety of reasons, sentiments are changing and Americans are reexamining the benefits of mixed-use developments. It is places like

*One of the many early sketches of the store frontage. Looking for something that the group and the city could both like and afford.*





*Many architectural elements contribute to a long-term choreography of community in cohousing. Viable, usable, welcoming, and giving front porches are one of those elements.*



*The street side of the commercial area is one of the places where cohousers interface with neighbors.*

## Goals for the Site Plan

- Not separate from the rest of the neighborhood; not a gated community
- A model for the world
- Contributing to Cotati — socially and environmentally

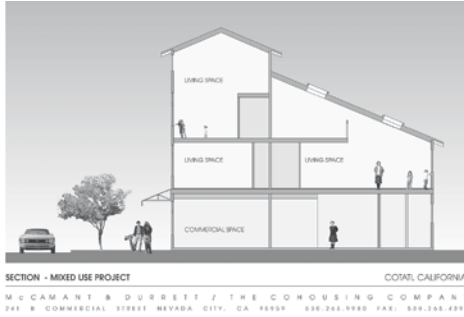
*The streetscape.*



*Hanging around the common terrace after dinner on a warm summer eve.*



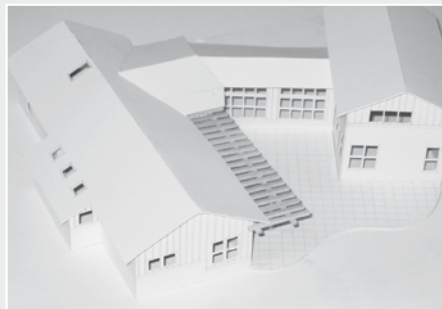
*The FrogSong site plan is reminiscent of village planning, 100% organic, but 100% rational at the same time. That is because it grew from the priorities of the future neighbors.*



*A section of the mixed-use building with eight living units above storefronts in an old world, almost timeless land use pattern, and certainly a pattern that contributes to a more proximate and therefore pedestrian-friendly environment. In seven of the eight units are people who could have chosen any house on the site, but over time gravitated to choosing these units on the street, above the commercial space.*

## Goals of the Site Plan: Physical and Spatial Qualities

- Places to gather in winter
- Mix of complex and simple
- Architecture flows but still expresses individuality
- My kids are safe
- A place to have large celebrations
- Physical markers that highlight community milestones
- Space for rituals
- Places for “real” conversations
- Room to keep adding art into the community
- Pays attention to solar and lunar rhythms (seasonal cycles)
- Allows for full light cycle
- Balance private and common space — facilitate trust
- Encourage indoor/outdoor flow
- Not see cars and street when I open the door
- Encourage shared resources
- A place I don’t need to drive to meet my needs
- Ability to walk to work within the community
- Walkable
- Many options for different energy levels (quiet, gathering, wild)
- A place for pets
- See stars at night
- Make it easy to use bicycles
- Pleasant in winter — cozy but not dreary
- Decipherable from a child’s point of view
- Conducive to many kinds of play
- “Inclusive”
- Uses of spaces are obvious
- Easy to keep neat and tidy
- Shared spaces allow homes to be small
- Seasonal changes noted and celebrated
- Ability to eat and cook outdoors



Left: Inside the neighborhood.

Right: An early study model of the common house.

Some (8) houses  
are atop the  
commercial space  
on a main street.



*An early sketch of the life between the buildings.*

## When Residential Is Commercial

The group created a complementary arrangement between the commercial and residential aspects of its community. A case in point is parking. Because both residents and businesses require parking spaces, the question is how to serve both needs without laying down a sea of asphalt. The solution is simple, revolutionary, and consistent with the core values of cohousing in general and FrogSong specifically.

Simply put, these two otherwise-competing forces share. Residents use the parking at night and businesses use the same spaces during the day. Parking gets a little tight on Saturday afternoon, but that is the sign of a high-functioning town.

FrogSong Cohousing that are leading the way.

The town of Cotati, a Native American name, has 5,000 residents and benefits from a charming downtown. Charming or not, when the cohousing group got its start the town lacked affordable, quality housing in proximity to public transportation. Pedestrian-friendly activities were also lacking — kids couldn't safely walk to school and adults couldn't really walk to work or to shop. Like many small towns in the area, Cotati did not need more single-family homes spread out across the landscape.

The community originated in a group calling themselves the Sonoma County Cohousing (SoCoHo). Their efforts were catalyzed by three active folks in 1998. That year, the group had suffered two potentially debilitating losses: the death of a very active member of the team at age 34, and the loss of several thousand dollars each by several households, after they lost a parcel of land to a competing developer in West Santa Rosa. Fortunately, the group was soon joined by three families who were new to the area, all recently hired by Sonoma State University, followed by another three households soon after. Now strong in number, they proceeded with the site search. After losing another prime site, they came across the current one. Their broker, whose office was directly adjacent to the parcel, and the Cohousing Company, made a strong case for the group and they signed a contract for the site in the spring of 2000.

Commercial space in cohousing is not unique to FrogSong Cohousing, but it is rare. The group went through the standard procedures for finding tenants by advertising



and listing with a local realtor. This yielded about three-quarters of the tenants right away and the others trickled in within a year of completion, by the fall of 2004. Five years later the complex has a pizzeria (which serves at least one pie named after a member of the cohousing community), a hair salon, a Mexican bakery, and several professional offices including a green building consultant, a design firm, an antique store, a healing center and herbal cooperative, and a copy shop.

As evidence of the project's success, FrogSong Cohousing was recognized in 2004 by the National Home Builders Association as the best smart growth project in the United States. This recognition is ironic in that it proves that a few school teachers and engineers can develop a high-quality neighborhood that is superior to those created by professional developers with many decades of experience. The members of FrogSong Cohousing were able to succeed because their neighborhood design focused on the needs of real people and real lives.

The result is more than an award-winning cohousing development. It is no understatement to say that FrogSong Cohousing has revitalized the town of Cotati itself. First of all, several more mixed-use projects were finished right on the coat tails of FrogSong — other developers and the city itself were no longer afraid of mixed-use development. Seasoned but skittish developers were emboldened to build in a more traditional and more profitable manner. The lack of setbacks brings an “outdoor room” quality to the streetscape and makes the scale more comfortable to pedestrians. So along with outdoor tables, produce, and other wares such as antique furniture, merchants spill



*Life between the houses... sans autos.*

### Living “Down the Lane”

One of the original founders of this cohousing community, Will (age 86) wanted to live near his daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren. He wanted to live down the lane so he could spend time with them readily and easily. He wanted to live with them, but not *with* them.

Will's dreams came true when he and his family moved into FrogSong Cohousing. He and the members of his family were just a few doors apart, had dinner together frequently in the common house, and spent time socializing along the lane.

Will lived out the remaining six years of his life at FrogSong, and when he passed the community remembered him with a very large and heartfelt memorial. The residents of FrogSong continue to show an immense amount of appreciation for Will and what he brought to the community both as a founding member and a long-time resident. Will was thoughtful, creative, and easy to spend time with. People sometimes say that cohousing re-creates a traditional village. Will's experience demonstrates this truth. Not only did Will spend the last years of his life “down the lane” from his own family, but he did so among an extended family called FrogSong Cohousing.



*Kids' heaven.*



*And where the adults can be adults.*



*Dinner at the common house terrace.*

out onto the sidewalk, making the entire streetscape more human and much more populated than almost all others, especially compared to the strip commercial areas of Sonoma County.

The community encourages others to try combining residential with commercial uses: complementary parking (commercial by day, residential by night); a neighborhood outdoor realm; a public bike lane through private property; adding color to the street and the neighborhood; a new and frequented bus stop; new housing right in the downtown of small town America; shared, edible landscaping; the list goes on and on. FrogSong demonstrates what we can do with redevelopment, new public transportation, and kid-, elderly-, and pedestrian-friendly development. Residents walk to city hall, to shopping, to restaurants, to all the services almost all other patrons are driving to. Good planning is where we have to go, and communities like FrogSong, although they are still way too rare, are leading the way.

## Planning Hurdles and Successes

The development process for FrogSong was not free of obstacles. For example, when the residents wanted to do all of their landscaping themselves after move-in, the adjacent neighbors were not supportive, the city was not supportive, and there was significant protesting at city hall. Nearby residents and town officials feared the site would go unattended for too long and would remain in its unfinished state. Ultimately, the group was allowed to go ahead with its landscape plan, and soon had a couple of intense workdays. Today there are 77 fruit trees between the houses, and state-of-the-art xeriscaping

(water-conserving landscaping) and permaculture. The once-concerned neighbors frequently visit FrogSong for guided tours of its cutting-edge inter-urban landscaping.

In conventional American development schemes, many of the planning procedures (such as single-use zoning and pre-move-in landscaping) make it very difficult for people to undertake more intelligent solutions (like mixed-use planning and resident-implemented landscaping). Although these rules were established to protect consumers, they end up impeding progress toward the very goals we as a society say we seek, such as safer, less auto-dominated neighborhoods. When it was completed in 2003, FrogSong Cohousing was the first mixed-use development in Cotati, California, for 30 years.

In total it features 30 units, a common house, plus 7,500 square feet of commercial space. Since then, several other local



## Goals of the Site Plan: Nature and Landscaping

- Sense of humor/whimsical landscape
- Lots of visibility
- Ability to graze the edible landscape
- Pleasant outdoor environment
- Comfortable for walking
- Gradients of light
- Low-tech/permaculture approach to environmental sensitivity
- Allows for changes over time/evolving landscape
- Places for sanctuary



*"Bringing back the traditional color, form, and detail make me smile, everyday," said one resident.*



*Inside a cafe at FrogSong's commercial space.*

developers have followed suit to create other mixed-use developments. FrogSong Cohousing has demonstrated that a small group of people working with experienced

professionals can not only develop a better-than-average neighborhood, but can also revitalize a small town.



*The bedroom at the top of the tower . . .  
Someone had to have it.*



*The common workshop illustrates, as well as anything else, what cohousing brings to the table: a common realm. Not the public (roads, hospitals, schools, parks), which too often feel as if they belong to everyone but no one. Nor is it private. It's yours and ours. A manageable and accountable scale. If you leave it messy you know you will lose the respect of Jim and Sarah and the other people who regularly use the shop — so you don't.*

## How FrogSong Got its Name

We usually tell groups before construction to pick a name and not belabor it, since we've seen it become one of the most difficult issues to agree upon. The Cotati group debated the name during the planning and design phase without a conclusion. Finally, one of the members suggested they wait until after move in, in order to "see what the land says to us." That sounded like an appropriate thing to do since nothing else had worked.

The winter after the move-in there was a lot of rainfall, which ripened the pond created to catch rain-water and avoid runoff into the storm drain. Hundreds of frogs converged on the pond, creating a cacophony of croaking for weeks. When we revisited the process of naming the community, "FrogSong" was the one that stuck.



## Hearthstone Cohousing

### *The Catalyst to a Larger New Urbanist Neighborhood*

**North Denver, Colorado**

**32 Units**

**Architect:**

**McCamant & Durrett Architects**

**Completed: 2002**

**Tenure: Private ownership**

**Common House: 3,500 sq.ft.**

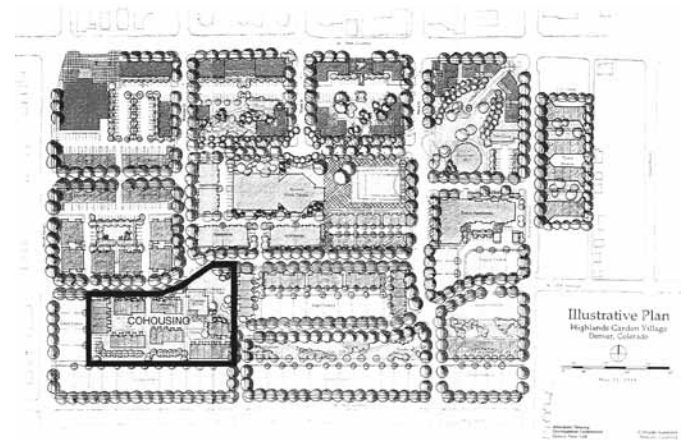
The larger neighborhood of North Denver, in which Hearthstone Cohousing is located, is one of the city's "oldest and most diverse." It is rich in mixed use, including retail and offices near homes. Hearthstone is located close to public libraries, schools, parks, coffee shops, restaurants, community theaters, stadiums, a children's museum, an amusement park, and bike paths.

It is difficult at times to determine exactly where this cohousing community itself ends and the larger community begins. Hearthstone Cohousing is a perfect "fit." But without Hearthstone Cohousing, the

neighborhood would have been a very different place.

### **Relating to a Larger Neighborhood**

Hearthstone Cohousing was the first cohousing community in America to be built within



*The 32-unit cohousing community, a small part of a larger neighborhood, was catalytic to the new urbanist neighborhood, and key to its economic and social success.*

a new urbanist development, but because of its success, there are many more in the planning phase today. Completed in 2002, it consists of a 1.6-acre site of mixed-sized housing. It is a part of a larger 27-acre urban infill development, Highlands Garden Village, built on the old Elitch Gardens Amusement Park site.

Infill projects are difficult for reasons as varied as the sites themselves. However,

*You can do better than fitting into the neighborhood, you can make the neighborhood.*



## New Urbanism

The New Urbanism movement was started in the 1980s by a group of architects, planners, and thinkers hoping to reinvigorate neighborhoods and communities through new development based on the success of traditional neighborhoods in the US. New Urbanism encourages mixed-use neighborhoods with discernible centers, ample public space, diverse housing types, quality architecture and urban design, increased density (higher than typical suburban development), access to public transportation, and sustainable building techniques (energy-efficiency, resource preservation, pedestrian-friendly, local production). The principles of New Urbanism have had a profound effect on new housing development by encouraging mixed-use, higher density, walkable neighborhoods located near public transportation.

because the new community of Highlands Garden Village made a variety of improvements to the larger neighborhood, the project moved forward where others have floundered. The catalyst to these improvements was Hearthstone. In fact, cohousing made the new “village” possible in a variety of ways:

1. Cohousing provided the first residents for a larger neighborhood, a great benefit because it is often difficult to attract the first residents to a new project.
2. The cohousing group helped make the project viable from a business standpoint.
3. The first residents were already a community prior to move-in. This sense of community was created through focused but fun design workshops that helped build the cohousing group, both in terms of interpersonal relationships and the physical neighborhood. This sense of community helped catalyze more.
4. The cohousing group demonstrated what a neighborhood could be. They learned how to navigate the process of honing wide-ranging and diverse ideas into a single vision and how to implement that vision effectively. In this way, they became a model for the rest of Highlands Garden Village.

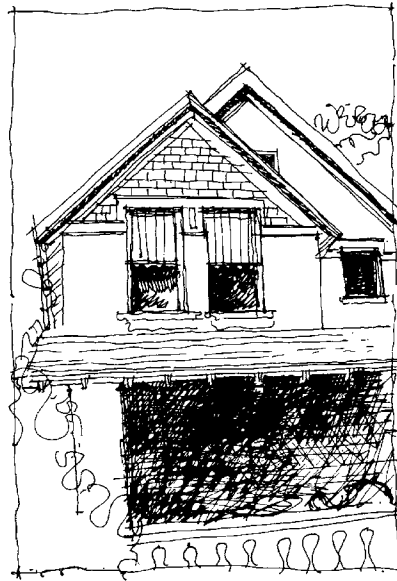
By speaking out for good decision-making and by participating as skillful facilitators, Hearthstone Cohousing helped earn support for the Highlands Garden Village project from the larger neighborhood. Before the development, the area had a reputation as an unattractive living environment. Yet the life manifested between the buildings in this new cohousing community stimulated

people's curiosities, and Hearthstone Cohousing quickly earned a standout reputation in North Denver. Non-cohousers were drawn to the site, to the point where Hearthstone residents had to put up an arbor at the front of the community to let visitors know that the grounds were "not public." Conversely, they welcomed outside visitors by successfully initiating neighborhood-wide festivities in the larger Highlands Garden Village community.

### Getting It Built

In late January 1999, McCamant & Durrett Architects led a weekend workshop for the site plan design. The members of the cohousing group decided to place the common house at the northeast corner of the site, with a view to most of the houses and near a neighborhood park. The common house workshop was held in March, the private house workshop in April, the design closure workshop in May, prioritization in June, and the design development workshop was finished in July. In other words, it all moved at a rapid but deliberate pace. At the same time, the process never feels fast enough to anyone except the poor draftspeople back at the computer trying to get everything documented fast enough, so that the plans are as energy-efficient as promised, so that it doesn't leak — things that don't get appreciated until they don't work. Of the five new associated neighborhoods built by the same developer, the cohousing was finished first. Construction began in the fall of 2000.

We have worked on about ten cohousing projects associated with larger development initiatives. In every such project, the cohousing component has been completed first.



*Local architectural heritage.*



*Architecture that feels like it belongs there, like the entire place, would be remiss without it. Anybody can just put something somewhere. To make it integral to the place, that is the trick.*

Why is it that a cohousing group always seems to work faster than a traditional developer? See the accompanying sidebar for our theories.

A small sample of an elaborate 60 page program. In a total of about 10 days the making of a uniquely human neighborhood emerged.

### Challenges


One of the most challenging aspects of the building and development process of Hearthstone Cohousing was designing the project into the existing neighborhood so that it would "fit." Once people understood that the style of the buildings was going to integrate into the architecture of the older surroundings, including Victorian and

Craftsman architectural styles, we went on to blend Hearthstone Cohousing in other ways as well, such as with highly integrated pedestrian paths.

Hearthstone Cohousing required 15 units per acre of development. This requirement made it challenging to create a flow in the porches, and to ensure that enough sunshine got to each house. We were able to


**PROGRAM FOR SPECIFIC OUTDOOR AREAS**

PLACE	ACTIVITIES	CHARACTER	RELATIONSHIP	DETAILS
Regular storage	Recycling		Close contact with adjacent units. Could be adjacent to 1st or 2nd story outdoor area.	Community bins for reuse


**PROGRAM FOR SPECIFIC OUTDOOR AREAS**

PLACE	ACTIVITIES	CHARACTER	RELATIONSHIP	DETAILS
Small private area	Bathing Swimming (shower) Climbing (below porch) Garden beds Picnics Tie-in porch, up Road mail Bicycle parking	10' wide or 8' deep (shower) Large for kids going in & out Tie-in porch, up Tie-in to 1st or 2nd story Covers front stoop	Looking out to common areas Not more than a 2-3 steps up Tie-in to 1st or 2nd story Covers front stoop	Community shower nearby Bicycle parking nearby


**PROGRAM FOR SPECIFIC OUTDOOR AREAS**

PLACE	ACTIVITIES	CHARACTER	RELATIONSHIP	DETAILS
Private space	Entertaining friends Kidding Kissed Family discussions Dining alone Reading Sunbathing (Hammock) Art projects Eating Kidding Hanging Eating Grooming Eating alone	Backpack of each unit Shower and level of privacy needs vary Covers all access from porch/stoop	Looking out to common areas Tie-in to 1st or 2nd story Covers front stoop	Community shower nearby Bicycle parking nearby

**PROGRAM FOR SPECIFIC OUTDOOR AREAS**

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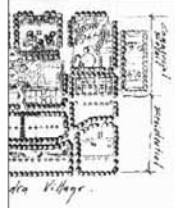
**FOR THE SITE PLAN**

The "fit" is in form in a good way. It is not too big, and it is not too small. It is just what we need to be successful in our purpose.

It is not too big, and it is not too small. It is just what we need to be successful in our purpose.

It is not too big, and it is not too small. It is just what we need to be successful in our purpose.

It is not too big, and it is not too small. It is just what we need to be successful in our purpose.



  

**NORTH DENVER COHOUSING**

**SITE DESIGN PROGRAM FOR A COHOUSING COMMUNITY IN DENVER, COLORADO**

Developed from a master plan meeting facilitated by the Urban Development Corporation

January 10 - February 1, 1995

**I. INTRODUCTION**

**Background**

North Denver Cohousing (NDC) is a group of individuals interested in living in a community in Denver, Colorado, and specifically in a site in the new Highlands Center (Village 700) on 16th and Colorado (Annapolis Park) streets. Highlands Center is a new area of houses, shops, and offices, with a new street layout and a new park. The 28-acre development will include several hundred units of housing including single-family homes, town houses, duplexes, apartments, senior housing, and a cohousing community.

The Board of the Highlands Development Company approved the site plan for the development of a cohousing community in the Highlands Center, NDC, located at 16th and Colorado in response to the Board's interest in the possibility of creating a cohousing community in this location.

This Program is the preliminary stage of design for the site.



accommodate both requirements, and other details, thus providing residents with pleasant outdoor spaces that encouraged neighbors to sit and have conversations. The success of these design details in facilitating community is evident on a daily basis in Hearthstone. These details have also impacted the larger community in unanticipated ways: “There are five homeowner associations at Highland’s Garden Village, and they all hold their

regular meetings in the cohousing common house, and the cohousers often facilitated them,” says Chuck Perry, the developer of Highland’s Garden Village.

### The Common House

The common house is at the center of the Hearthstone Cohousing community. This 3,500-square-foot facility includes a large dining area and meeting space, a high-capacity

### From the Hearthstone Site Program: Architectural Image

The North Denver neighborhood has a variety of architectural heritages, notably a unique interpretation of turn-of-the-century Victorian and Craftsman styles. All new developments at Highland Gardens Village are obligated to incorporate strong elements from either of these two architectural styles. At the same time, it is important that the houses look good and be well-proportioned and elegant at a basic level.



*Local  
architectural  
study.*

### Why Cohousing Groups Out-perform Traditional Developers

- A. Motivation. Once a group gets started and the picture of their new community begins to come into focus, real motivation kicks in. Future residents are motivated to move in — and motivated residents move projects forward.
- B. Know-How. Groups that undergo highly facilitated workshops have the essential tools and plans they need to move forward expeditiously.
- C. Money. Cohousing is not a speculative enterprise. Hence, cohousing groups bring working capital to their project.
- D. Market Forces. The group isn’t incessantly second guessing the market — they are the market.
- E. Friendly Faces. Future neighbors of a cohousing community are less fearful of actual, new neighbors than they are of an anonymous development company.
- F. Entitlements. The identified future residents bring real faces with real obvious consequences of delay. “I’d like to enroll my daughter into the high school next fall” really comes up, and people really respond to these seemingly compelling needs to move forward.

kitchen, a children’s playroom, a laundry room, and more. A large south-facing patio provides an appealing area where residents linger after dinner or gather for celebrations.

Residents wanted the common house to be easily accessible for themselves and attractive to the whole neighborhood. That said, they also wanted their neighborhood to

be well defined, to discourage public traffic through it, and wanted the common house and the shared green space in the common interior courtyard to be a “non-public” space. Privacy remains a sensitive issue with regards to the larger community because outside residents sometimes treat the privately owned cohousing community as a public space. At

## The Front Porch

Everyone knows what a front porch is. It’s the outside entrance to a residence with an option to sit and chat or just relax. It is the welcoming room. It’s an open-air place where public life meets private life. How complicated can porches be? As it turns out, in cohousing design, a lot more goes into every detail than meets the eye.

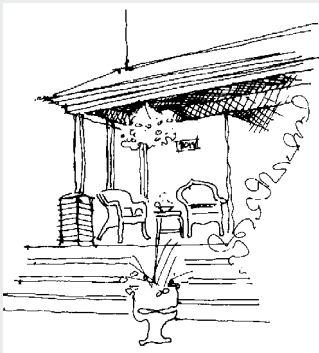
In the case of Hearthstone Cohousing, each residence required a minimum of 6’ 6” of usable front porch (from the outside of the house to the inside of the rail). In addition, “the appropriate overhang at both front and rear porches must keep the door dry, provide for appropriate levels of shading and natural light based on orientation and the climate, and

created very definite sense of place *and* beautiful architecture.”

In practical terms, the front porch (and the back deck, too) had to be wide enough to furnish one side of the door with a small table and three to four chairs, and provide an area to store things like snow shovels on the other side of the door. We designed this storage area to accommodate a box that doubled as a bench. This storage bench, in turn, made the porch more space-efficient and easier to furnish. Handrails for porches were set at 30 inches to demark territory, but perchable, except where code required 36 inches.

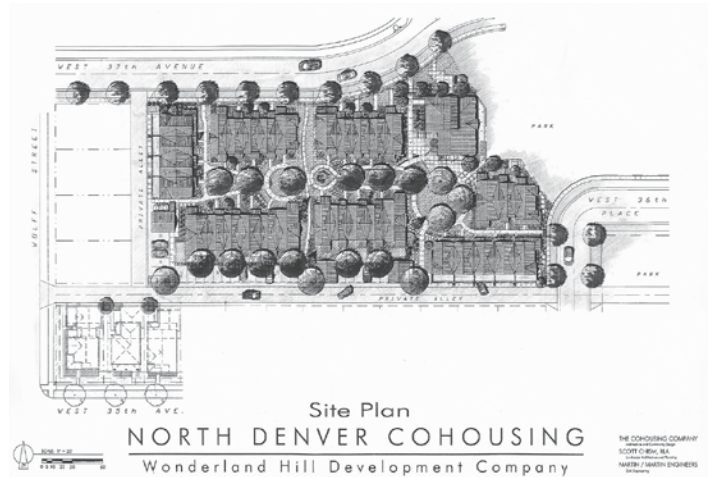
Left: *Early sketch.*

Right: *Neighborhood context . . . real front porches.*



times, cohousing residents need to remind their neighbors that walking through the community grounds is like walking through a private yard. However, they understand that these small problems are the price of a larger success.

Hearthstone Cohousing has not only influenced its neighbors — the lives of its residents have been significantly enriched. Children and elders thrive between the buildings. Hearthstone represents a clear vision for positively influencing an infill project to create a vital, vibrant neighborhood for all. It underlines the fact that not incorporating cohousing in the New Urbanist communities in the US is the biggest missed opportunity for cohousing — and for New Urbanist neighborhoods — over the last twenty years. New Urbanists feel that a cohousing group might slow them down, when in fact, once the group gets going, they're not interested in going slow and always out accelerate New Urbanist neighborhoods. And cohousing groups are always concerned that New Urbanist neighborhoods are going to be too sterile — yet many of them have turned out to be quite comfortable, especially those with cohousing



Top: *In the cohousing communities no cars are allowed in between the houses. "Autos dominate the rest of our urban experience, here is one place we'd like to live without them dominating."*

Bottom: *Design criteria: "Let's see how cozy we can make the sitting room."*

## General Goals for the Design of Individual Homes

Light	Warm and cozy	Historically referential
Open	Pretty	House plant-friendly
High ceilings	Unfettered	Zoned from one side of house to the other: common to private
View from kitchen to common house	Space and energy efficient	Nooks and crannies
Uncluttered	Good natural ventilation	Mystery
Low maintenance	Variety of textures	Peaceful, quiet—good acoustics
Comfortable	Relaxable	Fun
Unique	Colorful	
	Visually appealing	

communities incorporated into them. As usual, it never pays to operate according to

preconceived notions (prejudices) and better to seek out partnerships that work.

Top Left:  
*Conversations  
after common  
dinner can go on  
for some time.*



Bottom: *Life at  
the common  
terrace on a  
sunny day.*



*Life between the buildings.*



## Life at Hearthstone

*Interview by Francesca Troiani*

Honey Niehaus and her husband Paul have been involved with Hearthstone since the very beginning. Here she relates her story of some of the motivations, challenges, and benefits of living in this community.

**Francesca Troiani:** How did your interest in cohousing develop and evolve?

**Honey Niehaus:** My husband and I are both professionals. We had little children with no grandparents to help, and said to ourselves, "This is crazy, with just the two of us, to raise children." For a while we lived with another couple and shared children and chores, but eventually the other couple got divorced and it ended.

We tried to do it (cohousing) on our own. This is before we even knew about the existence of cohousing itself, about 25 years ago. We lived in a small apartment building and got some people to be partners with us. But we couldn't build a nice communal kitchen with six families, and it fell apart financially.

When our youngest child was a junior in high school, we heard a talk by Katie McCamant in Denver. It was so much like what we had tried to do on our own that we signed up immediately. I'm an accountant and we discovered you have to have 25 to 30 families to make it work financially.

**Francesca:** What was the planning/development process like?

**Honey:** For the three years before moving in, we were heavily involved in every planning meeting. We wanted it to be done right. People who try to do it on their own, without the help of experienced facilitators like Chuck and Katie or Jim Leach, have a much harder time of it. We had the added bonus of knowing what was ahead of us. These kinds of guides and help were good because they were able to keep showing us how it would turn out.

**Francesca:** How were your lives different before and after moving into Hearthstone?

**Honey:** My husband was involved in theater. When he was gone he would leave for up to ten weeks, as well as many weekends, and I always hated it and we would fight. With little children it was too hard. Not long after we moved in he took part in another show, and I thought, I don't have to worry about it because there are people around here to be with. I could always make a plan to do something, but planning ahead is too hard with work and kids, but at cohousing there was already someone sitting around you could go join.

Cooking is my favorite activity here. We had to learn about cooking too much or running out of food and it took us a whole year to learn how to cook for all these people. Now when it's your turn you post a menu, and you cook what you're confident making. But now it's no big deal nor does it cause stress or anxiety. We know who the good cooks are and put at least one on every team. I usually make pasta with a sauce that has all the vegetables plus the kitchen sink. Now when I cook people post: "Pasta with sauce, the way Honey makes it." [laughs]

**Francesca:** How did the project work with the larger neighborhood, and specifically with Highland Gardens Village?

**Honey:** There is a master homeowners' association (HOA) of which we are a small part. When my husband was the president of the committee that was in charge of communication with the larger community, a woman came over to complain about a sign on one of our houses. This was during a time when many of our members as well as others in the larger development were fighting a new Walmart from being built. It was an ugly fight, but in the end we succeeded in getting a Sunflower grocery store built instead of the Walmart. The house had a sign against Walmart 🖱️

on it, and this was against the larger HOA rules. So the neighbor, whose house backed up to Adam's house, came to complain. My husband said, number one, in cohousing we have a rule, you've got to have a direct conversation with the person you're complaining about. Then she said to me, "I don't understand why you're not upset with that sign which will reduce property value."

I told her:

- 1) I care more about Adam than property values.
- 2) I plan to go out of here in a box.
- 3) You should talk to him and he would take it down if he knew how it's harming you.

We certainly deal with HOA very differently than other non-cohousing communities do. We taught our larger HOA they don't have to treat each other in unpleasant ways.

**Francesca:** Can you tell me about your specific role in this community?

**Honey:** Sometimes, when we have a member who is difficult, sometimes more than one, I'm the one who is willing to confront people who might be behind in their dues, or have displayed unacceptable behavior; though I don't see myself as playing this sort of role, I do it, as I'm less good at facilitating meetings. I'm willing to sit and have the hard conversations. For me it's getting over my fear — it's not fun to have conversations with people about things they don't want to hear. Quietly and respectfully, I try to present the position of the community on a certain issue. The process I learned is that I need to be vulnerable in the conversation, and how hard it is for me to say what I am saying, to be uncomfortable about it. I always wish I'd done it sooner. In that way, I guess I play a role as an elder, or something, although I'm still young [laughs]. [Honey is about sixty years old.]

**Francesca:** Can you tell me about any members in the community that have had a memorable impact for you?

**Honey:** Aaron was an older member of the community, a retired physics professor from the University of Colorado. Lots of us loved to hang out with him. His colleague Mortimer Adler started discussion groups on great books, such as *The History of Natural Philosophy*, which were led by Aaron. He died a couple of years ago. At the end of his life he invited everybody to come in and children to be with him as he was dying. My husband (not me) was there and many members including little kids were in his living room. His wife and other cohousers were there at his moment of death. It was a sad, good death. The parents felt it was wonderful children could have the opportunity to say goodbye to him and see his body after he died, as young as they were. He had a huge funeral with family and friends also from the University of Colorado and a wonderful celebration of his life.

Another few members are a couple, Ed and Christine. Ed is a cop from Boulder. When he was in the National Guard he was called to go to Iraq and the community held a goodbye party for him that was extraordinary. We kept a candle lit for him every time we got together and were there to support his wife when she had a miscarriage. Finally he came back and Christine got pregnant and got very ill and had open-heart surgery and the whole community lined up to support her. Her baby, Brian, was at high risk. The child is now almost three years old and very disabled, but the entire community has been supporting them the whole time. A babysitter from the community is a speech therapist and has been an extraordinary support. Brian is not able to walk, talk, or sit up on his own. But he definitely has his own unique place in the community, where we have over twenty children under the age of six. It is quite something to have Brian be a part of a community of children his age.



## Bellingham Cohousing

### *Save the Wetland — Save the Planet*

**Bellingham, Washington**

**33 Units**

**Architects:**

**McCament & Durrett Architects**

**Completed: 2000**

**Tenure: Private ownership**

**Common House: 4,800 sq. ft.**

*The ultimate ecological success of our project will have less to do with building materials and more with the sustainable behaviors we engage in as a community.*

— David M. Longdon,  
Bellingham Cohouser since 1998



*Early sketch of common open space at the entry to Bellingham Cohousing.*

*Northwest  
Scandinavian  
Craftsman  
architecture.*



## Goals of the Site Plan

### *General Feel*

- A well-thought-through design
- Create a sense of discovery throughout the site (magic places)
- Show uniqueness of community (different ways to live)
- Create quiet places

### *Nature and Landscape*

- Optimize solar access to units
- Maintain and enhance integrity of wetlands and creek
- Optimize environmental sustainability

### *Enhance Relationships of People within Community*

- Sense of community
- Safe place for kids
- Encourage connections to outdoors
- Encourage spontaneous interaction
- Create balance between private and common areas
- Create places that help us slow down

### *Physical and Spatial Qualities*

- De-emphasize/minimize role of the automobile
- Screen less desirable views (e.g. trailer park)
- Focus on desirable views (e.g. beautiful mountains)
- Allow for more green space

After a three-year effort, the day of Bellingham Cohousing's grand opening is here. The speeches are inspired and fun. The smiles and laughter are genuine. Thirty-three new dwellings and a common house feel like a rustic Norwegian fishing village. The house colors are vivid, especially when set against the crystal blue sky. During the festivities, one cannot help but admire the phenomenal beauty this group of people has created. The ceremonies end at four p.m. but the residents continue to celebrate their move-in well after dusk. The Bellingham residents wanted their common house to accommodate dancing, and after the opening dinner they danced — and again the night after. Everyone notices that, with construction finally complete, the birds have returned to the site as well.

The founding members of Bellingham Cohousing, Marinus VanDeKamp and Irene MacPherson, first met in the fall of 1995. They, along with other members of their core group, envisioned a new community that would feature sustainable building techniques.

After two years of preparation, the core group of four families put up \$20,000 each to option a site. This is particularly remarkable given that the households had very little money. Kate Nichols, a part-time bookkeeper who earned \$25,000 a year, was a member of the core group. As a single mom, and in very much mama bear fashion, Kate was determined to not raise her six-year-old daughter alone. For her, cohousing was just the solution she was looking for, no matter the financial risk. She and her partners figured that with an option on a site, it would not be difficult for them to expand their group and ease the risk.

However, after six months of effort, the group had not attracted any additional



families to the proposed 33-home cohousing project on a bucolic site one hour north of Seattle (Fairhaven, population 5,000, now a suburb of Bellingham, population 50,000). The group knew the site itself should attract more than enough households: Fairhaven is walking distance from a forest in one direction and a ferry in another. This ferry provided access to the natural wonderlands of the San Juan Islands, Victoria B.C., and Alaska. If the site itself wasn't the problem, then what could the problem be?

We (Katie and Chuck) traveled to Washington State to consult with the group. Independently, we both came to the same conclusion: the group needed more extroverts.

The Cohousing Company vigorously initiated a full-court media marketing effort. They designed a flyer, printed 2,400 copies, and I (Chuck) went back to Bellingham to take the group through an intensive two-day flying campaign:

With 300 flyers in each hand, seven of us descended onto the Bellingham sidewalks. The idea was to walk up to people and ask them if they had heard of cohousing. "Cohousing is a custom neighborhood, we're the future residents. Help plan and organize the community and if you're interested in more, there's a slide show next Thursday night."

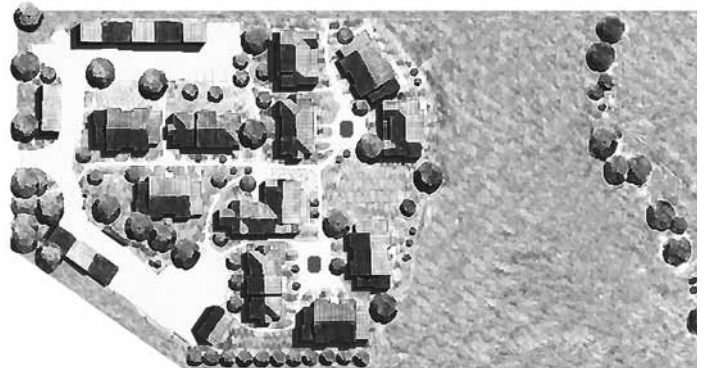
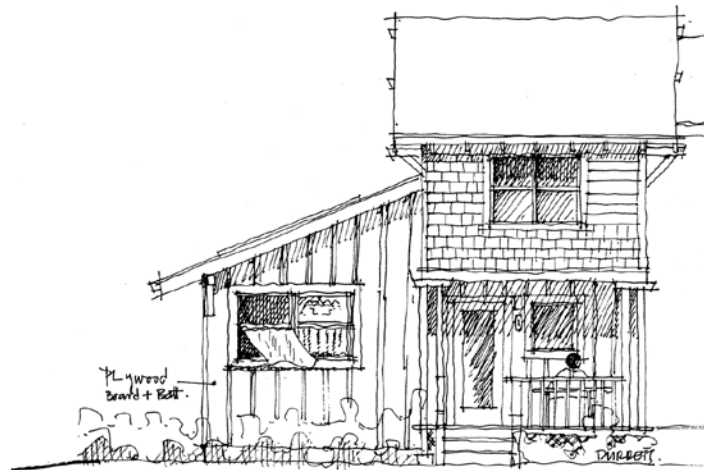
Easy, right? But I noticed that the cohousers would just walk right by people, apparently looking for people that looked just like them. So once that was corrected, each individual successfully handed out 300 flyers.

Then we hit up every bulletin board, childcare center, and church. We also sent news releases to every local and regional newspaper, radio station, T.V. station, and lifestyle magazine. I can only imagine what we would have done with today's internet.

Chuck and the group appeared on a few radio shows. Their releases appeared in the local newspaper. An audience of seventy-five attended the advertised slide show. A half-dozen households joined up soon afterward,

*Top: Original front elevation sketch for the three-bed, two-bath "B" unit.*

*Bottom: Site plan with parking at the periphery, preserving half of the site, lowering costs, and preserving habitat.*



including a couple of extroverts, and the group was secure. A nearby group named Whatcom Ecovillage group also joined up with the cohousing organization. This large group joined forces with Wonderland Hill Development Company, a developer based in Boulder, Colorado, with ample experience in cohousing projects. Together with the group,



*Neighbors on their porches at Bellingham.*



*Friends hanging out on a front porch.*

### **Community Building — That's All We Have**

We aren't going to do it by setting rules and legislating what behavior is. You have to be willing to say: "Not only will I live on these values but I will make decisions based on these values, and I will listen to other people's interpretation of these values and make decisions alongside them."

— Kathleen Nolan, Bellingham Cohousing member<sup>2</sup>

we designed the site plan, common house, and private houses soon thereafter.

### **Sustainability Efforts and Saving the Wetland**

The Bellingham cohousing group intended to have a fully sustainable design. However, they were forced to abandon certain visions due to the economic constraints of building in a short period of time. For example, the group wanted to build with sustainably harvested lumber. Ultimately they didn't because their lumber vendor told them, at the last minute, that the sustainable lumber would cost more per square foot than had been promised. This unforeseen cost increase put sustainable lumber out of reach.<sup>1</sup>

What the group was able to accomplish sustainably, however, much outweighed what they could not. First, they clustered their buildings to minimize impact on the land. All told, their structures only take up less than half of their five-acre site. On their remaining land, the group started a long-term wetlands restoration project. The 33 homes were built using ten buildings, thus significantly reducing the amount of materials that 33 stand-alone homes would have required. The group preserved a farmhouse that was already on-site, and many of the old trees. They created a bioswale, a filtering device for runoff water, which also helps to protect the wetlands. All told, most of the land is open space, and the buildings are out of the wetlands completely.

The homes themselves feature Marmoleum (a linoleum equivalent made with linseed oil and cellulose), carpets made of recycled pop bottles, bamboo flooring, cellulose insulation, low-toxic paints and glues,

sustainably harvested trim wood, advanced framing (for great natural light), and shared water and heating systems. Compact fluorescent lighting was also used to reduce energy costs. Skylights and light tubes increase the light during the day. The frequently used common house and the extensive sharing of resources at Bellingham Cohousing also have a big impact on realizing the group's desire to live more sustainably.

On one occasion, the whole community volunteered hundreds of hours removing non-native species of plants and planting native shrubs and trees on the site. With help from the Bellingham Parks Department, they also spread cardboard and laid a thick layer of mulch all along a population of reed canary grass, helping to eradicate it, which in turn helped the local salmon population. And they had a wonderful time doing it.<sup>3</sup>



*Making brunch at Bellingham cohousing.*



*Ten a.m. coffee is available every day in the common house.*

## Attached Dwellings, Shared Walls

The residents of Bellingham Cohousing discussed the advantages and disadvantages of attached dwellings with shared walls. Keeping their core values intact, the group wanted to determine to what extent their buildings should be free-standing houses, duplexes, triplexes, or larger building blocks. They concluded that

they should decide the actual mixture of building types according to the requirements of the site layout. In addition to important considerations like values and cost, this group also wanted to reduce sound transmission between dwellings.

### *Disadvantages of Attached Houses*

Noise through wall (can't play loud music)  
 Not favorite image of little cottage  
 Lack of light/windows in middle units  
 (good design will solve this)  
 Less interesting roofs

### *Disadvantages of Detached Houses*

Noise through windows (can't play loud music)  
 Doesn't look as nice at this density  
 Use more materials; cost more  
 Use more heat  
 Take up more space

Left:  
*Plentiful  
open space.*



Right:  
*A sun-filled  
lounge for  
relaxing together  
or alone.*



## Pleasant Hill Cohousing

### *Passive Cooling in the Village*

**Pleasant Hill, California**

**32 Units**

**Architects: McCamant & Durrett Architects**

**Completed: 2001**

**Tenure: Condominium**

**Common House: 3,835 sq. ft.**

A group that desires to integrate sustainability with design, and make their community the most cost and environmentally efficient housing project possible, has many options.

As architects we had the challenge to reduce energy use by applying multiple innovations. We shaded windows and designed for cross-ventilation by using built-in awnings and trellises that will grow hops for shading. Another innovation was to include almost



*Architectural  
detail.*



*The architect spending time with the workers seeking the mutual goals of quality construction.*

four-foot overhangs designed specifically to keep direct sunlight out of the houses. We also used radiant barriers to both reduce solar heat gain and reflect 80 percent of the sun's direct radiation. Corrugated metal roofing, low-e windows, thicker gypsum board, and lightweight concrete floors also help dissipate, ventilate, and retain heat, depending on the necessity of the season. A cooling tower in the common house collects and removes hot air from the building, creates a breeze when needed, and evacuates hot air at night, replacing it with night air that cools the building's mass.

Other efficiency techniques used in Pleasant Hill which are not typical of standard housing units include extensive use of natural lighting; dual-purpose water-heaters (providing both potable hot water and radiant heating); efficient water fixtures and lighting; and insulation made with recycled cardboard and newspaper. It's worth noting that the individual homes do not feature fireplaces (for better air sealing).

A less tangible energy efficiency technique is the community itself. Residents choose to sit out on their porch in the evening to cool off and chat. Many residents chose not to install garbage disposal units, to encourage composting. Because they live in cohousing, they share-ride their car trips when it makes sense.



*The unique site plan is unlike any other condominium plan, and more lived in than any single-family house neighborhood in California.*

The result is 25 percent less driving per household compared to neighboring single-family households.

This cohousing community demonstrates what sustainability means in terms of real world choices. 🍃



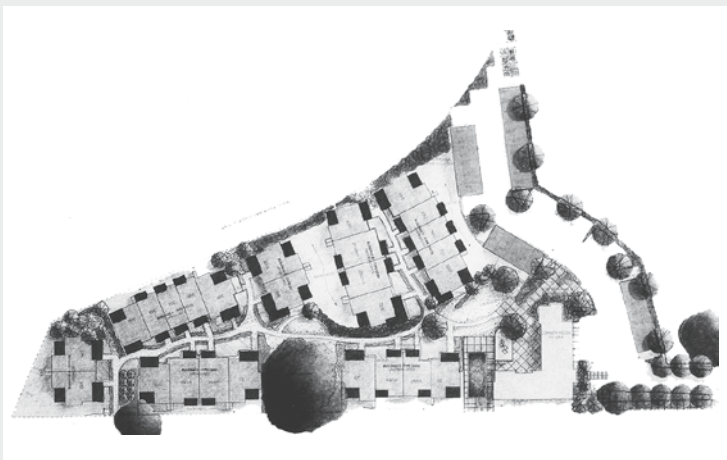
*Damian, on the right, is blind. He likes to sit on his front porch and wait for folks to come by and visit.*



*Playing in the sandbox at the common house.*



*Deck detail.*



The site plan with the common house in the bottom right corner.



A private back patio.

A collection of architectural program sheets for various spaces in a cohousing development. Each sheet is titled "PROGRAM FOR [SPACE]" and contains a table with columns for PLACE, ACTIVITIES, CHARACTER, RELATIONSHIP, and DETAILS. Some sheets also include small sketches or illustrations of the intended use of the space.

**PROGRAM FOR COMMON HOUSE**

PLACE	ACTIVITIES	CHARACTER	RELATIONSHIP	DETAILS
Commons Dining	• Dining	• Local or seasonal light	• Common outdoor dining	• Dining with wheelchair • Dining - common, with • Dining with wheelchair • Dining - common, with • Dining with wheelchair
Commons Living	• Living	• Local or seasonal light	• Common outdoor dining	• Dining with wheelchair • Dining - common, with • Dining with wheelchair

**PROGRAM FOR SPECIFIC OUTDOOR AREAS**

PLACE	ACTIVITIES	CHARACTER	RELATIONSHIP	DETAILS
Barbecue	• Barbecue	• Local or seasonal light	• Common outdoor dining	• Dining with wheelchair • Dining - common, with • Dining with wheelchair

**PROGRAM FOR SPECIFIC OUTDOOR AREAS**

PLACE	ACTIVITIES	CHARACTER	RELATIONSHIP	DETAILS
Children's Play Area	• Children's play	• Local or seasonal light	• Common outdoor dining	• Dining with wheelchair • Dining - common, with • Dining with wheelchair

**PROGRAM FOR COMMON HOUSE**

PLACE	ACTIVITIES	CHARACTER	RELATIONSHIP	DETAILS
Barbecue	• Barbecue	• Local or seasonal light	• Common outdoor dining	• Dining with wheelchair • Dining - common, with • Dining with wheelchair

**PROGRAM FOR COMMON HOUSE**

PLACE	ACTIVITIES	CHARACTER	RELATIONSHIP	DETAILS
Barbecue	• Barbecue	• Local or seasonal light	• Common outdoor dining	• Dining with wheelchair • Dining - common, with • Dining with wheelchair

**PROGRAM FOR COMMON HOUSE**

PLACE	ACTIVITIES	CHARACTER	RELATIONSHIP	DETAILS
Barbecue	• Barbecue	• Local or seasonal light	• Common outdoor dining	• Dining with wheelchair • Dining - common, with • Dining with wheelchair

A sample of the design program facilitated by McCamant & Durrett Architects.



## Muir Commons

### *First Steps Toward an American Model*

**Davis, California**

**26 Units**

**Programming and Schematic Design:**

**McCamant & Durrett Architects/  
The Cohousing Company**

**Construction Documents:**

**Dean Unger Associates**

**Completed: 1991**

**Tenure: Condominium**

**Common House: 3,670 sq. ft.**

From the central lawn at Muir Commons in Davis, California, the view east or west down the pedestrian lanes offers a thriving landscape of native Californian plants, vegetable gardens, and young fruit trees. Paths wind from house to house, dotted with abandoned tricycles. Every few minutes a mob of children thunders by, some running, others on roller skates, racing from one end of the 2.6-acre site to the other. As the heat of the day subsides, residents emerge from their homes. They have invited the surrounding

neighbors to a potluck dinner, and it is time to prepare for the guests.

Completed in August of 1991 after almost three years of effort on the part of its residents, its developer, and The Cohousing Company, Muir Commons was the first cohousing community to be built in the United States. It has broken new ground and stands as an inspiration for other communities to follow. It has hosted countless curious guests and fielded inquiries from across the country. But tonight, as residents and neighbors gather around tables brought out from the common

*Children playing on the lawn.*



house and children tumble on the lawn, Muir Commons simply feels like home.

### **A New Development for a Progressive City**

In late 1988, fueled by the intuitive guess that Davis would be ripe for cohousing, we organized a slide presentation that led to the formation of the Muir Commons community. Most key participants learned about the cohousing concept that night, including future residents and the enthusiastic head of the planning commission, who was later a strong advocate for the project at the city level. Also attending the slide show was Virginia Thigpen, a developer with West Davis Associates, a company that was planning a 110-acre subdivision on the edge of town. She had come in search of a new model to fulfill the city's requirement that 25 percent of all new housing be affordable to moderate-income households.

A university town with a reputation for innovation, Davis is an ideal location for a cohousing community. With land and funding already in place, West Davis Associates offered future cohousing residents an opportunity to pioneer a new style of housing, while incorporating affordability. Thigpen explains:

I have always believed that community can be fostered through design, and I thought some aspects of cohousing would also lend themselves to affordability — for example, the clustered parking, the higher density, and the smaller living spaces.

### **Developing Muir Commons**

In choosing to work with a developer, the resident group was able to bypass the one

to two years most groups need just to find and secure a site. Many of the details that can delay the cohousing process — working out legal agreements, hiring professionals, finding financing — were undertaken by the developer.

The residents were able to save time and effort, but they ended up sacrificing some degree of control. The project's architect and builder had already been chosen, and although the developer encouraged a participatory process, residents never signed a formal agreement defining the extent of their voice in the decision-making. The group constantly struggled to ensure that their opinions were taken into account on basic decisions and the developer, under their interpretation of what would build the project quickly and keep the budget low, expressed impatience with the group decision-making process.

The architectural firm had many years of experience in conventional housing design, but little knowledge of how to use participatory process to integrate residents' opinions into the plans. The firm presented drawing after drawing of potential site layouts, but residents could neither agree on any one plan nor decide on modifications. Without a common set of agreed-upon design criteria for the site, they had nothing on which to base a critique. The residents were missing the most basic, normal cohousing design elements and, in frustration, they hired McCamant and Durrett Architects to start over, and to facilitate a programming process and develop conceptual designs, which the local architect would then complete. Thigpen expressed concern that hiring consultants six months into the project would cause expensive delays, but the residents were convinced that it was



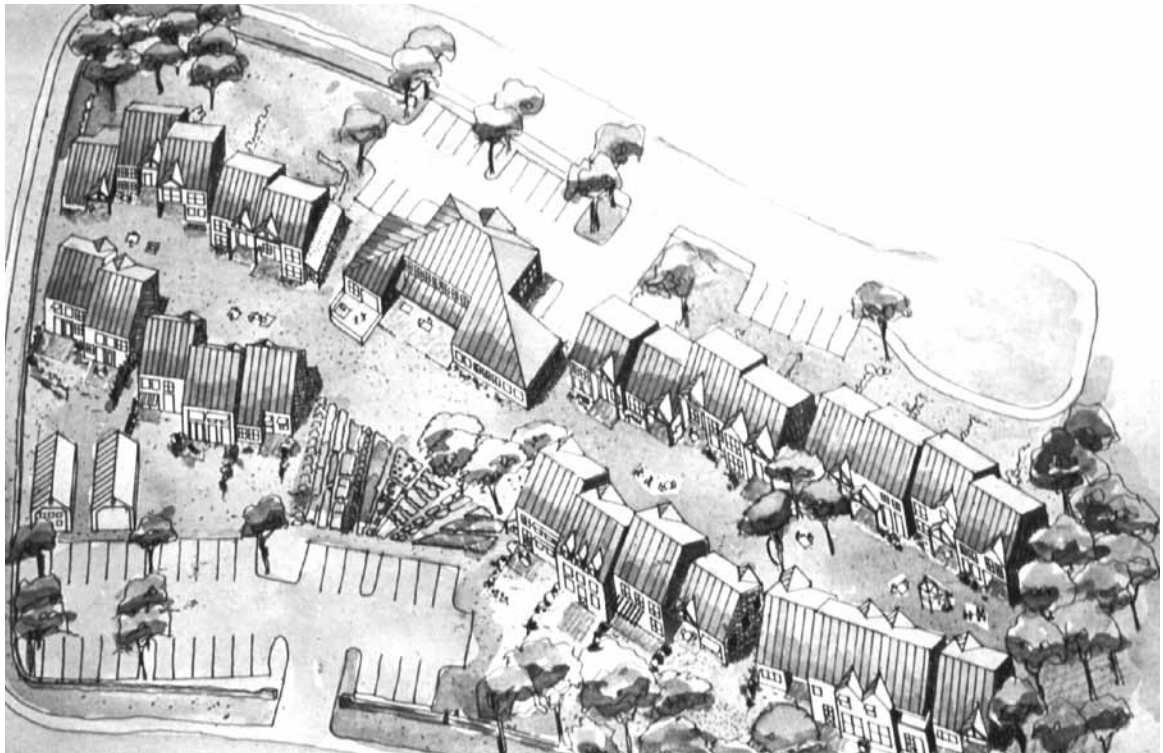
the only way to ensure that the community's design met their needs. The developer's concern was unfounded. The designs were completed in three months because the group had taken the time to develop a clear, consistent process. As one resident, Daniel Mount Joy, put it, "before we had a clear process we argued incessantly. Once we did there was no acrimony, we simply built the project one decision at a time."

### The Participatory Design Process

Effective architectural design begins long before the drawings are produced, through the process of programming — defining



*The resident group works with The Cohousing Company on the design of their community.*



*Schematic site design: Common house, terrace, tot lot, garden, gathering nodes, wood and auto shop, orchard.*



*Site planning workshop.*



*Although each home has a private backyard, front yard landscaping reflects individual taste and neighbors have a place to interact with each other while keeping an eye on the children.*

### Site Issues

- How does the community present itself to the surrounding neighborhood? How will the community and the neighborhood interact?
- What circulation patterns will feel most comfortable and encourage casual interaction?
- How will common areas relate to private areas?
- How can residents' needs for privacy be addressed?

the goals and criteria that a design will aim to meet. Thoughtful participatory design, involving as many future residents as possible, is the key to a successful cohousing community. But how is this accomplished? It can be difficult enough for a couple to agree on what color to paint their kitchen, let alone for 26 families to agree on the design of a site or a common house.

A series of programming meetings facilitated by The Cohousing Company and attended by 25 to 35 people each served to focus the discussions of the Muir Commons residents. Acting as facilitators, The Cohousing Company encouraged residents to explore their goals for the site layout and the designs of the common house and private houses. The results of these discussions were consolidated into a 20-page written program — an outline of the specific criteria (goals, activities, and spaces) the group had agreed were most important to meet in the site plan — which received group consensus approval. Then, over two, very fun (if not exciting) evenings, we put together a site plan with the group.

Using plans of the vacant site, woodblock houses, and plenty of construction paper, the group assessed different layouts based on the criteria outlined in the program. On one memorable day, residents marked out an entire house plan in string and filled it with furniture to see the size and layout of the houses they were designing. These visual tools made it easier for the group to reach agreement on the final design.

The group was pleased to see how well the evolving plans addressed the goals they had outlined. For most of the future residents, designing their own homes and neighborhood

## The Programming Process

The Muir Commons residents agreed upon a clear program of goals and priorities for the use of the site and a well-defined list of spaces to meet those goals before any site layout was drawn up. From a brainstormed list of goals for their community, the participants identified all of the activities they wanted to incorporate on the site, outlining detailed needs for each activity. They were then able to determine and define the space that each activity would require. For instance, the participants brainstormed the following list of goals:

- Spend time outdoors
- Interact with other residents

- Feel comfortable being outdoors in a bathing suit (i.e., screened from the larger world)
- Grow food for private and common use
- Teach children about nature

These goals led to the identification of key activities, for example:

**Activity:** Gardening

From the precise definition of a given activity, the group could identify specific spaces, e.g.

**Space:** Private and common gardens, away from the road, with children's learning area

was a challenging new experience. Thinking back on the site design process, Jane, a Muir Commons resident, remembers:

One of our first topics was privacy versus public space. Although most of us wanted to stop off at the common house on the way home, I can be a grouch for a while after work, and want to be able to stop at home first. I can do that — sneak through the orchard into my living room through the back door. But when I feel sociable, which is most of the rest of the time, a stroll back toward the common house is certain to result in an encounter with the smiling face of a friend or the chatter of a child. I find myself stepping out the front door often, just to see who's out there.

The 26 two- and three-bedroom units range in size from 800 to 1,400 square feet.

Residents own land in front and back of their units and share ownership of the common outdoor space and facilities. Over half of the residents qualified for subsidies from the developer or second mortgages from the city to enable them to afford to purchase their home. Many folks have expanded their houses since the original construction.

## The Program Makes the Difference

The design work accomplished by the Muir Commons residents during these months demonstrates the importance of a written program — a well-defined outline of the prioritized goals, activities, and spaces for the site — for building consensus. When they had been asked to evaluate designs previously without a program, the ensuing discussions had been inconclusive and random. Once the group had a solid program on which to base their design decisions, they could reach agreement and present a united opinion to the architect and the developer.

## A New Etiquette for a New Type of Housing

A wide variety of individuals and family types are represented in Muir Commons. Of the 26 households, almost half are singles or couples with no children at home. The remaining single-parent and two-parent families have about twenty children between them, none of whom ever lacks playmates. Daniel, a parent of two young children, remarked on what a difference living in a cohousing community made:

Every morning the kids wake up early and fly out the door to play with their friends. They can't wait to get out of the house; the TV is completely forgotten.

By the time they were finally able to move into their homes, the residents had spent two and a half years meeting and planning. They had gotten to know each other well and their children had become good friends. Nevertheless, it took some time to settle into their new way of living, to establish boundaries

and invent etiquette for situations they had never before encountered. According to one Muir Commons resident:

It took a while to get used to, to learn how to live in, this environment. Do I have to say hello every time I walk by people, or is it okay to keep to myself sometimes? If two people are talking in a yard, how do I know whether it's polite to join in or if I'm being intrusive? My son had to learn that it's all right for him to say that he just wants to play by himself sometimes.

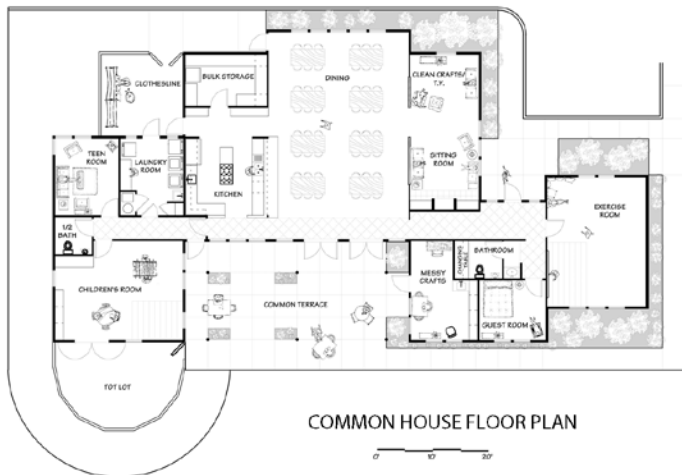
## Respect and Inclusion

The common house presented another opportunity for residents to rethink unspoken standards. Soon after moving in, residents had established a common house committee to schedule private events and resolve policy questions: Is it fair to ask 25 other households to stay out of the common house, even for a short period of time, so that a private party can be held? Or can they come and go in the rest of the house without participating in the private event? Is it impolite or awkward not to invite them? Many cohousing communities have the policy with a private party to open it up to the community after 10 p.m. — it gives the party a new life (or in some cases, any life at all). Many of these issues are resolved without formal policy; residents have found that their respect and concern for each other guide their actions.

## Accommodating Visitors

As they learned about living together as a community, the residents of Muir Commons became proficient at fielding visitors. During their first year in their new homes, residents

Common house plan.



welcomed dozens of journalists, photographers, and individuals from around the world, all interested in exploring the country's first cohousing community. To minimize the disruption to their lives, the group determined that two days each month would be set aside for tours. A list of guidelines for visitors was established and posted in the common house (see sidebar).

Twenty years after moving in, Muir Commons residents are certainly settled into their new community. In the common house, bulletin boards are neatly divided into sections for meal sign-up and announcements, committee agendas and minutes, community activities, and items of general interest. Meals are available in the common house several times a week, with an average of 50 percent of the residents participating on any given night. Younger children don't remember living anywhere else, and for older children like ten-year-old Robin, previous neighborhoods are a place where "I didn't know anyone."

With all that they have accomplished in designing their community — working

through the legal and practical aspects of bringing into being a new kind of housing, dealing with the frustrations and challenges



*Common House gathering.*



*Children hanging out in front of the common house.*

## Muir Commons Committees

**Communications:** Oversees media and public relations as well as ensuring the smooth flow of communications within the community.

**Architectural Review:** Reviews and approves additions or exterior renovations to the private houses.

**Garden:** Takes care of ongoing garden maintenance.

**Governance:** Oversees the management of the community.

**Children's Issues:** Addresses concerns relating to the community's children.

**Landscape:** Reviews and develops the landscape plan.

**Common House:** Oversees the use of the common house.

**Meals:** Ensures the smooth provision of five meals each week.

**Community Spirit:** Plans social events and celebrations.

**Finance:** Keeps the accounts, assesses residents as needed.

**Coordinating Committee:** Includes one member from each of the above committees; oversees the smooth running of the community and sets the agenda for common meetings.

*Landscaping is an integral part of the environment's design.*



of real estate development, and learning what it takes to work and live together — the Muir Commons residents are finding satisfaction in their way of life. The mechanisms and designs they established to make their lives easier and more pleasant are living up to their promise.

## Muir Commons Guidelines to Visitors

(Posted in the common house)

Dear Friends:

The 26 households that live here welcome you to our living room, otherwise known as the Common House! We are delighted when our fellow cohousers have social events here, which may be why you are visiting today. You will probably want to know the guidelines we have for ourselves and others in this building and on the Muir Commons grounds, so we list them below:

- We eat in the dining room, and keep the other Common House rooms for non-food activities.
- Our pets stay in our individual yards, or are leashed. They are not invited into the Common House.
- We take turns cleaning up this Common House every weekend. We pick up after ourselves, and we ask that you do the same.
- We don't smoke in the Common House.
- We ask that any visiting children be with a resident, or with their parent or guardian, when in the Common House.
- If you wish to walk around outside in Muir Commons, please ask a resident to show you around. Or, you may arrange to have someone give you a guided tour.
- If you want more information about Muir Commons, you may arrange for a briefing or a tour. Any resident can tell you whom to contact.



## Doyle Street

### *An Urban Neighborhood*

**Emeryville, California**

**12 Units**

**Architects:**

**McCamant & Durrett Architects**

**Completed: 1992**

**Tenure: Condominium**

**Common House: 2,100 sq. ft.**

On a Saturday morning in May, in a deserted warehouse in the small industrial town of Emeryville, California, a group of fifty strangers met for the first time. Wandering through the large red-brick structure bisected by heavy steel beams, they gazed up at the towering ceilings and tried to imagine what it might be like to live there. As introductions were made, the visitors found they had one thing in common: all of them were searching for a sense of community among neighbors, which they lacked in their current housing. Out of this commonality, the Doyle Street Cohousing Community was born.

Today, 12 households live in beautiful artistic homes that retain the feel of the original building. High ceilings and large windows make the dwellings airy and spacious; the old brick gives them warmth. The delights of San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley are minutes away, and Emeryville has changed

*A new story over the renovated one-story factory (brick) for a total of 12 units on .29 acres.*



*Design workshops in the abandoned factory.*



*Under construction.*



considerably and today offers cafes and art galleries. But the focal point is a community of neighbors who have transformed the industrial urban environment into a safe and comfortable home.

### **A New Approach in a Difficult Market**

By early 1990, the Cohousing Company had been giving workshops and slide shows — and looking for buildable sites in the San Francisco Bay Area — for almost two years. Cohousing groups were meeting throughout the area, but sites were expensive and hard to come by. We knew that if a cohousing community could be built here, in one of the toughest real estate markets in the country,

one could be built anywhere. We were looking for a chance to prove it.

### **The Place — Renovating an Existing Building**

That February, the owner of the vacant warehouse approached us. He had heard of the cohousing concept and was interested in pursuing something other than “brand X development.” He would act as project developer and secure construction financing. After assessing the project’s financial and design feasibility, we agreed to spearhead the organization of 12 loft-style cohousing condominiums and act as project architect, project manager, and chief organizer. By the time of the initial workshop later that May, 14 households had signed up for the project, each paying an initial fee of \$150.

To renovate the building, the existing brick warehouse was gutted and incorporated into the new construction. The addition of a second level allowed for 12 units sized from 780 to 1,600 square feet, plus common facilities of about 2,100 square feet. Prices for the dwellings were comparable to similar housing in the area. Residents own their own condominium units plus a share of the common areas through a homeowners’ association. Common facilities include a sitting area with a wood stove, a kitchen and dining room, a children’s playroom, a workshop/rec room, a storage area, a laundry room, and a hot tub.

The individual units echo the original shape and character of the building. Each front door opens on a common patio or terrace, landscaped by the residents to provide as much greenery as possible on the small urban site. Lofts in the bedrooms take advantage of the high ceilings, while individually chosen



fireplaces, skylights, and floor finishes make each dwelling unique.

A neighborhood park and a community garden within a couple of blocks of the development soften the urban environment and provide a setting for interacting with the larger neighborhood.

## The People

What sort of person would want to live in a pioneering community in an old warehouse? From the start, the project appealed to an enthusiastic group of couples and singles, including a retired professor and his wife, an attorney raising her daughter, and a couple with two young children. For these busy people, the cohousing concept offered practicality and the potential for easing the isolation of a fast-paced, urban existence. The members of the 12 households of the Doyle Street Cohousing Community are city dwellers at heart. They appreciate the variety of people and activities to be found in an urban environment. They also appreciate the diversity of their own community.

Margaret, a woman raising her teenage granddaughter, was ready for a change when she moved in. After her husband's death, their large, formal house had become more of a burden than a pleasure. Margaret wanted to expose both her granddaughter and herself to a broader community of people. Through the planning and design process, she discovered speaking, facilitating, and design skills she never knew she had.

Chris is representative of the singles that became involved in the community to create a sense of home for themselves. The executive director of a local nonprofit, she lives a whirlwind life of work and social activities.



*Planning Emeryville cohousing.*



*The group with the working model of Doyle Street cohousing.*

Before moving to Doyle Street, she had owned a house she liked in an interesting neighborhood, yet she joined the community because she wanted to live among neighbors she knew. Since the formation of the group, Chris has met and married a man who, once introduced to the cohousing concept, has become one of the group's most active participants. Originally planning to live in one of the community's smaller residences, Chris and Jon "traded up" to a larger unit.

Margaret, Chris, and the other core households — about half the final number — came together early in the planning process. None of them knew each other; what

they shared was a vision of the potential of an urban life shared with a supportive community of neighbors. One by one, other households joined the process and became valued members of the community, each contributing a variety of skills and points of view.

### **The Road to Community — Planning Stages**

The project encountered its first hurdle at the city planning approval stage. The planning department staff had strongly supported the plan's preliminary review sessions. However, on the night of the planning commission meeting, a small group of neighbors presented loud and aggressive opposition to the project. The resident group had spent hours prior to the meeting attempting to address the neighbors' concerns, inviting them to view the site and the plans and soliciting their

input, so they were astonished at the attack. The neighbors argued that the project would unbearably increase neighborhood density and traffic, and that the proposed parking for the development — one space per dwelling — was not sufficient to meet its needs. The planning commission denied approval for the project, by a vote of two to three.

### **Interacting with the City Council**

Discouraged but not defeated, the resident group decided to appeal the decision at the city council meeting the following month. In the meantime, they hit the streets. They spoke individually with every council member, explaining the project and the cohousing concept. They gave each city council member the first edition of this book to help them see what their neighborhoods were all about and to help dispel myths. They met

## **Opposing Neighbor Turned Supporter**

*by Jerry Carniglia*

I owned the property next door to Emeryville Cohousing when it was proposed to turn the Pittsburgh testing lab into a residential cohousing right next door to my place. When I first learned of the project I was up in arms. I fought the project and, in fact, I was the lead organizer to counter the development. We had fears of traffic, noise, density, and loss of privacy. Eventually they got approval from city council, built the project, and I started reviewing my resistance to this idea, because it not only raised the bottom line and value of my own property, but I saw how the presence of this community became a benefit for me, not only in terms of friends I made, but having that residential buffer zone in an industrial neighborhood as well would change the neighborhood's entire tenure. All the resistance I

had really didn't have a lot of basis. When I refinanced my property my bottom line went up and I thought, "What was my objection in the first place?" The other thing is, the cohousers now live next door to me, and I couldn't appreciate them more. Our fears turned out to be unwarranted. I've had dinner in their common house many times. They have hosted several neighborhood meetings. They have been the most contributing neighbors in our neighborhood — they have participated on our school board and they've participated on many town commissions.

If I had better understood what an immense contribution they would make and what absolutely great neighbors they would be, I would never have opposed this project, and I've let them know that.

with the opposing neighbors and attempted to reach compromise solutions, eventually squeezing three additional parking spaces onto the site (which were abandoned later as unnecessary). They circulated a petition to other neighbors seeking support for a community that would bring such assets to the neighborhood as new customers and nighttime security for the small businesses on the block.

The city council chambers buzzed with energy on the night of the appeal. Residents spoke passionately of their commitment to the project and to the neighborhood. When the vote was called, approval was unanimous. Emeryville would be home to the country's first urban cohousing community.

### The Search for a Developer

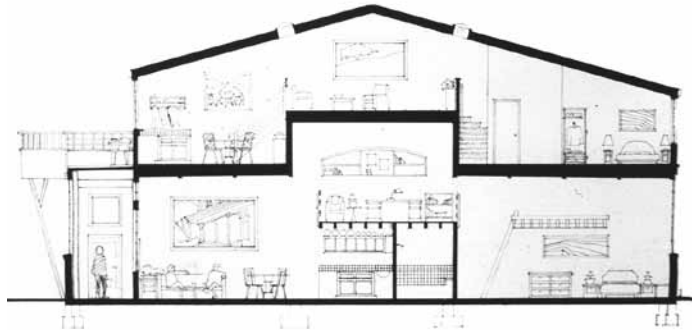
Before the residents had had a chance to celebrate their victory, they ran into their next challenge. The owner of the building resigned his role as developer of the project due to other financial commitments. The residents did not have the resources to move development forward on their own. After three months of work with The Cohousing Company to explore their options, they hired a new developer, Stephen Hannah Corporation, to complete The project. The residents formed a limited partnership with Hannah as general partner. Taking financial responsibility for the project, he lined up investors, including the future residents, to be limited partners. Once again, the project was on track and moving forward.

### Turnover

Turnover is a normal part of the cohousing process. During the two to four years needed



*The wall raising ceremony.*

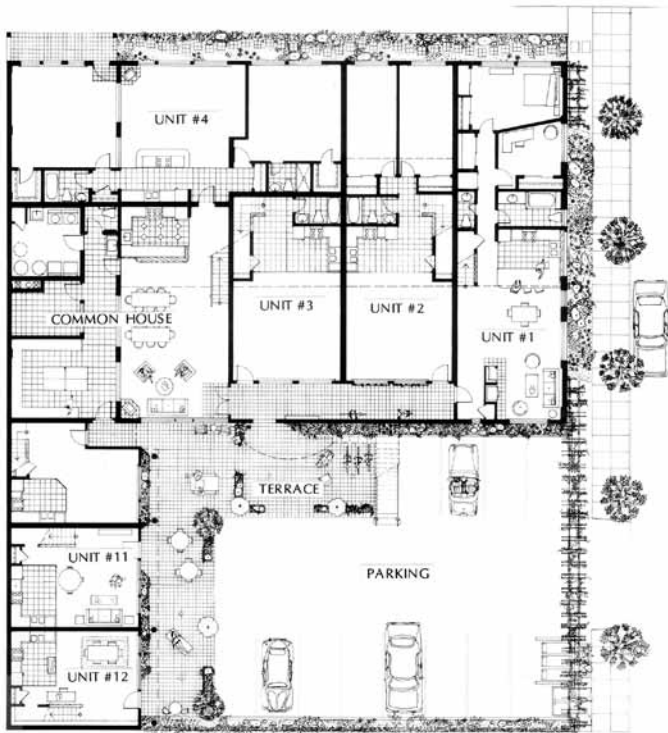


*The section of the building.*

to develop housing, many changes occur in people's lives and fortunes. The Getting-It-Built Workshop, in May 1990, drew 14 households. By the time the group was ready to move in, almost two years later, only nine of the original households were still involved. But the committed members rallied, attracting new members (and reenlisting former members) who pledged money and support to keep the development alive.

### Defining Community

The first weeks of construction were exciting for the residents and for us (The Cohousing Company as cohousing consultants and McCamant Durrett Architects as well). We



*Doyle Street ground floor plan.*



*Cohousing as redevelopment.*

had spent part of every day of the past year and a half with this project, guiding the residents over endless hurdles. Now we could sit back and watch it go up — or so we thought!

During the months of construction, the resident group had been working on their homeowners' association management documents — the codes, covenants, and restrictions (CC&Rs) that would legally govern their community. CC&Rs outline the legal specifications of a condominium complex; while much of their language is standard legal boilerplate, some sections do have a bearing on the character of a development. These documents are registered with the state and are submitted to banks that may offer personal mortgages on a project.

The residents, through an efficient group process, had addressed such issues as use of the common facilities, community participation, and orientation of new households — questions pertaining specifically to the cohousing nature of the project. A polished final draft that satisfied the attorney, the developer, and all the residents was completed in a surprisingly short time.

At the state level, the document was approved with little difficulty. As the walls of the building went up, interest rates were going down, and the time was perfect for the residents to begin lining up their personal mortgages. The CC&Rs for the project were submitted to a number of banks, which in turn submitted them to the Federal National Mortgage Association (nicknamed Fannie Mae) for approval.

Fannie Mae took one look at the Doyle Street Cohousing Community's CC&Rs and decided that the concept was too new and untried. It flatly turned down the project,

and banks that had tentatively offered loans to the residents withdrew their offers. At an emergency group meeting, faced with the possibility of being unable to finance the purchase of their homes, the residents decided to amend the CC&Rs to make no mention of the cohousing nature of the project. Even the legal name was changed to Doyle Street Condominiums. While they are free to amend their CC&Rs at any time, at this point, legally, residents have no way to ensure that this project will remain a cohousing community. Although the decision was difficult for the residents, once these changes were made banks were willing to loan on the project — and it is a very high-functioning community to this day.

### Cohesiveness of the Community

The community's cohesiveness relies not on any legal structure but rather on the residents' accountability to each other and to their common goals. All day-to-day operating responsibilities are set down in the "House Rules," the residents' legally nonbinding guidelines for themselves. The House Rules ensure that residents maintain a common standard of participation, based on commitment to the community and respect for each other.



## Doyle Street Management Documents

The management documents for the Doyle Street condominium development includes several parts.

**Codes, Covenants, and Restrictions (CC&Rs)** outline the legal parameters of the development and address such issues as membership rights, homeowners' dues, required insurance coverage, modifications to private or common areas, resale, pets, and parking restrictions.

**Bylaws** define the homeowners' association that manages the community, specifying the responsibilities of the board of directors, election of officers, and frequency of meetings.

**Articles of Incorporation** declares the homeowner's association to be a corporation, with all accompanying rights and responsibilities.

**House Rules** are the group's agreed-upon set of guidelines for the day-to-day management of the community. They cover participation in common meals, committees, and workdays, and outline guest and common house policies. The group has lived by these rules.



Left: An expensive custom house in the midst of inexpensive production houses.

Right: Hanging out at the gathering node.

## Fannie Mae and Personal Mortgages

A bank can handle personal mortgage loans in two ways. With a portfolio loan, the bank keeps the loan in-house, holding on to the 30-year note and absorbing the risk itself. However, many banks prefer to sell the loan to a federal mortgage company that buys loans from banks on a scale large enough to minimize its own risk. The loans available through this secondary loan market often (though not always) deliver the best rates and certainly broaden the choices of an individual shopping for a loan.

There is a catch: a new development must be approved by the Federal National Mortgage Association

(nicknamed Fannie Mae) before any bank can offer a secondary market loan on it. Many banks — even portfolio lenders — will not loan on projects that have not been approved. They fear losing money if they should have to foreclose on the unit and fail to find a buyer. Single-family houses are a safe bet, or so they thought prior to 2008. However, what everyone has figured out since 2008 is that while cohousing has had one house foreclosed on in the entire United States over the last twenty years, regular for-sale housing has had over two million foreclosures in the last two years alone.



*Architecture on a tight budget.*



## A Place to Call Home

The uncertainty and delay in acquiring personal loans added to the tension that inevitably accompanies the process of moving. In addition, minor construction delays pushed the move-in date back week by week, causing residents to reschedule movers and postpone vacations. One resident remembers:

We had given notice at our previous apartment, based on the last best guess of the developer. When moving day came, we found ourselves with a truck full of possessions and no place to call home. Other group members took us in during the 10 days before our unit was ready to occupy. I work with the homeless, and during those days I got a pretty good taste of how disorienting a nomadic life can be.

Construction at Doyle Street began in August 1991. In spite of the tension and



*Common dinner on the common terrace at Doyle Street cohousing.*

frustration everyone experienced, residents were able to support each other and welcome each household as its loan closed and its moving van rolled into the parking lot, beginning in April 1992.

Such challenges can test even the most dedicated cohousing supporter. Yet they can also help to forge a community, bonding a group tightly through shared struggle and effort. The ultimate success of the Doyle Street Cohousing Community demonstrates the power of a strong and determined resident group who shared a commitment, first to an ideal, then to a beautiful old building, and ultimately to each other.

### Real Urban Redevelopment

Doyle Street Cohousing is a real urban redevelopment story. Our family lived there for twelve-and-a-half years. We wouldn't have dreamed of moving to that neighborhood on our own. But in the context of a new neighborhood where we knew and trusted our neighbors before moving in, we had no such concern. Nora Davis, the mayor of Emeryville then and still mayor, contends that the cohousing group played a significant role in turning the entire town around:

The cohousing neighbors have been a great plus to our town. The residents are particularly good citizens. They participate in local issues. One resident ran for and won a seat on the school board. At the time, the school district was in disarray, with a corrupt superintendent. Now the test scores are improving; I attribute a lot of that improvement to the participation and leadership of the cohousing



*Hanging out in the common house.*



*Kids playing.*



*One of the many, many parties at Emeryville cohousing.*

### Doyle Street Menus

The Doyle Street Cohousing Community is quickly gaining a reputation for its gourmet meals, prepared three times a week in the common house. Recent menus included:

- |                            |                                   |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Roast Chicken and stuffing | Eggplant parmesan                 |
| Citrus-broccoli bake       | Salad from the garden             |
| Green salad with walnuts   | Bakery bread and purchased cheese |
| Fresh fruit                | Apple-blueberry crisp             |

*Cost per Resident*

**\$3.50**

**\$4.50**



*Saturday snack.*



*A music recital in the common house after dinner.*

members. The city and school district are working closely to provide a better educational experience for our children.

Other residents have been involved in schools, volunteered for various committees, and have participated in a wide variety of city activities. They have modeled how to accomplish environmentally sensitive, appropriately scaled multi-family developments. I can assure you that they have been a great contribution to our town.

Moreover, their cohousing community has revitalized the local neighborhood.

Signed: Nora Davis, Mayor of Emeryville

The population of Emeryville, heavy with infrastructure and light on people, grew from 2,100 people in 1992, when the cohousing project was first built, to 9,000 today, due in large part to the renewed faith the cohousing group brought to the town.





## Southside Park Cohousing *Great Inner City Growth*

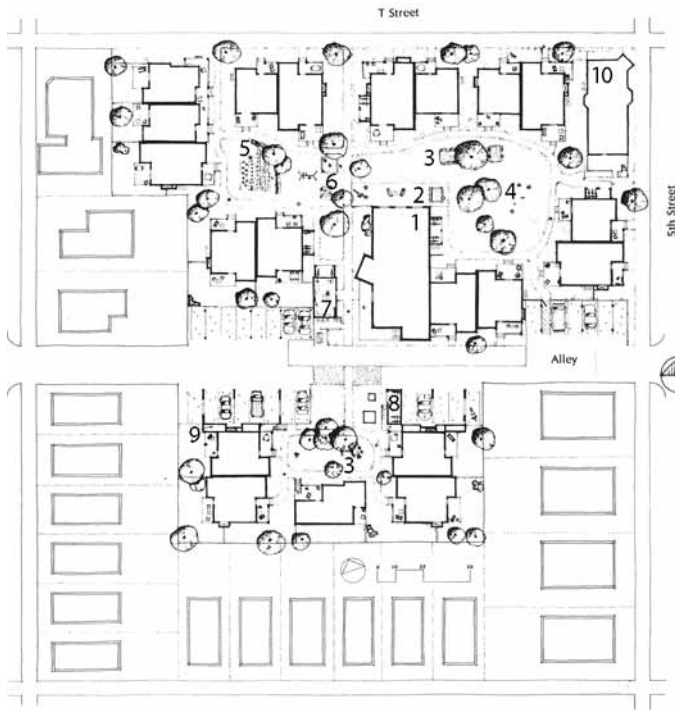
**Sacramento, California**  
**25 Units**  
**Design Architects:**  
**McCamant & Durrett Architects**  
**Construction Documents:**  
**Mogavero Notestine Associates**  
**Completed: 1993**  
**Tenure: Condominium**  
**Common House: 3,000 sq. ft.**

Southside Park Cohousing Community in Sacramento, California, completed in 1993, encompasses most of one block in a deteriorated downtown neighborhood struggling to regain its respectability. On a weed-covered lot with several crumbling houses has risen a vital development of 25 households — not a fortress against the surrounding urban neighborhood, but rather a



*The community's long-awaited groundbreaking inspired several original songs including:*

*There's no housing like cohousing,  
Like no housing we know —  
Everything about it is appealing  
Common house and all the units too  
We designed it all from floor to ceiling  
And now we're seeing all our  
dreams come true...*



Site plan: 1. Common house 2. terrace 3. gathering node 4. grassy area  
5. garden 6. playground 7. workshop 8. bike storage 9. storage  
10. existing Victorian converted to flats



*New life in the neighborhood.*

bridge to a built community. In its step-by-step progress from slide show to umbrella group to core group to site search and acquisition, this community illustrates the “classic” cohousing development scenario. Along the way, by working with the city’s redevelopment agency, the residents have incorporated affordability into the project and created for themselves a home that will redefine urban living and revitalize a small corner of the city.

### The “Classic” Progression — Forming a New Community

After The Cohousing Company gave a slide presentation in November of 1988, there was an active interest in establishing a cohousing community in Sacramento. Out of that first slide show and a follow-up Getting-It-Built Workshop emerged an umbrella group that met monthly for about a year, concentrating on education and outreach as well as on potential cohousing sites. Within the group, two clear directions began to take form: some people wanted to explore sites in the downtown area, while others envisioned a more suburban community. Core groups broke off to pursue each of these options.

The urban core group of 11 households, who called themselves “The Downscalers,” hired a consultant to assess the status of several promising downtown sites. Each of a dozen households invested \$1,000 — money completely at risk — to take this step. One site in particular, owned by the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency, met many of the group’s criteria. The group spent months considering the feasibility of the site, talking with neighbors, consulting with professionals, and working with us. By the time the redevelopment agency issued a request

for proposals to develop the site, the group was ready to act.

### Criteria for Redevelopment

In its request for proposals (RFP), the redevelopment agency outlined the criteria it considered essential to the development of the 1.25-acre site.

- ♦ A site plan with a high density of houses for the site.
- ♦ Housing for a range of income groups (20–40 percent of the homes had to be affordable for households with an average income of less than 80 percent of Sacramento’s median income).
- ♦ A developer with a proven record in building multi-family housing.
- ♦ A plan to incorporate the scale and character of the existing neighborhood — a designated historic district because of its classic Victorian houses — into the design of the new homes.
- ♦ Evidence of market demand for the types of units proposed.
- ♦ Restoration and incorporation of a Victorian duplex located on the property.

In addition, the agency wished to see housing that would:

- ♦ Provide community facilities and an environment for interaction with the surrounding neighborhood, and;
- ♦ Target current neighborhood residents and a mix of income and ethnic groups.

The RFP was issued in September of 1990. In order to meet the deadline six weeks later, the resident group, together with

McCamant & Durrett, established a site plan and conducted the required feasibility work.

### Designing a Neighborhood within a Neighborhood

In preparing a site design to submit, the future residents sought to strike a balance between creating an urban community where they and their children could feel safe and comfortable and reaching out to the larger neighborhood. They hired The Cohousing Company to establish a design program and clarify their priorities by means of a series of workshops and design sessions.

First, future residents took a hard look at the neighborhood. Though historically it had been a solid middle-class area of Victorian bungalows, urban blight had set in. Many houses had fallen into disrepair or become centers of drug use. A liquor store adjacent to the site had turned into a local hangout. At the same time, an active neighborhood



*Charles Durrett leads a site-programming workshop to help the future residents assess the benefits of the plans they are considering.*

## Southside Park Resident Mix

Of the 25 households that made up the Southside Park Cohousing Community:

- 13 were single adults, 4 of them with children at home
- 12 included children, for a total of 22 children
- 4 represented ethnic minorities
- 5 were expected to qualify for mortgages in the low-income bracket
- 6 were expected to qualify for mortgages in the moderate-income bracket
- 14 were expected to qualify for mortgages at market rate



Top: Interior green space, common terrace, and children's play area.  
Bottom: The common house is located within the site so that its use is reserved for residents of the community.

association was fighting to recapture the area's former sense of community pride.

In designing the community, the cohousing group had to clearly define its goals for the site. How much should the community open up to the larger neighborhood? Should the common house perhaps front the street, where it could also serve as a community center? After some discussion, the residents decided that the common house was not the same as a community center, so they set it on the interior of the site, surrounded by green space and with limited access by nonresidents. Porches on the houses and the community's garden border the street, providing for easy interaction with the neighbors. According to one of the initiating members:

We had to take a look at what was really going to happen. We had no guarantee that the neighborhood would want to use our space, but we knew we wouldn't feel as comfortable sending our kids to the common house if it was open to anyone who wanted to wander in.

We struggled with the budget. We had to set limits: here's what needs to be standardized; here's where there is room for choice. Having to stick to such tight limits was probably the hardest part.

The redevelopment agency and the city council liked the design, with its common facilities, interior green space, and children's play area. The group had greater difficulty convincing them that the cohousing approach could be successful. Susan, a participant involved with the project from the beginning, remembers:

Our competition was a developer from San Diego who wanted to build 40 conventional condominiums on the site. I strongly believe that he would have won the site, except that the agency liked our design with its interior play areas.

The project gradually gained support from the surrounding neighborhood. One resident household, Dale and Joanne and their two children, had lived in the neighborhood for nine years already, and had long been active in the neighborhood association. They spoke to the neighbors on behalf of the project and enlisted cohousing members in wider local causes. As Dale explains:

The neighborhood was wary initially. They had seen developers come in trying to make a quick buck with some new development. They didn't

want more short-term rental housing that would attract people who weren't interested in contributing to the neighborhood. Or they assumed we'd come in and gentrify the area in an elite way. Slowly they began to see that we were a group of owners who wanted to be part of the neighborhood over the long term.

The redevelopment agency consulted the neighborhood in making its selection; in fact, two neighbors were on the selection committee. By this time, the neighbors not only knew and understood the project, but had also gotten to know many of the future residents. Dale continues:

It was critical that we establish face-to-face interactions with each other. Future cohousing residents have participated in the neighborhood

### Strong Neighborhoods Reduce Crime

Crime and violence have become commonplace in American cities, and people in urban areas live with the constant fear of being robbed or assaulted in their own homes. The successful national "Neighborhood Watch" program is based on the premise that the most effective deterrent to crime in residential areas is knowing your neighbor and looking out for one another. Cohousing emphasizes building strong neighborhoods instead of building strong gates.

The alternative, a suburban neighborhood, comes with its own problems. Single-family, suburban housing developments have long been attacked for their massive consumption of land and energy. Most planners recognize the environmental benefits of higher-density

multi-family housing, such as preservation of agricultural land and open space, and facilitation of effective mass transit. Yet such high-density developments have not been able to compete effectively against detached houses for potential buyers. Thomas Cook, former chief of Housing Policy Development Division for California's Department of Housing and Community Development, believes that the cohousing concept makes multi-family housing more attractive by offering advantages to home buyers that they cannot get in a single-family house. It also makes urban living more appealing by providing a neighborhood feel and a sense of safety in areas that people might otherwise avoid.



*Site design workshop giving future cohousers and neighbors a chance to discuss their thoughts on the design.*

cleanup days, in the traditional Fourth of July picnic. We actively solicited feedback on the design, and we've worked alongside the neighbors to keep out some high-rises that would really change the residential feel of the neighborhood.

### **Incorporating Ethnic Diversity**

From the beginning, residents sought to include in their community the wide diversity of cultures, incomes, and family types that characterized their downtown neighborhood. Although they worked hard to educate and inspire a variety of people to become involved with the project, they feel they met with only moderate success.

Although ethnic diversity is an active goal of most resident groups, in cohousing communities it has thus far been a step-by-step process with more and more success along the way. However, some minority cultures within American society have been better able to preserve extended family and

community ties, and so do not feel as strong a need for the qualities the cohousing approach has to offer. Until cohousing is more broadly accepted as a mainstream housing alternative with obvious benefits for people of many different backgrounds, greater ethnic diversity will remain a goal that groups like Southside Park are just beginning to realize successfully.

### **Incorporating Affordability**

To achieve the required (and desired) affordability goals, residents explored a number of options with the redevelopment agency. The agency was willing to hold the land for the project, saving the residents from having to put up option or down-payment money early in the process. Half of the cost of the land would be paid to the agency as the individual units closed; the other half was held by the agency and offered as second mortgages to households with qualifying low incomes. Although all homes were priced at market rates, those bought by qualifying families were essentially subsidized by these second mortgages. In order to incorporate an element of affordability into the project, the redevelopment agency agreed to postpone being paid in full for the land.

This arrangement allowed the group to include some participants who otherwise could not have afforded a home. However, working with a city means playing by city (and often state or federal government) rules. Such programs have very strict definitions of "low" and "moderate" income, and for a conventional house or condominium. The qualifying process doesn't happen until construction begins, but many of the future residents had been involved in the project for three years by that time. Some counted on qualifying for

affordable homes, and each time the government criteria changed or their job situation altered, they had to consider how it would affect their qualification status. Although the city program did not adapt itself easily to the cohousing process, in the end everyone who had been involved in the project was able to qualify for their home.

### Working with the City

Although both the city and the redevelopment agency have been supportive and helpful, they are not used to dealing with residents in a cohousing process. As one longtime group member says:

There's a lot of turnover in city government over the course of three years, and every time someone new took over, a lot of reeducation had to be done. People in the group could handle all the negotiations, and we had specific members we called on to give an impassioned explanation of the cohousing concept, or to provide the history of the project, or to reason with a new planner. Cities need to recognize that this is a different process. Working with a group needs special requirements. If a city wants to encourage cohousing development, it has to be willing to be flexible.

Dealing with so many government agencies and departments often proved frustrating, and probably added at least a year to the development process. At times, residents felt like adversaries of the redevelopment agency, not partners. They spent months negotiating agreements, feeling as though they were swimming upstream. They passed



out cohousing information to every member of the redevelopment agency, the planning department, and the city council, and still they encountered resistance. Just when it seemed that the project would never meet the agency criteria, the city reevaluated its policies, placing a higher priority on housing. Suddenly, there was a breakthrough in the negotiations, and the whole process became easier. One resident concludes:

There's no question that it will be easier for the next Sacramento cohousing group. But it was inevitable that we had to work through the preconceptions to get to where we are. There's no getting around it.

In keeping with the wish to include residents with a diverse range of incomes, minimum preconstruction investments in the project were required. Some people invested much more, with a return, of course. Initially, residents formed a corporation in order to do business as a legal entity. They paid monthly dues as funds were needed to hire consultants.

*Breaking into small groups, residents prioritize functions for the common house.*

*Cooperation with city officials/ redevelopment agency pay off at the groundbreaking ceremony.*



*Center: Cohousing helped to reenergize this urban neighborhood.*



*Bottom: Neighbors socialize on the porch, bringing new life to the neighborhood streets.*

Later, the group signed a legal partnership with a developer. At this time, residents were encouraged but not required to invest at least the estimated amount of their down payment. This equity, together with a share put in by the developer, helped convince the bank to loan on the project.

### Approval at Last

The group’s proposal won conditional approval on the site in January 1991; it then took a year and a half of hard work with the city before full approval was granted. In the meantime, the residents worked to satisfy the redevelopment agency’s conditions — “a million nearly impossible things,” in the words of one of them. They found a developer/builder they could work with and signed a partnership agreement with him. They got a letter of interest from the financing bank. They completed the designs for the site, the common house, and the private houses, and had them approved. They spent months working out the land payment scenario and affordability guidelines that would satisfy both the city and the banks, only to have to rework them when the land was appraised at a much lower value than originally expected. All of this had to be approved by the redevelopment agency and then the city council. The final green light was given on September 1, 1992, and construction began shortly thereafter.

The residents of Southside Park Cohousing Community addressed several essential issues that must be considered if we are to reclaim our cities as healthy environments where people can live and work. They helped to reenergize an urban neighborhood while striving to work with and include its current residents. They reached out to find





fellow residents of diverse incomes and cultural backgrounds. They built a community of owners designed to strengthen the backbone of their downtown neighborhood.

### Lessons Learned

1. Go ahead and get a site early. The year spent debating the site was a waste of time — or was it?
2. Some of those early discussions are not a waste of time.

*The houses, here still under construction, complement the surrounding neighborhood with front porches and bright colors.*

## Collaboration to Build Cohousing

It takes scores of people to create a cohousing community. But Southside Cohousing is here most assuredly today because of two women, Diane Durrett and Rosemary Durrett. Rosemary, Chuck's mom, lived in Sacramento and spent months driving from bookstore to bookstore and library to library. She would place the book (the first edition) gently on the counter in front of the cashier or manager in store after store. And she'd say, "If you don't have this book, please take this one on consignment and if it doesn't sell, I'll come back and get it." She had photocopies of national cohousing press coverage in her hand to make it easier for the bookstore to promote the book. When she came back for the book, she'd usually have to leave more copies instead. Meanwhile Diane, Chuck's sister, organized

the events, including the original slide presentations at the local YMCA.

Cohousing is more than a sound bite. And creating cohousing requires engagement. People usually need to warm to the concept. But the good news is that once they get used to it, digest it, imagine it, they inevitably "make it theirs."

Creating anything of value requires work. But creating cohousing is rewarding work because it is an example of what we can accomplish in relation to what we say we want to accomplish: cooperation, less consumption, meaningful relationships, a hundred parents for every child, moments of compassion, and learning how to work together to create something of substance that transcends the generations.



## Jamaica Plain Cohousing

### *Another Urban Solution*

**Boston, Massachusetts**  
**30 Units**  
**Architects: Domenech, Hicks and Krockmalnic Architects**  
**Programming and Site Design: Kraus Fitch Architects, Inc.**

**Completed: 2005**  
**Tenure: Condominium**  
**Common House: 6,968 sq. ft.**

The open green at Jamaica Plain Cohousing is remarkably non-urban for a site with many urban characteristics. Sited on a corner one block from the train — Boston’s “T” — the community’s large public green space is hugged by the buildings and provides an oasis for children and adults alike; the sights and sounds of the city feel very far away.

This is not to say that Jamaica Plain Cohousing turns its back on its neighborhood. To the contrary, a 30-foot opening to the site (dictated by an easement for an underground aquifer) creates a view and entry into the common open space. At the far end, the large common house anchors the interior corner of the site. People gathering on the large public terrace in front of the common house, seated at gathering places, or walking



*Street Edge.*

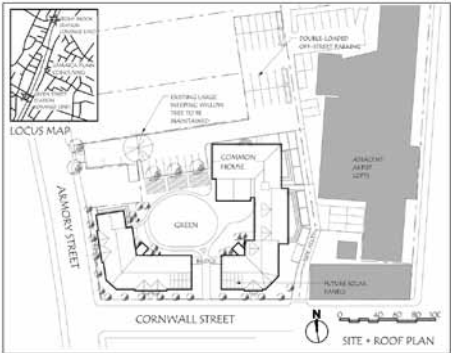
along the outdoor balconies bring constant movement and life to the community.

**From Schematic Design to Move-In**

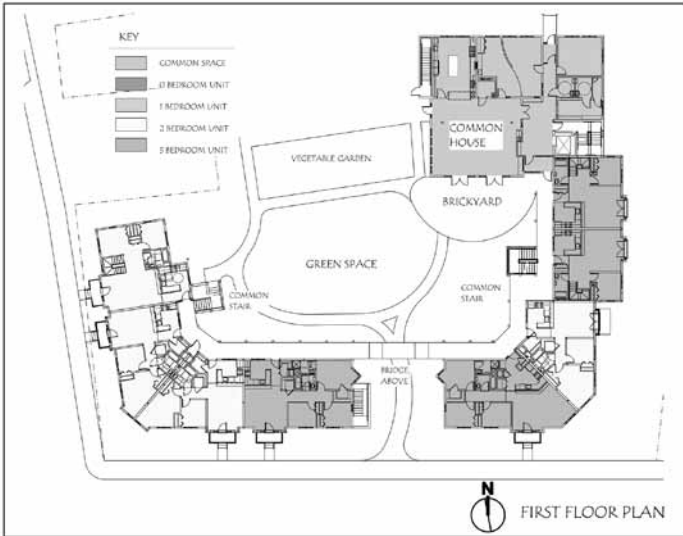
The initial group of three households was specific about their interest in a site in Jamaica Plain, a neighborhood four miles southwest of downtown Boston with easy access to the train. They were also visionaries, able to see the potential of a former junkyard and take on the responsibility of cleaning up a contaminated site. (This was an expensive undertaking: Clean-up was initially priced at \$300,000, but the final cost was nearly \$900,000.) The group was also specific about drawing from the diverse population found in a city. At present the group includes members who are African-American, Chinese-American, Mexican, and European, with a total of five different native languages.

The group hired Kraus Fitch Architects for the programming and schematic design. The firm did four workshops with the group: a visioning workshop and a set of three workshops to create a site plan, a common house program, and private unit designs. The initial site design included buildings surrounding a central courtyard, a plan that was kept throughout the design process.

A local architecture firm was hired to complete design and construction drawings that adhered to the programming and schematic designs. During the design process, the site plan evolved to include a bridge or catwalk over the entryway, with apartment flats on both sides of the entryway. Outside balconies on each level were designed to link the homes, meeting one of the group’s goals — to provide “visitability” to all units (wheelchair accessibility to upper floors is made



DOMENECH HICKS & KROCKMALNIC ARCHITECTS  
Top: View of the interior courtyard, terrace, and balconies, from the entry way.  
Center: Site design plan.



First floor house plans and site plan.

DOMENECH HICKS & KROCKMALNIC ARCHITECTS

*Bridge and balconies.*



*Mayor of Boston giving award to JP cohousing.*



*Daylighting in common house.*



*Anniversary party on the terrace.*



possible by elevators and wide outdoor corridors). These outside hallways provide space for tables and seating for every unit regardless of its size (units range from studios to one four-bedroom; a majority feature one or two bedrooms). Hallways are the “front porches” of the community, where neighbors may linger with a view of the common terrace, garden, and children’s play area. It is an arrangement that facilitates safety and encourages people to join activities.

Sustainability was also an important factor in building this community. Green building attributes include energy conservation, green building materials (windows, floors, exterior siding), a recycling program, and shared resources that include several autos. The project has received awards including a Citation for Social Sustainability from the Boston Society of Architects and a green building award from the city of Boston, handed out by the mayor himself who expressed his hope that the award would “encourage Boston businesses and residents to engage in environmentally sustainable practices, learn more about such practices, and initiate their own sustainability efforts and programs.” In addition to the green building aspects, an on-site garden, community composting, and a community-supported agriculture (CSA) drop-off point provide practical models for a sustainable food supply.

## Urban Site–Neighborhood Connections

During a recent visit, our host, Jeanne, spoke enthusiastically of the supportive and collective nature of the community; collaborative activities around the neighborhood and the city are common, as are frequent parties that

last well into the evening and spill onto the common house terrace. Sharing resources and “freecycling” (giving items to others who need them) within the community are also common. Jeanne talks about going to a neighbor’s place one afternoon to borrow a car so she could buy a new television. She left several hours later with a used TV and a full belly instead.

Three affordable units were required by the city’s affordability requirements at the time. Units were income-based and have a cap on equity. In addition to the city’s requirements, the community came up with its own program for bringing in households that might not otherwise be able to afford a cohousing unit. The members have invested in an “affordability fund” that an interested household can tap to fund a second mortgage. The household pays back to the fund incrementally or when the unit is sold. Unlike state requirements, if a household’s income changes, financing from the cohousing affordability fund is also adjusted.

### The Benefits of Community

Jamaica Plain, like many urban neighborhoods, is not without its challenges. The parking lot, located at the back of the site, is out of view from the balconies and common house, and there have been several car break-ins. There have also been a few cases of violence several blocks away. Given these conditions, several residents mentioned how lucky they feel to have neighbors who they know and can call on to meet them at the train station at night or share a walk with the dog.

While the design supports surveillance of the site, it is the sense of community that residents credit with the sense of safety and

## Focus on Affordability

*“We will work to the best of our ability to make our community affordable to anyone who wishes to join and share in our goals and values.”*

— from the mission statement of Jamaica Plain Cohousing



*Common dinner in the common house.*



*Center: Sharing a cake for an anniversary party.*

*Bottom: Children doing crafts.*





*A community work day.*

camaraderie. As a successful redevelopment of a former industrial site, Jamaica Plain Cohousing is also a model for brownfield and infill redevelopment. Despite their urban surroundings, residents rarely find it necessary to leave the site — stay long enough and you'll find companionship and good conversation, and you'll probably leave with an appliance or a new piece of furniture and a full stomach.



*Children doing crafts/making stepping stones for the community garden.*



*Music making.*



## Berkeley Cohousing

### *Taking Back the Neighborhood*

**Berkeley, California**

**14 Units**

**Architects:**

**McCamant & Durrett Architects**

**Completed: 1997**

**Tenure: Private ownership**

**Common House: 2,000 ft<sup>2</sup>**

Walking into the Berkeley Cohousing, one is immediately struck by the large, central green that extends the length of this otherwise small three-quarter-acre site. This project graphically demonstrates, among many things, that small houses can have a large yard, that neighbors can cooperate, and that when they do so, everyone has more space than they would ever have individually.

This green, central courtyard is the center of activity at Berkeley Cohousing. It provides a calm contrast to the busy urban life happening just outside. In the center of the green stands a Norfolk pine tree, which shades children as they take turns on a small slide

near its roots. Along the path that circles the green, a resident is weeding her garden as one of her neighbors uses a blue trolley to cart groceries to her front door. Large rose-like succulents highlight the common gardens at the far end of the site.

Berkeley Cohousing is an exemplary urban renewal project. It has won awards from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development as well as the American Institute of Architects. For years the site

*The common lawn occupying the place between the houses.*



sat almost empty despite the fact that it was three-quarters of an acre in downtown



*Cohousing readily offers easier redevelopment.*

Berkeley. Criminal activities had scared off potential buyers and residents. Today there is no sign of them. Kids run around and older folks sit on front porches. Life happens between the buildings.

## **Creative Renovation**

Berkeley Cohousing is a case of creative renovation coupled with new construction. Of the seven existing houses there, all were in need of significant renovation. Some required drastic work. Others were raised a story, renovated, and a new house built underneath. Yet others were renovated and a new house was built on top. The remaining homes were squeezed in between the rest.

*Building #1:* An original house stripped to the studs and raised to a second story, partially reframed, rewired, replumbed, new interior, new exterior, and an attic space added for a woman (original member) and her new husband and new baby. A second, entirely new house was built under the rebuilt house for a single elderly woman.

*Building #2:* An original house rehabilitated and remodeled almost entirely with new foundations, etc. for a new family. A new house was built on top of the remodeled one for a family with elementary school-aged children.

*Building #3:* A brand new duplex with a two-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath townhouse built on each side, one for an older couple and the other for a young couple with an elementary school-aged child.

*Building #4:* The original, large farmhouse renovated into the common house with a common kitchen, dining, laundry, children's room, and guest room. A new apartment was created above the common facilities for a single mom with a young child. Another new apartment was attached to the side of it for an older, retired woman.

*Building #5:* A single bedroom, single-story cottage, slightly remodeled for a single woman.

*Building #6:* A single bedroom, single-story cottage renovated into a two-story, two-bedroom, two-bath unit for a woman with a teenage daughter.

*Building #7:* A single bedroom, single-story cottage renovated into a single-story with a second, loft-style bedroom for a single mom with two young children.

*Building #8:* A single-story duplex entirely renovated with a new interior and significant additions to both units for two couples, one older and one young.

In addition, all of the buildings were given front porches and several new outbuildings such as a workshop were also created.

The site was also greatly modified and given entirely new pathways, raised planters, better site drainage, a parking lot, and lots of new landscaping. Safety fences were also added to keep the kids away from the busy street.

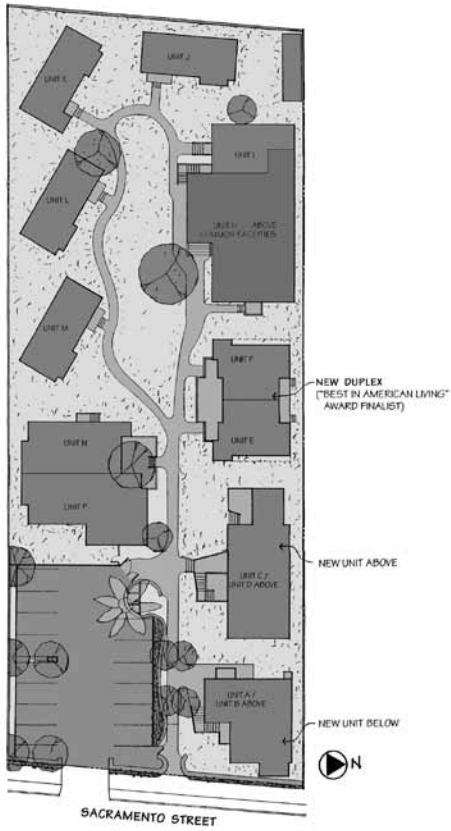




After construction.



A new house built on top of an old, gutted and renovated one.



The Berkeley cohousing site plan.



The Berkeley cohousing site.

*A small house, gutted to the exterior studs, added to, and a new one built under.*



*A people-friendly relaxed place between the building facilitates life there.*



## One Acre Eclectic, One World Aesthetic

The final site composition is as eclectic as could be, a montage of old and new that combines several architectural styles — much like the surrounding Berkeley residential area.

While visiting the Berkeley Cohousing site, I (Chuck) mentioned (to my father, actually), that the group wanted a collection of eclectic architecture in keeping with the diversity of Berkeley's old neighborhoods. He replied, "Oh yes, I see it. There's the Victorian Scandinavian, the Craftsman Scandinavian, the Mediterranean Scandinavian, and the Country Scandinavian." As you can see in the accompanying photographs, he was only half joking.

Berkeley Cohousing is also an exceptional model of sustainable (re)development. Buildings and materials previously on the site were recycled and any new construction included sustainably grown timber and low-toxic materials. The landscaping includes native plants that require little or no watering (in the tradition of xeriscaping), and what water is necessary for the gardens is taken from the site's grey water system.

The common house feels home-like with a living room, dining room, and kitchen adapted from the original farmhouse. This inviting atmosphere was retained in large part because the residents chose to keep the dark wood floors, furnishings, walls, and fireplace. The common dining room is split in two. One dining area is close to the children's room, so that parents are at eyes' and ears' distance from their children. The other dining room is designed for residents without children who wish for a quieter dining experience. Filled with light, the floor plan utilizes the original layout of the previous house. It is a design that breathes freshness into a historic building while also meeting the needs of this particular cohousing group.

The common house is not the only location for socializing and collaborating in this community. A variety of projects taken on by the residents are both community-building activities and social occasions. For example, one senior resident described how she enjoys participating in joint projects that benefit the community's many children, such as the creation of a new bike parking lot:

*... because I don't like doing projects entirely by myself ... the community is very helpful in that. Creating the*

new bike rack was very exciting, and a great learning experience. I found an abandoned rack near our site and then found someone to help with pouring the concrete base.

## The Meaning of Life in Community

Berkeley Cohousing is remarkable for several reasons, notwithstanding its creation from a variety of building types and its relatively small size. Over the years, residents have shared experiences, community events, and interests that have brought them closer. When you walk on-site, community support and enrichment are palpable. While it was created through a very deliberate and cost-effective design process (units start at \$120,000 in downtown Berkeley, which is unheard of), it feels organic — like an old, established neighborhood. Berkeley Cohousing has given faith to what can be done on a messy site, and what can be done with a small group of committed people working with professionals who can help them succeed.



*Ellen likes to point out that she has all of the privacy she needs living in cohousing while her husband sits on the front porch instead.*



*Mediterranean Scandinavian.*



*Scandinavian interiors are a neutral but elegant look that is easy to consense.*



*The path from parking to home is one of the many ways that community is sustainable.*

## Shared Talents and Social Advantages

*An interview with resident Judy G. Albert, talking with Francesca Troiani.*

**Francesca Troiani:** What have been the advantages to you personally of living in cohousing?

**Judy G. Albert:** There are a lot of advantages. David and I are getting married here in about two months, and we're going to get married on the lawn and there will be about two hundred people. My next-door neighbor Kim is taking a pivotal role in organizing the logistics, the facilities, the neighbors, everyone else who lives here. Steve over there is going to be doing the dance music and he has a whole karaoke setup. Other people here are helping out in various ways so here's this gigantic event, which, had I been living on my own, I would have had to recruit people for each little task; as it is now, my new neighbors are taking care of things which could have cost a lot of time and money, and it's free because I live here now and these people are real neighbors — like a small town.



*Pathways, porches, green spaces and benches facilitate socializing and recreation.*

### *When Community Enriches Individual Identity*

*An interview with resident Alice Green, talking with Francesca Troiani.*

**Francesca Troiani:** Is there something that really touched you about cohousing? What is special about it?

**Alice Green:** I identify myself as a member of this neighborhood, so when I think about myself it's very tied to this. That's a big, big change... When I think of not being here, I think my life would be so much more difficult, especially making connections with people the way I can here. I wouldn't be greeting people in the morning, and just be able to chat with them anytime.

**Francesca:** Has it enriched your life?

**Alice:** Oh, most definitely. Here I can do these projects with other people and ... our community; projects that get done here because someone wants to — they're motivated, and they find others that are motivated as well, and get them done.

**Francesca:** What has changed for you since you moved here? 🍷



*Front porches form a natural gathering place.*

**Alice:** I have changed .... When you're living with neighbors that you regularly talk to and interact with, it is different because you know you're going to see the person the next day. You can't just embellish your self-esteem for the moment and at the expense of someone else! [laughs]

**Francesca:** Is it true that you learn how to really be honest with people?

**Alice:** Indeed. And I think probably all of us think about the other person's motivation, and their desires and their experience and so forth ... That makes them want to do something in a way that helps determine their point of view.

## Living with Your Neighbors: Residents Tell Their Stories

*Raines Cohen, resident*

Knowing my neighbors is really powerful, getting together for meals, learning from our neighbors, seeing what they're up to. There's Alice, who has won awards for leading the way in recycling and with the garden here. Nina (80 years old) retired from working as an eldercare advocate, a patient advocate in geriatric care management services, helping people keep things coordinated. There are teachers. It's great just getting to know people and families. I've learned a lot about myself in the process of working things out with neighbors and understanding why I'm having trouble interacting with them, and we learn together.

*Mary Zoeller (age 79)*

What attracted me here was I heard Katie on the telephone a long time ago describe cohousing, and I had not really heard about it before that, so I went out and bought the book that day and I read it. Then I decided to look into it more and I visited the site under construction. When I arrived this was the only unit left. However, I initially said, "No, I'm not interested, because it's on

Sacramento Street. And I also don't want to live on the first floor if there's somebody upstairs." That Friday Nina invited me to dinner and while at dinner it all felt so comfortable. So the next day I pondered it, and I realized I did want to live here. I haven't been sorry, I like it very much, and I can't imagine not living here.

*Alice Green*

My neighbor Don had gotten a transfusion and was having a negative reaction to it, something hadn't taken. He called my neighbor Mary, but she wasn't around. Next he saw me and waved to me from the front door, and said he needed to go back to the hospital. Within a minute or so I had the keys to somebody else's car, and he was able to get treatment. That kind of watching out for one another is critical. When I got back, I called his wife at work. But even before we got to the hospital, people knew about it, including his wife. What would have been a big ordeal anywhere else was, in cohousing, just something we did.



## Temescal Commons and Temescal Creek

### *Neighboring Infill Retrofit Communities*

#### **Oakland, California**

**9 units plus 7 units and occasionally others**

**Architects:**

**McCamant & Durrett Architects**

**Completed: 2000**

**Tenure: Mostly owner-occupied,  
with a few rentals**

**Common Facilities: 880 sq. ft.**

Temescal Commons and Temescal Creek are small retrofit communities about ten blocks apart from each other in an older North Oakland neighborhood. By purchasing single-family house lots, retrofitting existing homes, adding new buildings, and knocking down fences, the families in these communities have created cohousing in an established neighborhood that has no land to accommodate a larger new development. Both communities are well integrated into their surrounding neighborhoods, and change in exact size as adjacent properties join or leave them.

#### **Temescal Commons**

Temescal Commons was sponsored by the Rockridge United Methodist Church as part of a larger strategy of neighborhood revitalization. The church, located about a mile from the property, worked with other local groups and churches to organize neighborhood watch groups and block parties, and to support tutoring programs at the local elementary school. This cohousing community was developed, in part, to provide a foundation for the larger revitalization efforts in the neighborhood. While the cohousing concept does not align with any political or religious movement, the vision statement of Temescal Commons reflects this particular community's strong Christian convictions:

We are called to care for each other as Jesus loved us. We desire spaces in which to live, pray, eat, rest, serve, and host, and simply be in. We intend to simplify our lives in such a

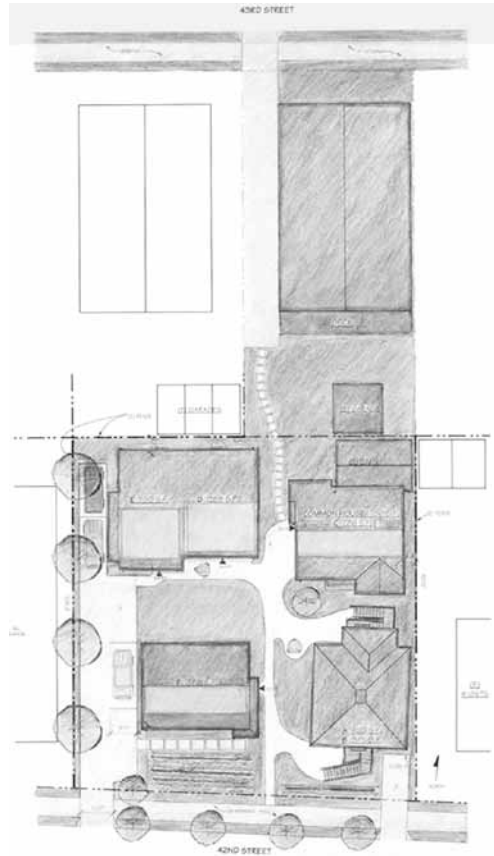
way that we can be more present to our families and each other and less susceptible to the norms of excessive consumption.

We desire to extend hospitality to the larger community as well as engage in meeting neighborhood needs. We intend to work and live in ways that reflect our concern for justice and love in the world. We also plan to honor the rich history of the neighborhood as exemplified by the farmhouse on this plot of land.

— 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Cohousing Vision (later named Temescal Commons)

The Temescal Commons community was built lot by lot, beginning with the good fortune of one church member, Mark, who lived adjacent to a large lot with development potential. This property was the home of an Italian family who had lived there for more than a hundred years. When the family decided it was time to move, Mark approached them about purchasing the property. Under the neighborhood zoning regulations, the lot allowed for a total of six units. Thus, by putting a gate in the back fence, this property could — and eventually would — connect to the three-unit property owned by Mark and his family to create a nine-unit cohousing community. This development encouraged other church members to seek homes in the area, further strengthening their community and neighborhood.

As a small group who already knew each other through their church, the families in Temescal Commons thought they would experience an easier development process than that of a larger community. What they found,



*Temescal Commons site plan shows how they tied properties by opening up the back fences.*

however, was quite the opposite. Because their cohousing community consisted of only six families, and because the group was acting as its own developer, the workload for each family was quite intense. Temescal Commons hired McCamant & Durrett Architects to provide both architectural and development/project management services. In order to keep costs down, the group also hired community member Jim Bergdoll as assistant project manager (Jim was a city planner and thus was well qualified to fill this position).

During the initial building phase, the community built four new homes and a small

common house on the double lot. They also retrofitted the existing home into two flats.

One of the goals was to include larger family homes. Thus half of the units are three- and four-bedroom houses. The retrofit and additions made for a dense development for this relatively small parcel, while maintaining the two-story scale of the surrounding neighborhood. While Temescal Commons could have been designed so as not to require any variances to the existing zoning, the community nonetheless requested changes that allowed for a design that would harmonize with the larger neighborhood (for example, they asked for an increased setback on the side parcel line to allow better light and air for the adjacent apartment house, and for a decreased setback in the rear where there was only a neighbor's garage). The group also requested variances to reduce on-site parking requirements (to one space per unit). The community had a strong argument for this because it is located just a few blocks from a major transit stop and BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) station.

*Temescal Commons from 42<sup>nd</sup> Street shows the renovated existing building (right) converted into 2 flats and a new 4-bedroom home next door, with photovoltaic panels that are integral to the roofing.*



The Temescal Commons group also struggled to balance its need for affordability with its desire to incorporate environmental features. The cost of installing photovoltaics, instant water heaters, and hydronic in-floor heating was simply not in everyone's budget. To cover the upfront costs, several community members created a \$40,000 environmental investment pool to help fund the solar panels, with the community repaying the investors over time. Temescal Commons was the first master-metered, net-metered development solar installation (allowing multiple for-sale units to share energy from one solar system and to feed energy back into the larger utility system) in Northern California. As is common in cohousing, because of the shared laundry facilities, public spaces, and transportation, there is a significant reduction in energy use and costs. One homeowner uses the community's surplus energy to power her electric car.

The buildings at Temescal Commons are also efficient in their multiple uses. The restored barn acts as a storage shed for bicycles and supplies, and its upstairs room is used for recreational activities. The adjacent common house has a dining area, kitchen, laundry, bathroom, and television alcove. The tool shed next to it holds the shared equipment.

Another goal of the community was to provide a permanently affordable home for low-income families, described here by resident Jim Bergdoll:

During our listening and visioning phase we all agreed to incorporate an apartment for formerly homeless families. Our church's involvement with a transitional group home



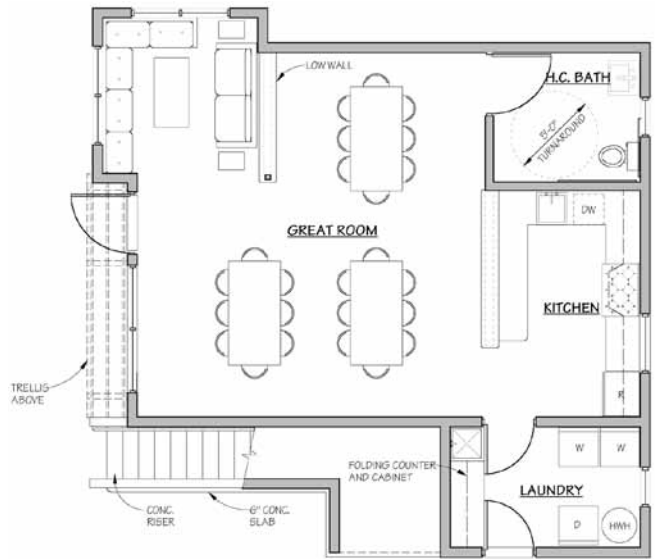
nearby showed us the challenges families face to find decent affordable housing in good neighborhoods upon finishing their program. Neighborhood schools were also close to our hearts and children's lives, and we knew there were families around us that didn't have many of the choices that we did. We longed for the collective energy that cohousing would provide to address more of these crying needs in Oakland.

Unfortunately, the Temescal Commons group found it nearly impossible to find funding for a single affordable unit — most affordable housing programs are set up for larger, professionally managed developments. Eventually, they simply ran out of time and energy to continue fundraising efforts during the development stage. As a compromise, one unit is kept as a rental.

Members of this community pursue diverse professions, ranging from a school-teacher and a gardener to a freelance writer and an artist. One member runs a business out of her house, publishing books with a community focus. Her efforts and outreach to different organizations have raised awareness about cohousing. A technical manager is changing his profession to the health care field. Another member runs two businesses — a window washing service and a wedding cake business.

### Integrating with the Surrounding Neighborhood

Only after the initial development phase, when one of the homes came up for sale, did the community face the question of



Top: Plan of part of the common house.

Bottom: A lively front garden enhances the street.

expanding beyond their church's membership. Lynne Elizabeth shares:

Initially, because I was interfaith, there was discussion about me

joining the group. After a while it was decided that I would stay, after an initial trial rental period. The group always had a kind and compassionate focus, aimed at serving the needs of the greater community. I have been an advocate of cohousing for many years, and this one exceeds my expectations. I consider it a simple low-budget community, and modest incomes make it work. My teenage son has recently moved out of the house. I have rented rooms in the past, and now have made good use of them by turning each one into an office for my employees at the publishing company, and sometimes using them as guest rooms for visiting authors. I have set up a library in the common house with many of my personal books. It's exciting to see that people have been actively borrowing them.

*By opening up the back yards, Temescal Creek created ample open space in the middle of the city.*



The members of this community have been involved in enriching their surroundings intentionally as well as unintentionally. They continue to be very involved in the local schools and organizations, and to invite the neighbors “in.” Their gardens along the front sidewalk, for example, attract people, who often stop and take a look. Residents of an informal cohousing community located a block away have introduced themselves. Commons members went to visit the development and talked about ways people from the neighborhood could collaborate. As Jim Bergdoll explained:

Neighbors were hungering for new relationships, and we saw an easy way to involve them by hosting them at common dinners.

Temescal Commons benefited from buying into this “edge neighborhood,” before it was rediscovered. When they first became involved in the area it was economically depressed, and 78 percent of the homes were rentals. This nearly caused a crisis at the construction funding stage, when the bank’s appraiser gave very low values for the homes, effectively reducing the amount of the loan. The gap had to be filled with additional investment by community members. By the time construction was completed, neighborhood property values had jumped considerably. The members of Temescal Commons moved into homes that cost \$50,000 to \$60,000 less than their final appraisals.

### **Temescal Creek**

Although not a church-based community, Temescal Creek was inspired by Temescal Commons. In this case, four households

purchased two properties that shared ten feet of backyard fence and created a six-unit community. This group's initial approach was to move into the buildings as they were. But after hiring McCamant & Durrett Architects to consult on how to price the various units, the group discovered that implementing a master plan would ensure that all future improvements — whether putting an addition onto a building, creating garden beds, or installing a hot tub — would serve to enhance long-term community viability. During this master planning, we suggested that the group replace an old garage with a common house and a new two-bedroom unit above. Selling the new unit would largely pay for the cost of building the common house. The community would also be able to benefit from rising home values in the neighborhood. When they subdivided the properties into legal condominiums, the group was able to fund improvements by refinancing rather than having to take out a construction loan.

Because the families could move into their “new” homes immediately, they were able to take advantage of cohousing's community support systems during the planning and construction of the new building. The group held common dinners in their respective homes until another family bought the adjacent house and allowed their front room to be used as a temporary common house for meals. Though this was not an ideal arrangement, it strengthened their relationships as a community.

In the decade since the first families moved into their homes, several other adjacent households have joined the community (though one later left, rebuilding the backyard fence).

Now the seven households of Temescal Creek are finding that their small common house cannot comfortably accommodate additional families to their community. Instead, they actively encourage interested neighbors to create their own common houses — and their own cohousing communities.



*A new cozy 2-bedroom unit built above the new common house largely paid for the community's common house.*



*View from upstairs unit's balcony.*



## Swan's Market Cohousing

### *Inner City Adaptive Reuse*

**Oakland, California**

**20 Units**

**Architects:**

**Michael Pyatok and Associates**

**Programming and Schematic Design:**

**McCamant & Durrett Architects**

**Completed: 2000**

**Tenure: Condominium**

**Common Facilities: 3,458 sq. ft.**

The courtyard at Swan's Market is a beehive of activity. The combined goings-on of cohousing residents, residents of an on-site affordable housing, children visiting an art museum, and the activities generated by a number of small businesses bring life to the historic market building, which dates back to 1917. The edifice had fallen into disrepair until the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC), a local nonprofit economic development organization, bought it from the City of Oakland for one dollar with an agreement to renovate the structure

for a mixed-use project. Completed in 2000, Swan's Market is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places and has won awards as a mixed-use, historic preservation project.

Downtown Oakland, where Swan's Market is located, had been the victim of urban decay in the sixties and seventies, when the construction of an elevated freeway cut the area in two and left many of its residential areas either abandoned or severely derelict.

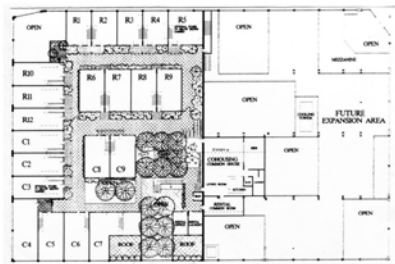
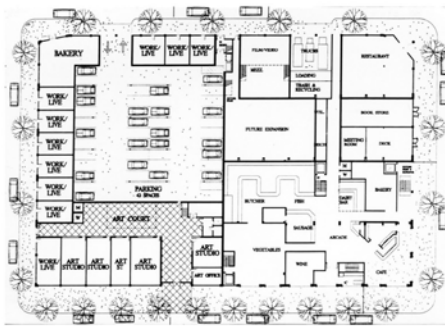
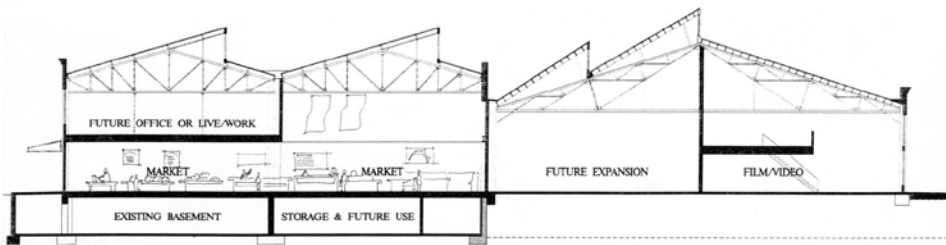
The project manager for EBALDC, Josh Simon, was familiar with cohousing. Because Josh was a cohousing resident himself, he was willing to join forces with a cohousing group and McCamant & Durrett Architects. Because of this expertise and support, the resident group was able to keep the project moving forward when the City of Oakland stalled the development progress. At one point, the group nearly lost out to the Golden State Warriors basketball team, who were

granted use of the building for their headquarters by the city. In a strange twist of fate, the deal with the Warriors fell through when the team's officials realized their members were too tall to fit comfortably in the market's historic scale. EBALDC was able to secure half of the building back for the cohousing group, changing the scope of the project from the 40 units originally proposed to 20 units.

The success of the project was not only dependent on EBALDC's cooperation but



*A bird's eye view of Swan's Market's urban setting.*



**SWAN'S MARKET COMPETITION**  
OAKLAND, CA

CLIENT: East Bay Asian Local Development Corp. & Sares-Regis

- Competition to turn an historic building into a mixed-use development with a fresh foods market, shops, cohousing condominiums, rental apartments, live/work spaces, and artists' film studios.
- Commercial space focuses outward, bringing life to the street and creating a new viable retail area.
- Historic building was largely left intact to use tax credit financing, with new space added for the housing community.
- The firm came in second place on the competition, and consulted on the cohousing part of the project.

**McCAMANT & DURRETT / THE COHOUSING COMPANY**

**Berkeley** 1250 Addison Street, #113 Berkeley CA 94702 Tel 510.549.9980 Fax 510.549.2140  
**Nevada City** 241-B Commercial Street Nevada City CA 95959 Tel 530.265.9980 Fax 530.265.4398

www.spacesforchildren.com  
www.cohousingco.com

*Plans and section.*

also on the resilience of the group and their ability to see the potential of the site despite the neighborhood's condition at the time.

## The Results

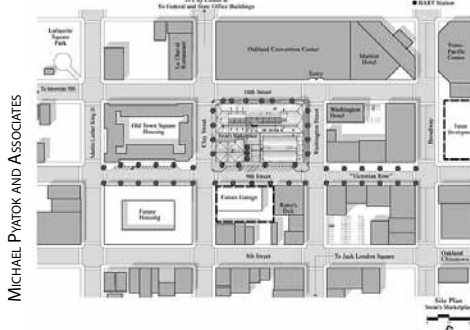
The 20 cohousing units of Swan's Market are contained on 0.3 acres of the site, making it one of the densest, if not the densest, cohousing community in North America. Dwelling units are located on a second level

with parking and accessory spaces (workshop, exercise room, bike storage, mechanical room, and guest room) on the ground floor.

## A Successful Redevelopment Project

Swan's Market Cohousing is a successful story of redevelopment and downtown rejuvenation. The resident group and EBALDC had to overcome resistance to the project from the City of Oakland early in the planning stages. The director of Oakland's Economic Development Agency tried to discourage a cohousing project on the site as part of the larger mixed-use project. He feared that downtown Oakland could not support home ownership units and that these middle-class residences would sit empty — and make the downtown look even worse than it already was. This fear could not have been further from what actually happened. The cohousing

*Plan of the neighborhood showing the density of downtown Oakland.*



VIEW AT NINTH AND WASHINGTON

*The Cohousing Company's early sketch of the new Swan's Market streetscape.*

project, fully occupied at completion, catalyzed a number of other for-sale projects throughout the neighborhood.

Today, Swan's Market Cohousing is part of a vibrant mixed-use project. Since it was completed, the neighborhood has undergone tremendous change with the addition of several large residential buildings and the renovation of many historic buildings for retail and residential use. On Fridays, the block comes alive with a farmer's market, and weekend street fairs are a common occurrence. Located a ten-minute walk from a public transit stop (for a twelve-minute ride across the Bay to downtown San Francisco) and a short driving distance from the Oakland Amtrak station, the project is very well connected to local and regional transportation.

As urban neighborhoods are rejuvenated and new uses are found for former industrial areas, adaptive reuse projects such as Swan's Market represent what could be a growing

trend in the cohousing movement. From a sustainability perspective, rehabilitation of an existing building saves resources. Urban infill projects also place a cohousing group within an existing neighborhood where they can contribute to and benefit from existing residents, activities, and services.



*Garden and elevated plaza with tables and people.*



*The life between the buildings.*



*The Oakland Mayor, Jerry Brown, congratulating the authors, architects, and the group for a very successful urban renewal solution.*



## WindSong Cohousing *Community Under Glass*

**Langley, British Columbia, Canada**

**34 Units**

**Architects: David Simpson, Architect  
Programming and Schematic Design:  
McCamant & Durrett Architects with  
David Simpson**

**Tenure: Condominium**

**Common Facilities: 5,000 sq. ft.**

*Housing  
surrounded by  
the community  
garden, and  
natural habitat.*



*This is an incredibly safe environment.  
Safer than any alarm system or guard  
dog. There are always people around.*

— WindSong resident,  
WindSong Cohousing

With a climate that is more like Denmark than that of most North American cohousing communities, WindSong was conceived to overcome the cold, damp climate of the Pacific Northwest. This design decision creates an unusual but intimate common environment between the houses. Within a short distance of an urban center yet surrounded by natural habitat, WindSong residents have struck a balance between city and country, community and autonomy.

WindSong Cohousing residents find shelter from the cool, rainy climate of British Columbia by spending time in the community's glass-covered pedestrian street. The street connects two rows of townhouses with front doors that open into the atrium. A large



entry foyer and high ceilings in the arcaded space create a gathering place that is well used on a year-round basis; alcoves with tables and chairs create small areas for socializing. The common house, located at the middle of the L-shaped corridors, opens onto the street. In the evenings, standing street lamps create a soft, ambient light that gives the space the feel of a village main street, complete with a fountain.

### Using Space to Create Sustainable Community

The atrium and the closely placed houses create a safe and social environment at WindSong Cohousing. As one resident says, “We couldn’t have had quite as vibrant a group without the atrium. It makes us all closer.” In total the project includes 34 housing units, some of which are stacked, but all in the arrangement of townhouses. Every unit has a front door to the pedestrian street,



*Homes are clustered beneath a glass-covered interior street.*



*Small area for socializing.*



*Interior street with plants, color, personalization (after painting).*

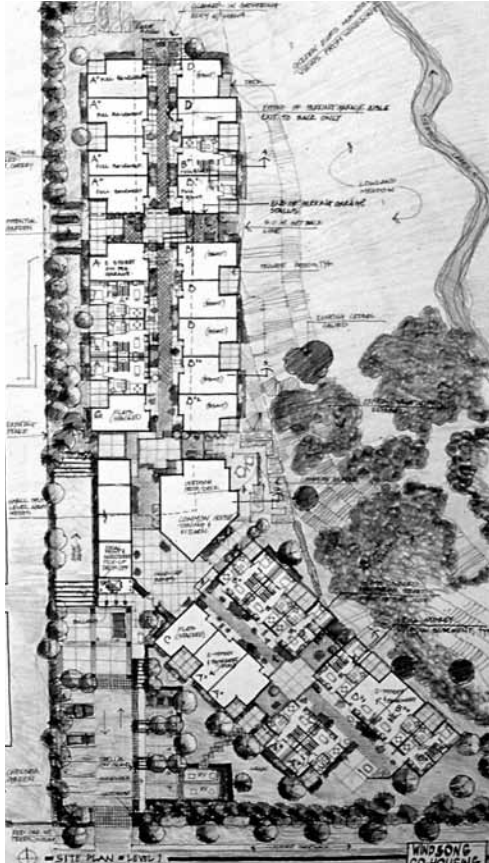
many of which are painted or decorated with unique items that personalize each entrance. Potted plants, awnings, and rugs add color and character. Unit sizes are smaller than

typical new houses, with 1,000-square-foot three-bedroom houses, 650-square-foot one-and-a-half units (bedroom and den), and 1,600-square-foot four-bedroom houses.

Open space is plentiful, making up two-thirds of the nearly-six-acre site. This includes a common yard, a community garden, and four acres of preserved land. Only 1.8 acres of a total of 5.8 acres are developed. When the project was first proposed, the Canadian Ministry of the Environment issued a restriction on development to protect a salmon creek that runs through the property. The open space and creek are a habitat for birds, beavers, and fish, and provide bountiful nature just outside the community's doors.

WindSong Cohousing demonstrates environmentally sensitive design practices in various ways, the most vivid example being the group's choice to place its 34 units of housing on one corner of the property. Clustering attached homes preserves energy and construction materials. In addition, the covered pedestrian street provides passive solar heating. WindSong has won several awards for its environmentally sensitive design, including the Canadian Home Building Association's Georgie Award for Best Environmental Achievement and the Urban Development Institute's award for "excellence in urban development." The clustering of housing also means that a habitat for wildlife, even mosquitoes, is as uninterrupted as possible. "We live over here, and they live over there," said one resident.

Access to public transportation and a culture of recycling and reuse of equipment and supplies also support sustainable lifestyles. WindSong is an easy commute to Vancouver,



Site plan.



Environmentally sensitive glass covered street.

thirty miles to the west. A local bus stop is a short walk from the community, as is a Park & Ride bus loop to Vancouver's public train system, the SkyTrain. Shared equipment and a workshop used to repair community items are other ways in which community members preserve resources and limit consumption.

During design and development, the cohousing group faced two challenges. The first was fitting the houses and common facilities onto less than two acres of land in order to meet the qualifications of the Ministry of the Environment. Underground parking, a costly but attractive solution, helped conserve as much space as possible. The second challenge was financial. The lender required that the closing for all homes happen immediately after the project was finished. Yet as completion neared, only 30 of the 34 homes were sold. Together, the committed households joined together to come up with the remaining money and were able to secure mortgages for the four unsold homes. Within five months, these units had been sold and the community was complete.

WindSong Cohousing is a tight-knit community. Members often meet and socialize somewhere in the atrium. The community frequently hosts a variety of events in the 5,000-square-foot common house, which includes a 65-seat dining room, a small stage, an office, a fireside lounge, exercise space, a guest room, a laundry area, and an arts and crafts room. Small performances are presented on the stage and the dining room is used frequently for a variety of celebrations including Passover Seders, holiday caroling, and birthday parties. One member of the community teaches arts and crafts classes to children. Residents share



*Life in the atrium.*

many other talents and skills in the common house, from ballroom dancing and weaving to piano lessons. The community also has a quarterly newsletter with event listings, book recommendations, and the personal experiences and stories of its members.

Members of the community all recognize the positive aspects to this way of life. However, they point out the ongoing challenges of cohousing, such as the division of labor and management, and decisions about activities and uses of the atrium. One resident summed up the plusses and minuses:

The thing I love most about WindSong is that it takes forty minutes to take out the garbage. There's always someone to talk to. And the thing I also dislike about WindSong is that it sometimes can take forty minutes to take out the garbage. When I have to run off, I have to miss something.

Most importantly, community members extol the opportunities and advantages that come from having a supportive community. “I am happier now than I have been in years,” says one resident, a social worker who moved to British Columbia from upstate New York with her husband. The couple felt very isolated in their first neighborhood in Vancouver; now WindSong has given them a positive alternative to single-family living.

*Kids playing in the sunny atrium.*



Since its completion in 1996, residents acknowledge that the definition of “green” has evolved significantly. In an attempt to reexamine their efforts toward sustainable living, the group commissioned a green retrofit feasibility study. Their goal was to understand what measures they might be able to take to further reduce their ecological footprint.<sup>1</sup>

As a result the community retrofitted their lighting and updated the heating system. Thinking through methods for decreasing energy use and living more sustainably, while saving money, has reinvigorated the community’s need and willingness to work together toward common solutions — and illustrates how a cohousing group’s commitment to ongoing collaboration can return rewards, not just for the community itself but for the larger world.



*Left: Interaction in the common house.*



*Right: Spontaneous interaction.*



## Quayside Village Cohousing

### *Elegant Density*

**North Vancouver, British Columbia,  
Canada**

**19 Units**

**Architects: The Courtyard Group**

**Cohousing Consultant:**

**Community Dream Creators**

**Completed: 1998**

**Tenure: Condominium**

**Common House: 2,600 sq. ft.**

*I arranged with the nine-year-old [Elise] who lives two doors down to read to her tonight after her dinner. I read from my favorite book. Afterward Elise invited me to have dessert with her, which I did. This is all a part of the many good things about living in Quayside Village. Community. Not perfect, but so much better than anything else.*

— Marylee, resident of Quayside Village

Quayside Village Cohousing is a true urban gem and a model infill project. It is well integrated with its urban surroundings

yet includes a number of site design and housing design elements that support community. All 19 units are housed in a single building with a central courtyard that creates a gathering space for community members



*Discussing the issues of the day, large and small, out on the common terrace.*



*An urban setting with a corner market is part of the solution.*



*A colorful but tight urban solution.*

that is well used year round. The courtyard includes a number of indigenous plants, a fountain, and many small seating areas. Small private yards, porches, and balconies for every individual residence and little common gathering places offer many places for relaxing and socializing. The building has stunning views of the Vancouver skyline, the

North Shore Mountains, Lion's Gate Bridge, and the Strait of Georgia beyond.

The community is a short, fifteen-minute commute to downtown Vancouver via the Seabus (a transit stop is situated just down the hill). Located in a dense residential neighborhood, the building's main floor includes a small convenience store as well as a licensed family daycare center run by one of the residents. The development is near the Lonsdale Quay Public Market, from which it got its name, and within walking distance of restaurants, a library, a hospital, schools, and shopping. All parking is underground.

This cohousing development includes a number of environmental features ranging from recycled building materials and energy-efficient appliances to a grey water system. Stained glass windows, wood doors, and oak floors were salvaged from otherwise dilapidated houses that formerly were on the site.

From a sustainable planning perspective, Quayside Village helped limit sprawl and greenfield development by shoehorning into one of Vancouver's "Town Centres," a designation made by the city in order to concentrate new development in one of eight areas within commuting distance of downtown. It also meets many of the City of Vancouver's objectives for new construction, including affordable housing, mixed use, and community development. Because of these features, the project had the city's support early in the approval process. After completion, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), the country's federal housing agency, selected Quayside as one of its Affordable Housing Projects of the Month.

Quayside Village has excelled at resource conservation and recycling. Its "Dump the



Left: Deck of the common house. Even a small soft edge helps.



Right: A common sitting area.

Dumpster” program achieves a 90-percent recycling rate, a goal established by residents during the planning stages of the project in the late 1990s. The community now generates a total of only two twenty-gallon cans of trash per week, an average of just over one gallon of trash per person. Compare this figure to the two-can limit for a single-family household in Vancouver and to what most of these fairly average citizens dumped previously, and the impact is remarkable. Collectively, residents help educate one another about how to divert “trash” from the landfill by disassembling appliances and goods into their component parts and then separating them into on-site recycling bins. For goods that the city does not include in their recycling program, Quayside residents have found alternatives. Extra clothes are collected for the Salvation Army, wine corks and wood are sent through a chipper to be turned into landscaping materials, and soft plastics and low-grade paper are collected and sent to private recycling or reuse facilities. To conserve water, Quayside also installed North America’s first pilot project for a multi-family grey water system, which saves and reuses



Center: A soft edge in front of a house.

Bottom: A view of Vancouver beyond.



Top: A place to meditate.

Bottom: A state-of-the-art recycling program.



## Local Acts, Global Change

Brian Burke and a few of his neighbors are sitting at the common terrace sharing a pot of coffee and casually discussing the issues of the day. Some of the issues are cohousing community-wide, others neighborhood-wide, Vancouver-wide (a city of about one million), or worldwide. They bounce back and forth between several topics. It's obvious they can immediately effect the issues that have to do with their cohousing community. But it's equally obvious that they can leverage those skills to actually effect change within their larger neighborhoods, and perhaps citywide in the future — and who knows beyond that.

Building a society that works takes practice and understanding, not just an in-depth understanding of the issues but also a real understanding of people and consensus-building. As we watched them, we saw how individuals attain all three over time — by learning from and listening to each other.

30 percent of the water from sink, laundry, and shower use for toilets. The project has received significant press coverage and two North Vancouver Sustainability awards.

Most importantly, and in addition to the project's bells and whistles, Quayside Village is a true community made by a committed and diverse group of people from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Small design details reflect the character of its residents, including small memory boxes above the common house fireplace to be filled with memorabilia, a community garden, a meditation room, a number of child-friendly spaces, and a variety of indoor and outdoor places for recreation and socializing. The group frequently organizes outings together, both formally and informally, and has hosted many neighborhood events such as parent parties for new parents in the community. It is not unusual for common dinners and organized potlucks to include a great variety of cuisines from France, India, or North Africa, reflecting the diversity of the group.

The Quayside Village Cohousing building includes a range of unit sizes and prices, including four affordable homeowner units and one rental unit. Units are modest, ranging in size from 450-square-foot studios to 1,100-square-foot three-bedroom apartments. Four units were sold at 20 percent below the market price to low-income households. A density bonus (which lowered the cost per unit), as well as funding from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the national housing commission, helped make the project affordable and helped offset the costs of sustainability features. Each of the original households contributed 15 to 20 percent of the project's initial cost.



## Quayside Unit Types

Unit type	Number of unit type
Studio	1
One-bedroom apartments	6
One-and-a-half bedroom units (bedroom, den)	2
Two-bedroom apartments	5
Two-and-a-half bedroom unit (2 bedrooms, den)	1
Three-bedroom apartments	4



The Quayside site — a dense multi-family building that replaces pre-existing single-family houses — combined with its top-notch recycling program, make it a model for the future.



Top right:  
*A welcoming laundry room.*

Bottom right:  
*A warm and cozy common house.*

Top left:  
*A private unit with plenty of light and fantastic views.*

Center left:  
*People also live outside in their soft edge.*

Bottom left:  
*... oh, and so do their cats.*

## Cohousing and Urban Infill

As discussed in the chapter on sustainability in this book, and illustrated in several case examples such as Doyle Street and Swan's Market cohousing, urban infill sites are a very viable option for new cohousing projects. By inserting cohousing within an existing neighborhood, its residents benefit from existing services and public transit, while also bringing new people and new development to an area. Similarly, the Quayside residents' attitude toward recycling is an example of collective, innovative problem-solving. Such an example illustrates the potential of a group effort, and can be applied to many other issues that we must address in order to move closer to a more sustainable society overall.



## Fresno Cohousing

### *Building a Community During a Recession*

**Fresno, California**

**28 Units**

**Architects:**

**McCamant & Durrett Architects**

**Completed: 2008**

**Tenure: Condominium**

**Common Facilities: 4,230 sq. ft. common house, 726 sq. ft. workshop and 880 sq. ft. exercise room, teen room, and pool and spa**

*By the second spring, resident-installed, drought tolerant landscaping was showing its colors.*



*“Fresno is the most American place that cohousing has been built.”*

— resident, Fresno Cohousing

The story of cohousing in Fresno is a story of peaks and valleys on a flat piece of property. The quick group formation process and unencumbered planning review was a surprising set of events in this relatively conservative city. Unfortunately, the economic crisis and housing downturn at the time of the project’s completion created unprecedented hurdles in selling the last homes, and threatened the financial viability of the entire project. Two years after completion of construction, Fresno Cohousing remains a story in the making.

The city of Fresno is located in the San Joaquin Valley of Central California. Known for its agricultural production, the valley has a temperate climate with highs of up to a hundred degrees in midsummer and lows in the thirties during the winter months.

Fresno has seen considerable development in the last decade. Its population increased by 15 percent, from just over 420,000 in 2000 to 500,000 in 2009. Growth has largely taken the form of suburban development, leaving the city and its surroundings with a lack of discernible neighborhoods. The need for walkable, sustainable neighborhoods spawned the formation of a cohousing group in 2004.

Fresno Cohousing, also called La Querencia, was completed in 2008. The community is arranged along a single pedestrian lane with houses on both sides. The lane ends at the common house and a large open space that includes a play area, pool, and spa, as well as two outbuildings with a workshop, exercise room, and teen room. In this layout, all households share a common path to and from the common house and other shared facilities. Ample front porches create soft edges along the central lane. The common facilities, all located at the far end of the site away from the street, share a view of a water basin on the northern edge of the property and of the Sierra mountain range beyond. Although the setting is suburban, residents can walk or bike to nearby stores. For members of the nearby Unitarian church, the walk to service is very short — the church parcel is next door to the community.

### Growing the Community

While not a project of the church, the community undoubtedly grew out of the nearby Unitarian congregation. Largely because of its experience with sustainable design and working with groups, McCamant & Durrett Architects was selected to design a new church for this growing, dynamic congregation.



*Neighbors socialize on the front porch.*

### La Querencia (pronounced *ker en' see uh*)

The Spanish word *querencia* refers to the deep sense of inner well-being that comes from knowing a particular place on the Earth; its daily and seasonal patterns, its fruits and scents, its soils and birdsongs. A place where, whenever you return to it, your soul releases an inner sigh of recognition and realization.

During the design process, we were invited to give a presentation on cohousing. A core group of households started meeting thereafter, and was soon hosting a Getting-It-Built Workshop. A few months after the workshop, in the spring of 2005, the community secured a contract to purchase the 2.8-acre property directly adjacent to the church. The group had not been looking to locate their community right next to their place of worship, but the relationship between the two new developments — Fresno's "green patch" of sustainable buildings — provided a best-use situation in terms of construction and community.

### Building Momentum and Seeing It Through

The beginnings of Fresno Cohousing were remarkably smooth. Within six months, the community had grown to 13 households who

invested substantial funds to purchase the property and move forward with the design. They decided to partner with CoHousing Partners (Jim Leach and Katie McCamant) as developers, and hired McCamant & Durrett as their architects.

Despite these positive indicators, we were wary. Fresno as a whole was more socially and politically conservative than other places where we had built cohousing. In recent years, the region had experienced a boom in housing prices and new construction. Yet the group was growing, attracting new members, and motivated. Perhaps, we thought, bringing cohousing to Fresno would represent a sea change — if cohousing could happen in Fresno, it could happen anywhere. And if there was ever a region in need of working models for more sustainable living, the Central Valley was certainly one.

The public review process, often the lengthiest and most frustrating part of many cohousing projects, also went relatively

smoothly. Some cohousing projects struggle through the planning and permitting process and spend months trying to combat opposition and get approval, but Fresno's Planning Department was supportive of the project and there was little neighborhood opposition. Approval required an amendment to the city's General Plan, annexation, and a conditional use permit. The community would be the first project to meet the city's new "Fresno Green" residential guidelines (the Unitarian church had been the first "Fresno Green" commercial project). The planning commissioners approved of the project as proposed.

While the beginnings were rosy, the project became more difficult and costly than anything we had previously experienced. The group bought the land when the market was high but finished construction at the low point of the housing market (the fall of 2008), when Central California was experiencing unprecedented mortgage foreclosures and a dramatic drop in housing prices (during the course of the development process, average house prices dropped 40 percent). In 2009, the stock market continued to fall, the regional housing market was overwhelmed by foreclosures, and buyers froze. The community had started construction with commitments for 22 of its 28 homes (households with at least 5 percent of their estimated sales price invested in the project), but a year after construction completion only 12 households had closed on their cohousing homes. As the recession continued, potential buyers experienced increased difficulty in securing mortgages and selling their current homes. And as house prices continued to fall throughout the region, the spread between prices in the cohousing community and other

*Future residents visit the project during construction.*



housing options grew, making it increasingly difficult to attract new buyers.

To cope with the worst of the recession, we sought alternative solutions beyond a typical cohousing community entirely comprised of homeowners. We explored rental and rent-to-own options. While potential renters are told about the emphasis on community and expectation to participate, the group soon realized that the expectations of new renters and long-term homeowners are inherently different. A renter that has just visited the community a couple of times has a very different relationship to it than a homeowner who has put in many years to create it. Despite this challenge, the community has successfully incorporated renters into common meals and landscape workdays. Nevertheless there is a difference between the commitment of owners and renters who know that, “it’s easy to move on if it doesn’t work out.” A long-term rental situation, which has been used successfully in some communities, is one possibility, yet as of this writing, the group is looking to sell all of the homes as soon as possible.

As the developer, CoHousing Partners assisted the community by hiring a local sales coordinator who works closely with the community in ongoing outreach efforts that include holding open houses and assisting new residents with orientation. The firm was able to renegotiate terms on the outstanding construction loan. Even more important to this process was the strength of the core group, a strength that was developed through a series of workshops with community process consultant Annie Russell.

The economic crisis tested the longevity of the core group. It has been their commitment to each other and the larger vision of

a more sustainable future that kept them going. While it was a difficult first couple of years, the community has stuck together — holding regular community dinners, putting in landscaping and an ever-growing vegetable garden, and hosting music concerts. The dedication of committed community members and their professional team helped maintain the value of the investment and prevented it from following the path to foreclosure that other new developments in the region slid down.

## The Resident Group

Thirteen original households took part in the initial site-programming process. Most of them were small families seeking something other than single-family homes and dependence on their autos. Several households gave up larger properties with many of the amenities they now share with the 28 households in the community (pools, orchards, gardens, and open space). For one couple, Brian and Rebecca, whose oldest child moved to college

*Children cook in the common house.*



when the cohousing group was forming, the chance for their younger son to live in a tight-knit, intergenerational neighborhood was a key factor in deciding to leave their two-acre property, 2,300-square-foot house, and pool. For their twelve-year-old son Joe, cohousing has been a great transition from a single-family home to an environment where his friends range in age from retired adults to two-year-old Anna. An accomplished violin player, Joe has also embraced common dinners as an opportunity to use his cooking skills. He also enjoys learning woodworking from his neighbor George, a retired teacher and master woodworker. When asked what his friends from outside of the cohousing community think, he replies, “they like it,” and then explains that he and his friends had a class assignment to make a mock advertisement for a movie about a utopian community. They used Fresno Cohousing as the setting.

Joe’s parents go on to describe a “cohousing moment” when Joe was playing his violin outside and drew a crowd of children. One of the kids, Jonah, fell onto his back on the lawn at the end and exclaimed, “That was amazing.” There’s little doubt among other residents that Joe will inspire other children in the community to play an instrument.

George and Pat were among the group of original households. As members of the Unitarian church, they attended Katie’s cohousing lecture out of curiosity and were surprised to realize that they were both interested in moving to cohousing. They now live next door to Brian, Rebecca, and Joe. George mentions that Joe’s absence was apparent while he was away at camp. They and others knew he was back when they heard a group of kids running down the pedestrian path to greet him. The two households have merged their backyards as a joint landscaping project.

Lynette and Lorenzo were also one of the founding households of the community, and also members of the church. The couple had been interested in cohousing for years, and when Lynette was on a job search she focused her efforts on places with cohousing communities. After being offered an ideal position in Fresno, the couple decided they would have to bring cohousing to the city.

After move-in, the family has become a model for energy efficiency. From June to mid-July, they typically use their air conditioning unit a total of twelve hours, even with regular daytime temperatures of more than a hundred degrees. Their energy bill for June was minus sixteen dollars — their solar panels feed more electricity into the system than they used. This is particularly impressive given that Lorenzo works from home during the day. They have taken full advantage of their home’s tight envelope, solar orientation, window shades, ceiling fan, and cross-ventilation, and many other passive cooling devices. By using all of these features they are able to keep their house at twenty to thirty degrees below the outside temperature. Another household installed a temperature sensor in

## Density and Site Characteristics

Zoning: R1

Acreage: 2.81 acres

Allowable Units: 28

Density at Completion: 10 units per acre

Open Space: 25%

Parking: 58 spaces

Distance between houses: 28–49 feet

the attic to monitor heat. Even on hot days (over a hundred degrees), the attic temperatures never exceed the outside temperature by five degrees. Keeping cool requires that residents do some work, but these examples are a testament to the efficiency of the good design and thoughtful choices of construction materials.

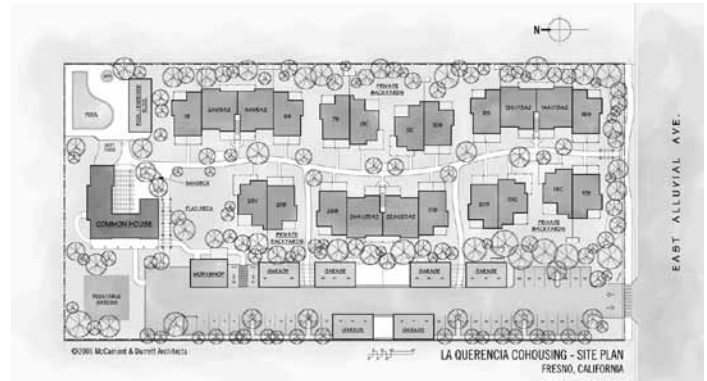
## The Design Process

The goals of the community and the site design were formulated in a weekend workshop. The design goals fall into four general themes: 1. Keeping environmental impact to a minimum; 2. Facilitating interaction, movement, play, and other activities; 3. Simplifying maintenance of grounds and houses; 4. Creating a sense of place with character.

## Community Design

The site plan originally included streets and houses oriented along four short streets that joined a central perpendicular corridor that, in turn, led to the common house on the northern edge of the property. After private house designs were finalized, the site plan had to be shifted to accommodate larger house sizes than originally anticipated, resulting in the one, double-loaded street that runs south to north. In our estimation, the simplicity of the Fresno site plan brings cohesion to the community; it truly feels like a village neighborhood.

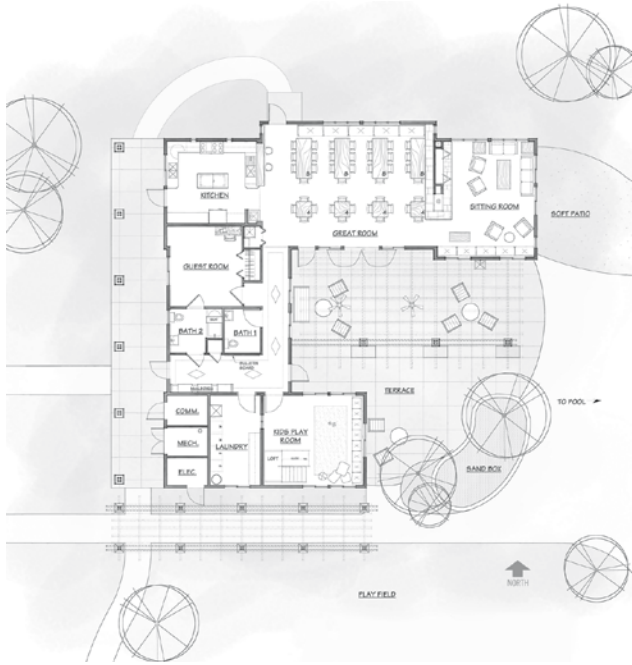
Residents have noticed that the site design creates varying degrees of activity. A lot of action takes place around the common house and the private homes near it, with activity subsiding with distance from the common house. Such an arrangement yields both advantages and disadvantages



to households, based on their location along the street — for those residents interested in activity, a location near the common house is best. Most of the original families wanted to be close to the common house, resulting in a core group of households that know one another well and live in close proximity to each other. This arrangement has meant that newer households tend to live in houses at the end of the site, where they sometimes feel less integrated in the community. Orientations and community events have been used to bring new households into the mix and prevent community stratification.

From an environmental perspective, the group was interested in a site that required minimal care and minimal water use — with maximum use of rainfall catchment and maximum shade. At maturity, the many trees planted on the property will provide shade from the extreme summer heat. Likewise, private houses are designed with tight building envelopes, deep overhangs (eaves 2.5 to 5 feet deep), porches, ceiling fans, and other elements to minimize the use of air conditioning. Even in the height of summer households have succeeded in using their air conditioning minimally. During construction,

*The site plan of Fresno Cohousing.*



Top: *Common house floor plan.*

Bottom: *The site plan at Fresno Cohousing is designed to promote a vibrant community atmosphere between the houses.*



despite falling housing prices, the community decided to increase the price of their homes by \$11,000 to add 1.5 kW of solar panels to every home, as well as a community computer network. This is an example of clear long-term costs savings that, nevertheless, require upfront investment.

## Great Challenges and the Rewards of Community

Fresno Cohousing illustrates the unique opportunities and challenges of a development process in which all households are committed to a greater whole — both economically and socially. In some ways, cohousing represents a great opportunity during tough economic times because most, if not all, of the units are pre-sold at the time of completion. Ask any conventional developer if he or she can hope for such resident buy-in and you can bet every one would welcome a project with such a high rate of pre-sales. The success of this development model, however, depends on the ability of all households to get financing and to sell their existing homes, both of which are more difficult to accomplish in an economic crisis.

Fresno Cohousing became a more challenging project than anyone could have anticipated. These hardships were the result

## Why Cohousing Costs More than Conventional Housing

In a low-cost housing market like the Central Valley of California, where most new housing is cheaply built suburban sprawl, the cost difference for a well-designed, sustainably built community with extensive community facilities can feel substantial by comparison. In 2009, it was relatively easy to buy a 2,000-square-foot

suburban ranch in Fresno for well under \$300,000. The construction costs of the smallest home in Fresno Cohousing — a two-bedroom/two-bath flat — was \$350,000.

However, the old adage, “you get what you pay for” has never been truer.



of tough economic times rather than characteristics of the specific project or the demographics of the location.

However, Fresno is also a great learning experience for cohousers at large. The need to develop alternate ownership models will be useful to other cohousing communities struggling with finding enough qualified buyers in tough economic times. Many a community has begun with the goal of incorporating greater income diversity by including rentals. While not the initial plan, in Fresno we've had the opportunity to learn how to make that work. The experience has also shown how having a development partner and hiring professional sales assistance can relieve the community of some of the most stressful development risks.

Fortunately, twenty years of resales in North America have shown that cohousing homes appreciate over time at a greater rate than houses in more conventional developments. Despite the challenges, Fresno Cohousing is built and will continue to grow and evolve. It offers an important model for how a community can survive an extremely difficult market. Ten years from now, we predict the pain of this time will have faded and Fresno Cohousing will be a successful community highly valued for its foresight and vision.



Top: *The central pedestrian lane at Fresno cohousing.*



Bottom: *An afternoon in the sandbox.*



## Belfast Cohousing and Ecovillage

### *Sustainable Living and Farmland Preservation*

**Belfast, Maine**  
**36 Units**  
**Programming and Site Design:**  
**McCamant & Durrett Architects**  
**Completed: In-progress**  
**Tenure: Condominium**

In 2007, a group of interested families and individuals came together to begin a cohousing and ecovillage in Belfast, Maine, a coastal town with a population just under 7,000. The group's overall objective is to combine sustainable living with sustainable farming in a cooperative environment.

Thirty acres of a 180-acre site will be developed for the cohousing community, yet

its 36 units of clustered housing will occupy a mere four acres (originally just three acres). The remaining 26 acres of the cohousing site will be community open space and the other 150 acres in the total parcel will be preserved for agricultural uses. The 30-acre site will also include a barn and gardens. Ideas for the surrounding 150 acres include a land trust to ensure agricultural uses and the creation of an organization dedicated to sustainability that would be housed in the historic farmhouse and barn located along one edge of the property, a short walk from the cohousing community.

The community's site is two miles (a hearty stroll or easy bike ride) from Penobscot Bay and downtown Belfast, which features an active waterfront and a lively arts community and is the center of business, services, and government for the surrounding county. Three elementary schools, a YMCA, the University of Maine's Hutchinson Center, and various shopping and recreational activities are all

*Panorama of the Belfast Cohousing site.*



close by. The location makes it possible to blend a truly rural lifestyle with close proximity to amenities.

In 2009, the city of Belfast was in the process of finalizing a new comprehensive plan. Despite a focus among residents and businesses on sustainable living, the plan included very few objectives toward “smart growth” — the average parcel size in Belfast is more than three acres. The cohousing group was looking to provide another model.

McCamant & Durrett Architects were hired to design the site plan with the group. Over the course of a four-and-a-half day workshop, the design evolved from a parcel with houses scattered on equal plots to a site with clustered duplexes. Clustering the houses achieves three objectives. First, it creates a greater sense of community, which is especially important in a climate where temperatures can plunge below zero degrees and where the average snowfall over the course of the winter is nearly five feet. Second, clustering the houses (as duplexes) creates greater energy efficiency through shared walls, which provide insulation to both houses and require less construction materials than freestanding, detached houses. And third, clustering is much more affordable than spreading houses out, both in the short term in terms of actual construction costs and in the long term by way of maintenance costs.

The ability of the site design process to achieve a village feel should not be taken lightly. At completion, every household will occupy just over one-tenth of an acre. By comparison, the average density for Belfast is 198 persons per square mile or 3.2 acres *per person*. Furthermore, many of the households interested in cohousing will be moving from



*Downtown  
Belfast, ME.*



*Site with barn.*

Our mission is to be an environmentally sustainable, affordable ecovillage that is easily accessible to a population center, includes land reserved for agriculture and open space, and is an innovative housing development model for rural Maine.

— Belfast Ecovillage mission statement

I'll never forget when the architect (Chuck) proposed duplexes rather than detached houses, and it seemed like everyone simultaneously saw how that would better serve our goals of lowering costs, energy efficiency, and a better functioning community. Detached houses were our original point of departure, but that wasn't based on anything more than typical default American planning.

— Belfast cohousing resident

outside of Belfast, where they occupy in most cases between 50 and 150 acres per household. In this context, the cohousing model represents a decision to not only live in closer proximity to neighbors and to occupy less

*Site planning workshop.*



*Planning the site.*

land, it embodies a desire to cooperate in the cultivation of the shared land and for some individuals and individual households to be engaged in the livelihoods (some shared agriculture) of their neighbors.

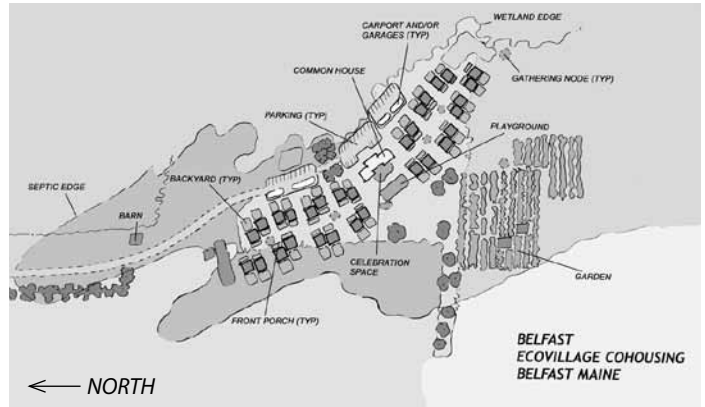
The site plan includes two rows of clustered houses with a common house and a large plaza at the center, in the New England tradition of the town green. The green is designed to be used as a recreational area in the summer and could be frozen in the winter for a skating rink. The common house and other common facilities will include uses that are compatible with farming and on-site food production. The common house design includes several root cellars for storing vegetables throughout the year. The site plan also includes a barn for small livestock including chickens, sheep, pigs, or ducks.

Following the initial site planning workshop, the site design has evolved slightly to include an affordable housing type, a 400-square-foot studio unit to accommodate several singles in the community. These units will be designed for later expansion, and will be clustered on the site as attached units nicknamed “studio row.”

Still in the stage of gathering households, the group is using a portion of the existing farmhouse and barn as a meeting space, demonstration area, and social hub where potential members can come together, see drawings and models of the community, and visit the site.

At completion, the cohousing project will build on other initiatives in the area aimed at sustainable growth and community collaboration. Belfast supports a food co-op and a number of locally owned businesses with sustainability goals. Nearby, a

wind turbine project is under construction to meet all the energy needs of an island community of 6,000 residents. The region also supports a number of organic farms, many of which include community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs. The hope is that Belfast Cohousing and Ecovillage will bring together many of the region's initiatives, and will serve as inspiration for future regional development.



*Site plan developed at the workshop.*



## Yarrow Ecovillage

### *Cohousing as a Building Block to the Ecovillage*

**Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada**

**31 Units**

**Architects:**

**McCamant & Durrett Architects**

**Completed: In-progress (10 houses  
completed in 2009–2010)**

**Tenure: Condominium**

Following the first cohousing community in the United States, Muir Commons in Davis, California, cohousing has not only continued to expand throughout the US and Canada, it has also become a model for other housing types (seniors housing, nonprofit affordable housing), and a building block for other larger communities. The Yarrow Ecovillage is one such project. True to the cohousing concept in general, it aims to re-establish many of the advantages of traditional villages within the context of twenty-first century life.

The site of this community is a former dairy farm, left inactive in the 1980s. Quite

conveniently, the site is also on a main road that connects the small town of Yarrow (drained by decades of suburban sprawl, and now incorporated with its neighboring town of Chilliwack) with both urban Vancouver (to its west) and the natural beauty of the Fraser Valley. Yarrow Ecovillage offers the possibility of creating a new town center for Yarrow, a place for living combined with commerce. The 25-acre site on Yarrow Central Road in Chilliwack, British Columbia, will include a 31-unit cohousing project, a 30,000-square-foot mixed-use area (commercial, rental units, learning, etc.), a 20-acre farm, and a 17-unit senior cohousing community.

Yarrow Ecovillage is designed to offer an exceptional combination of cohousing, sustainable living, farmland preservation, a live/work community, a learning center, and a mixed-use town center. Three main elements — living, working, and farming — along with many other activities and amenities such as learning, socializing, sharing, teaching, playing,



and visiting, are designed to come together to provide a model for environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable lifestyles. In order to accomplish the many objectives of the ecovillage, the city of Chilliwack worked with the resident group to establish an entirely new, custom zoning code. The result is an Ecovillage Zoning designation that includes residential, commercial, cottage industries, work space, public open space, recreational space, and farming.

The “town” of Yarrow has a population of about 3,000 people. It once had a concentration of commercial buildings along its main street. It was a rural but functional small

*A “town” in search of a village. A village in search of a center. It turns out that no individual developer has attempted or even knows where to start. But a collection of motivated residents can get together and imagine. They are now seeking the capital together for a new center for Yarrow.*

town surrounded by farms. Like too many rural towns, Yarrow’s commercial viability was eclipsed by big box stores scattered between farmland, new residential developments, and previous downtown corridors. As a result, it is nearly impossible to shop, dine, be entertained, or go to school, the library, or the park in the area without getting into a car.

Although technically part of the city of Chilliwack, Yarrow is about nine miles

*The valley, houses equidistant as far as the eye can see, in search of a place to commune and meet your neighbor.*



*The town of Yarrow has an old but extremely tenuous downtown.*

### **Ecovillage Zoning: A New, Sustainable Land-Use Concept**

In the winter of 2010, we and a few of the members of the Yarrow Ecovillage development team met with the city manager of Chilliwack, as well as the heads of planning and public works and other staff — nine city officials in all. To begin the discussions on the site, the officials opened the zoning map, the parcel map that designates the allowable land uses for all of Chilliwack and the surrounding incorporated areas. Parcels were designated for farming, residential and commercial, or a park, a school, and so on. Then we came to the 25-acre site on Yarrow Central Road, the address of Yarrow Ecovillage. Its zoning was (in capital letters) ECOVILLAGE — the first site in Canada that we know of, and perhaps in North America, that is a zoned ecovillage.

away from Chilliwack.<sup>1</sup> The community's disparate but numerous fruit and vegetable markets and smattering of small retail stores are too spread out to have any long-term commercial viability, much less create any sense of place. Furthermore, their dispersed locations do nothing to contribute to the kind of personal relationships that stitch a town together.

### **Cohousing as Essential Building Block to Ecovillage**

The cohousing community will be the first building block of the ecovillage and will play a critical role in creating the culture of the place. In building it, the group has learned cooperation and development skills, as well as how to brainstorm, discuss, and decide; it is the place where well-intentioned citizens learn to make consequential decisions together to accomplish their environmental and social aspirations. It is also where the relationships built during the design and development process will carry over to everyday interactions and relationships once the community is complete. For these reasons, cohousing will be the foundation upon which other players at Yarrow Ecovillage (such as merchants and farmers) model their legal structure to achieve a cooperative corporation. That is, they will learn how to invest together and, most importantly, how to get things done by working together.

The second and most public component of Yarrow Ecovillage is a 2.5-acre mixed-use area (commercial, rental units, learning, etc.) — effectively a town center. It will include 30,000 square feet of commercial space designed to offer services, and places for work and creative opportunities, to the greater



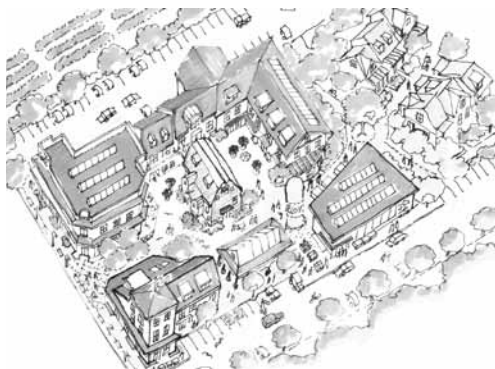
neighborhood. Yarrow Ecovillage and its new commercial area — including 17 apartments (or perhaps a senior cohousing community, if a group comes together), a refitted classic old dairy barn, and a completely walkable environment — promises to be as functional as a small town center. Its co-developer, the Yarrow Ecovillage Society (YES) Cooperative, brings clarity of vision to the process. YES originally owned the site and is working with new entities such as the Mixed-Use Development group (MUD) to best create the synergy on site that will set everyone up for success. Many of the original organizers of YES are moving into the cohousing on site.

The ability of the group to work together effectively yields the best strategy for accomplishing the sort of new town center that redevelopment agencies dream of. In the end, Yarrow Ecovillage will be a hub where people can purchase locally grown organic produce (some grown on-site), park once and shop at four or five locations, meet a friend for coffee, work, get to know their neighbors, or take a class or two. It will be a place where families, seniors, and even teenagers will want to congregate. The goal is to not only enhance commercial viability and create a quality

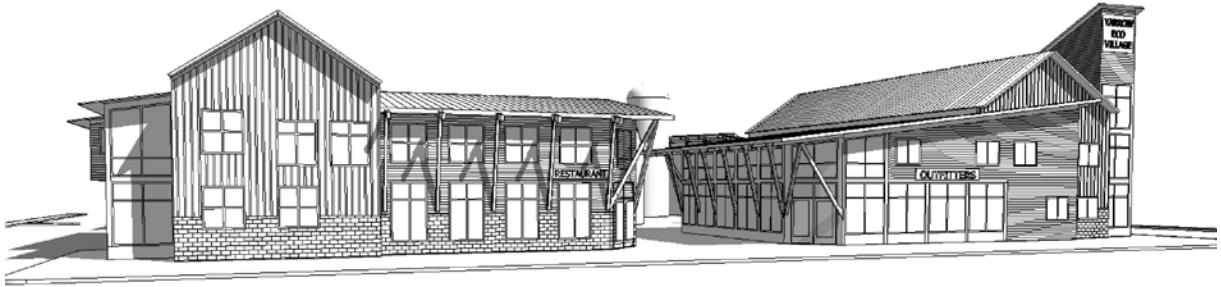


Top: Yarrow Ecovillage site plan with the cohousing at the center.

Bottom left: An early rendering of the Mixed-Use portion of the Yarrow Ecovillage.



Bottom right: The original barn, which will be preserved for use in the mixed-use area of the Ecovillage.



Top: A street perspective for the Mixed-Use along Yarrow Central Road.

Center: "What about that one?" Discussions during the site planning workshop for the ecovillage.



Prioritizing common house facilities during the group workshop.



living environment, but to create a culturally viable and culturally vibrant place.

A 20-acre organic farm is sited near the cohousing community. Some of the people who live in the cohousing community will co-own and operate the farm, and like the commercial area, the farm will be a separate partnership, managed by people with agricultural expertise (the business of farming), while remaining an important part of the larger whole — Yarrow Ecovillage.

### Cohousing Site Design

In January 2010, we held a site design workshop with the group to plan and focus on the cohousing site. The outcome was a site plan that achieved the group's objectives. It added a diagonal pathway that links the cohousing site with the mixed-use site and will serve as a sight line, giving the residents a view of an existing silo that will be preserved in the redevelopment, along with the heritage barn.

The cohousing site includes 31 private residences with a variety of housing types (duplexes, flats, townhouses), a common house, and ample programmed and unprogrammed open space. A 3,900-square-foot common house is sited at the intersection of the pedestrian pathways alongside the

parking area on the east side of the site. This central area is designed to accommodate a terrace (connected to the common house) and a children's play area (across from the common house terrace). The location of the common house contributes to the overall functioning of the community as a gathering place. It will be visible from private homes and the path that links them to the parking area and residents will pass it on their way home, meaning they are likely to drop in.

The Yarrow site arrangement is designed to foster a sense of community along the pathways and in the various outdoor spaces, balanced with adequate room for privacy in more secluded areas, such as private backyards. It is also well suited to passive and active heating and cooling possibilities, and overall sun control.

### Reviving the Town Center

The idea of the town center is almost as old as human settlement, and members of Yarrow Ecovillage understand that the combination of positive, usable public space, combined with commercial activity and spaces for creativity and learning, will activate the environment. Such public space doesn't just provide retail opportunities; it provides opportunities for meaningful human interaction. Over time, these spontaneous, informal interactions may grow into more formal friendships. You get to know the person who bakes your bread, grows your carrots, or relaxes in the public square on a sunny day, and he or she gets to know you. The variety of relationships and diversity of people, skills, and interests will likely establish a vibrant culture of learning, doing, and being — as a functional, interrelated society.



*More discussion.*



*The proud creators of a new site plan.*

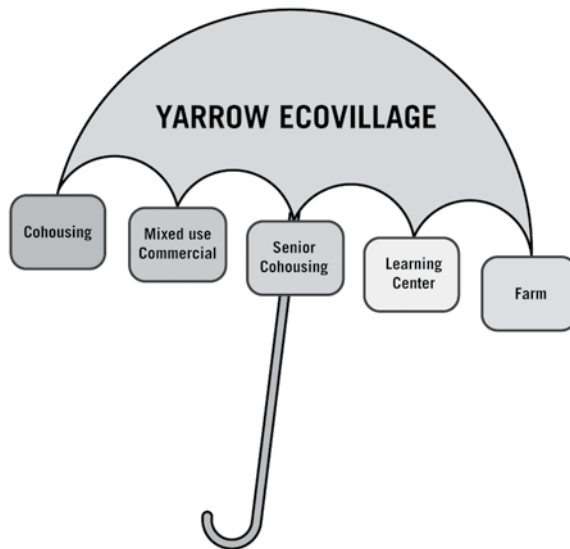


*Gerry, who just turned 84, with a couple of young residents.*

## Cohousing Design to Facilitate Community

Yarrow Ecovillage, while a model project in its own right, is part of a larger, growing trend in neighborhood design in which cohousing has played an important role.

We have seen many cohousing communities that begin as small infill projects and, over time, bring new life to an entire



**Ecovillage is more of a lifestyle than cohousing is.**

*Diagram showing the various entities making up the Yarrow Ecovillage.*

neighborhood. Yarrow Ecovillage will very likely be this type of community, and will probably catalyze other developments nearby, helping to stem the tide of sprawl in this beautiful valley. As an infill project that reinvigorates a former, under-utilized site with a variety of uses, it might well act as a model to be expanded upon in similar rural settings.

Yarrow Ecovillage group has already made the first steps toward a design that captures a true *genius loci*, the spirit of a place that is memorable for both its architectural and its experiential qualities. This combination also allows for a wonderful balance of economics, ecology, and positive social space. This type of calculated diversity assures flexibility and longevity for Yarrow Ecovillage. The cohousing, first in the development process, is really the kingpin of the larger whole. It will be the cornerstone or the incubator for thoughtful and efficient processes and investment models. It will not only catalyze the larger whole, it will help to synthesize the three separate endeavors to accomplish the overall goals of the ecovillage.



## Part Four

### Creating Cohousing

When we compare the approaches that we've used with different cohousing groups throughout North America, we've learned that some methods work better than others. The following chapters examine the cohousing development and design process in detail, how these have evolved, and the lessons learned from different strategies and solutions. Based on our twenty years of experience, this analysis provides practical lessons for creating sustainable neighborhoods.







## From Dream to Reality

### *The Development Process*

The active participation of people who want to live in cohousing communities, and their refusal to let housing developers define their neighborhood options, have been the key to getting so many communities built in North America. Resident participation in the development process is cohousing's greatest asset and its most limiting factor. It is a substantial task for a group of people, inexperienced in both collective decision-making and real estate development, to take on a project of this complexity. Most residents have little knowledge of financing, design, or construction issues, let alone planning entitlements or subdivision processes. They also find it difficult to maintain efficient timelines, avoid the domination of a few strong personalities, and integrate new members without backtracking. In dealing with these issues today, we benefit from more than two decades of cohousing development experience in North America.

Development and financing strategies for cohousing vary depending on the context,

the resources available within the community, and the market conditions. For example, an approach that was standard practice two years ago may no longer be financeable in today's economic climate. Given the need to adapt to changing conditions, we'll focus on the larger lessons learned in getting communities built.

*Katie facilitating a design charrette for Petaluma Avenue Homes.*





*Designing the neighborhood you want is only one of the perks of cohousing developments.*

### The Role of the Developer

A professional developer can provide the following:

- A vision of what the project can become — sees the potential in a property.
- Expertise — understands the development process, risks; ability to quickly sort out the biggest obstacles for a specific property.
- Business perspective — knows what it takes to create a successful development.
- Project management services — provides day-to-day coordination of all development work, including assessing feasibility, coordinating consultants, planning approvals, and permits. May be able to defer payment. (See more on project management services later in this chapter.)
- Financing — access to predevelopment cash and construction financing, and may “sign on the bottom line” to guarantee the construction loan. May also share other financial risks with the resident group.
- Credibility — ability to attract investors and obtain bank financing.
- Established relationships and contacts with consultants and other development professionals the resident group will need.

### Development Strategies

Cohousing communities have used a wide variety of partnering arrangements between resident owners and development professionals. A majority of the communities built in the United States are the result of partnerships between professional developers and resident groups. In some cases, however, residents have acted as their own developers — taking on all the risks of financing the development. In other cases, residents have bought up existing homes to organically retrofit structures for their community. While there has been much discussion over the years about developing cohousing without a resident group (spec cohousing), little has actually happened with this approach.

In deciding which development approach to take, the resident group should consider who is assuming financial risks, who is managing the development process, and what resources are available in their area. Experience has shown that the more a resident group can turn over the day-to-day project management of the development process to their professional team, the more they can focus on the building of the social community — the piece that cannot be hired out. Professional management also tends to assist resident groups in keeping to a more efficient timeline, which keeps costs down. If given a choice, why would a group of people with no development experience try to figure out, let alone track and coordinate, the ten thousand details required to get a community entitled, financed, and built? The alternative is to hire a project manager, or partner with a developer who knows the process and has the professional relationships the community will need to build the physical structures. At the same



time, only the community members themselves can create the actual social community.

### Partnering with a Developer

Many people are surprised to learn that a majority of cohousing communities in the United States have been created through joint ventures between for-profit developers and resident groups. Jim Leach, President of Wonderland Hill Development Company, pioneered this approach when he developed a legal and financial structure to partner with the Nyland Community in Colorado. Leach's "Streamline Cohousing Development Model" shares risks and financial reward between the community and the developer. Since the completion of Nyland in 1993, Wonderland Hill, McCamant & Durrett Architects/The Cohousing Company, and CoHousing Partners have refined these systems to bring out the strengths of the resident group while taking advantage of the experience and management of the professional team.

The underlying philosophy of this partnership model is that a successful development process is financially successful for all parties. While this might appear obvious to some, many a community has been completed with the resident group burnt-out and bitter and the professionals feeling underpaid and unappreciated. An interesting experience, perhaps, but not one to be repeated.

### The Group as Developer

When a community acts as its own developer, it takes all the financial risks, including raising funds and securing and guaranteeing the financing for land acquisition and construction. Resident groups often think they can save money by being their own developer and



*Sonora Cohousing under construction.*



*The community acted as their own developer at Berkeley Cohousing.*

cutting out the developer fee or profit margin. This savings has generally not materialized. Quite often, the opposite is true — these communities have taken more time to build and have tended to pay more because of the inefficiencies in their development process. In many cases, however, there is no cohousing developer available to partner with a resident group, and the group may have no choice but to be its own developer. When a community is acting as its own developer, it is even more important that they have an experienced and professional project management, design, and construction team.

## Partnering with a Nonprofit Developer

Nonprofit housing development organizations build the large majority of subsidized housing in the United States. When we first began organizing cohousing, we assumed these organizations would be our natural partners. Yet, in the first two decades of cohousing development in the United States, only a handful of communities have partnered with nonprofit organizations. This is primarily because these organizations tend to have missions that limit their endeavors to the development of affordable housing for low-income households, and funding for such developments is highly competitive and restrictive. While affordability is a significant concern for all cohousing communities, most cohousing households would not meet the low-income qualifications for currently available government subsidies in the United States. In Europe, however, governments

*Swan's Market was developed by a nonprofit housing company as part of a larger urban mixed-use development.*

finance more housing for moderate-income households, and thus broaden the range of people able to qualify for government-subsidized housing.

There are a few exceptions where local nonprofits have worked with market-rate buyers' groups, including CoHo Ecovillage in Corvallis, Oregon, and Swan's Market Cohousing in Oakland, California. More recently, two cohousing-inspired communities — Petaluma Avenue Homes and Sequoia Village — have been built by nonprofit affordable housing associations in Sebastopol, California. Both had income restrictions that limited residents and how they could participate in the development process. Nevertheless, there is tremendous potential for nonprofit housing developers to partner with cohousing groups in the future, especially to create more affordable cohousing options. As the United States develops more progressive affordable housing programs, we can look to Europe for broader models of working with social housing agencies and nonprofit developers.

## Retrofit Cohousing

A few communities have been created by buying up homes in an existing neighborhood and tearing out the back fences to open up shared spaces. N Street Cohousing in Davis, California, and Temescal Creek and Temescal Commons in Oakland are examples of this. These retrofit communities tend to be smaller, often growing organically over time. In most cases, they are well integrated into their surrounding neighborhoods. N Street has grown from four homes in 1989 to fourteen homes with a common house in 2010. Organizer Kevin Wolfe attributes some of their success



to working within a neighborhood that had a large number of rental homes, and thus more turnover at affordable prices, so that the community could get households who wanted to be part of the community to purchase homes as they became available. Temescal Creek, on the other hand, has been unable to purchase a home that would have nicely filled out their community. Having built their common house for their original six households, Temescal Commons is now contemplating the limits to its common facilities.

The primary advantage of the retrofit model is the ability to locate within an established neighborhood. In many cases, buyers can move into existing units in a shorter timeline. The downside is that it may be impossible to secure land to create a larger community.

## Spec Cohousing

Many a landowner and developer have considered the option of building the physical community, then finding the buyers. These developers pose the questions: “Wouldn’t it be easier, fastest, cheaper to do this without working with a novice buyers’ group that doesn’t understand development? If we build it, will they come?”

There are a number of reasons that we have not seen more of the spec approach. Residents who work together during the development process refine their vision for living together, and gain confidence that they can work together. This community building from the ground up is the foundation for their long-term success. Even if a community has only half of the homes committed at move-in, this core group defines the vision for the community that future residents eventually



buy into. On a practical note, getting construction financing for an unconventional project (with parking a distance from homes, for example) is much easier, and in some cases, only possible, when committed homebuyers are included in the deal. In the few attempts we’ve seen of the spec approach, the actual social community does not seem to develop to the same extent as it does when there have been resident groups involved in the development process.

This is not to say that good community-oriented housing, developed without a resident group, would not be a significant improvement in the way typical neighborhoods are designed today. There is much that can be learned from cohousing with regard to community-oriented, kid-friendly design. The addition of community facilities and process training would create much stronger neighborhoods even without resident involvement in the development process. But if residents are not involved in creating the community, we should not expect it to have the same strong bonds that we see in cohousing communities.

*Temescal Commons created 6 units and a common house as a small infill project in Oakland, CA.*

## The Development Process

The specific development process is different for every cohousing community. In some cases, the group forms around a specific site. In others, the group begins by establishing goals and objectives, sometimes meeting for years before identifying a site. The process generally includes the following phases, although the sequence may vary.

### Getting Started

- ♦ Get the word out to find others interested in creating a cohousing community in your area
- ♦ Establish an organizing group
- ♦ Agree on general goals, location, and financial expectations, including a vision statement
- ♦ Select a professional team — developer or project manager, architect, attorney, etc.

### Site Acquisition

- ♦ Identify site criteria such as number of units, density, region or neighborhood, and target home pricing
- ♦ Identify potential sites, get a site under contract with specific price and terms
- ♦ Formulate development strategy: define residents' and developer's roles
- ♦ Develop feasibility budget
- ♦ Establish project timeline
- ♦ Develop a design program
- ♦ Draw up legal agreements for partnership or joint venture arrangement

### Design and Construction Documents

- ♦ Develop schematic design proposal
- ♦ Obtain planning approvals
- ♦ Complete design development

- ♦ Secure construction financing
- ♦ Complete construction drawings and building specifications
- ♦ Obtain building permits
- ♦ Solicit and negotiate construction bids
- ♦ Select contractor
- ♦ Finalize construction contract, loan, and schedule

### Construction

- ♦ Monitor construction work
- ♦ Secure mortgage loans for buyers

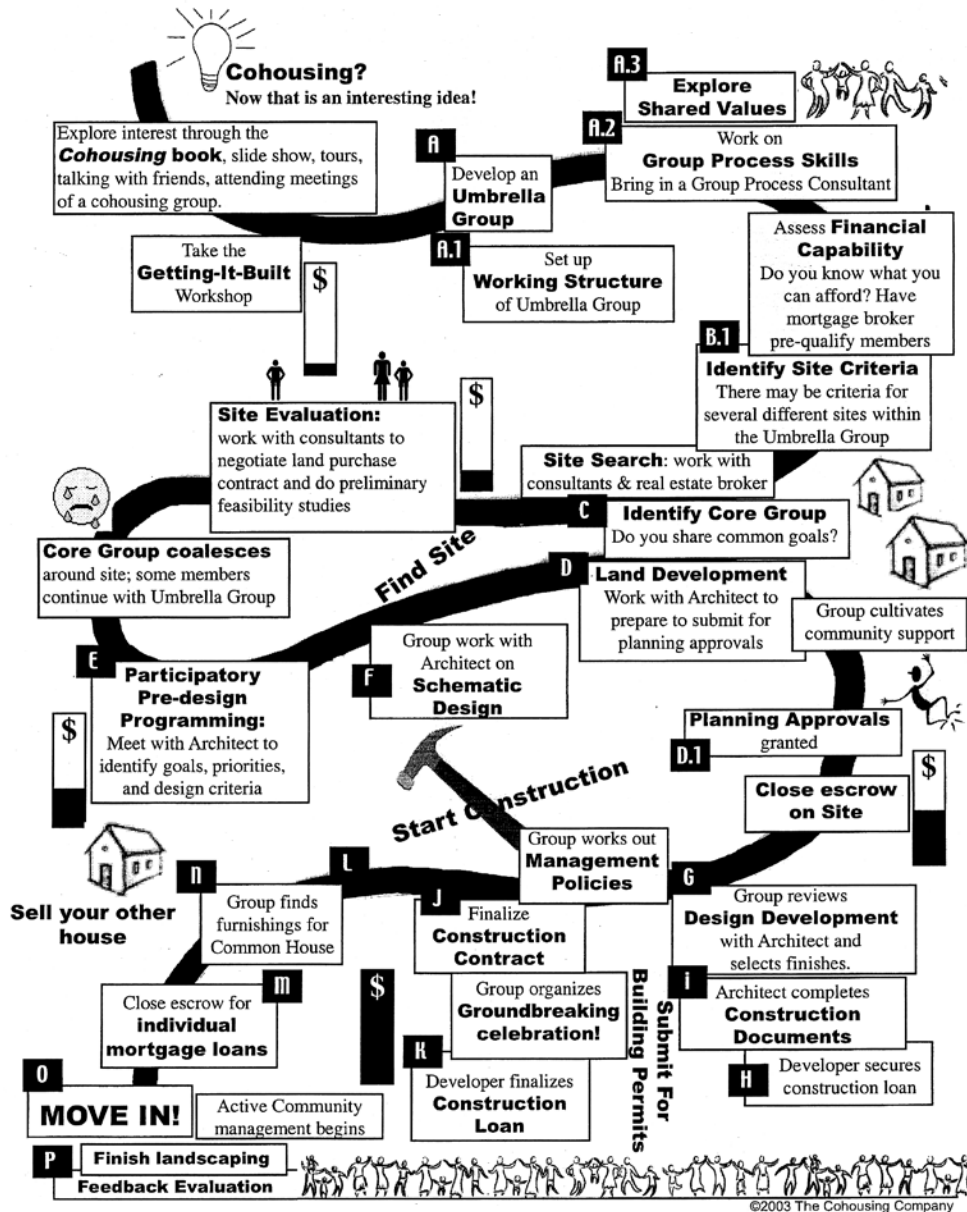
*Move in!*

## Getting Started

New cohousing communities often start with a couple of households who take the initiative to get the word out to find others interested in pursuing the creation of such a community. This might include placing a notice about the proposed project in a local newspaper or website, writing a letter to the editor, posting flyers, or writing about the concept on local email lists. Invite people to attend a presentation about cohousing. Utilize resources such as an experienced guest speaker, this book, and video presentations to help people understand the type of community you want to create. The more clearly you can define the type of community you are trying to create and outline basic financial expectations, the easier it will be to form a serious core group ready to make it happen. For instance, specify that you are looking for others seriously interested in pursuing a cohousing community for themselves based on models in this book, that you expect housing prices will be similar to other new housing in your area (it's not generally cheaper), and that members will have to

invest their own funds to get the project off the ground. This will help to shortcut long discussions about every other possible type of community — shared houses, low-income housing, or back-to-land economically based communities. From this point of departure,

## YOUR COHOUSING ROAD MAP (The people process)



The cohousing road map.

you can begin to form a core group of interested households ready to proceed.

## Developing a Cohesive Organization

In the challenging period before a site is secured, groups often have difficulty maintaining their focus. Yet to secure a site, the group must first take the time to develop an effective working structure, explore shared values, and sharpen its group process skills. Once a group has chosen a specific site, the development process creates its own momentum to keep them on track. A cohesive group that has already learned how to work together and has clearly defined its goals will be better able to make the financial commitment needed to acquire a site and hire consultants.

Many a cohousing group has started with a core group of five to fifteen households who define general goals, identify a site, and establish financial expectations. After these decisions have been made, other people can decide if they are interested in the project. Indeed, as a project becomes clearly defined, more people are attracted to it. Lars Bjerre, a Dane who initiated the community he now lives in and consulted on several others, commented:

You need at least one burning soul who really wants to live there to carry a project through. If you have one to four burning souls, then there is no problem. Others will become interested when it begins to smell like something real.

To develop an effective working structure, the community's first order of business includes setting up the following:

- ♦ A clearly defined Vision Statement
- ♦ A meeting structure — facilitation, agendas, recording, etc.
- ♦ A communication network — email list and website
- ♦ An organizational structure — committees and coordination
- ♦ Decision-making procedures
- ♦ Defined purpose of different meeting types — general meetings, committee meetings, social functions, business, discussion
- ♦ Membership fees to cover basic costs
- ♦ Membership responsibilities and benefits, expectations for participation
- ♦ New member orientation process

As an ongoing process, the community should seek to learn and improve group process skills. These skills are critical to developing your cohousing community (even after you move in), so you might as well get good at them early. At the end of meetings, evaluate the process and give each other feedback and suggestions on what seems to work, specifically regarding:

- ♦ Facilitation of the meeting
- ♦ Making your point clearly and concisely
- ♦ Ending meetings with clear decisions about what will be done and by whom
- ♦ Distributing responsibilities so that everyone can participate and no one is overburdened
- ♦ Making sure everyone's opinion was heard

One of the most important lessons learned in the last few decades of creating cohousing communities is the value of investing time

and money to improve group process skills. The early groups tended to take process for granted, focusing their efforts on discussing the more technical realms. But we've learned that improving the skills for working together can greatly facilitate the development process. Today, we strongly recommend that communities budget early for group process training and take advantage of the professional process trainers who have specific experience working with cohousing groups.

## Group Organization and Decision Making

The development process need not entail endless meetings and discussions. As with any other effective business venture, establishing efficient organizational structures and work methods early on will greatly assist a group in moving forward. Communities typically divide participants into committees (sometimes called work groups) responsible for different areas. A committee is where the work gets done, so that each one can present options and recommendations at the community meetings, where most decisions are made. Typical committees during the development process include:

- + Process
- + Finance and Legal
- + Membership
- + E-communications
- + Social
- + Coordinating or Steering
- + Community Relations
- + Design and Construction

Meeting formats vary, but it is important to devise a system where everyone has an

opportunity for input without a few people dominating discussions. Small-group discussions work well in this respect, as do "roundtable" discussions in which each person has an opportunity to comment on a topic. The job of facilitating meetings is usually rotated within a group of facilitators or within the entire membership. Some communities have found that small groups that meet between common meetings allow for more informal discussions. This format not only allows people to gain a better understanding of the issues and of others' opinions, but it also decreases the need for long discussions during common meetings so decisions can be made more efficiently.

Decision-making procedures also need to be carefully considered and agreed upon early in the planning process. Most cohousing groups try to use consensus as much as possible, but fall back on a majority or two-thirds vote when time pressures require a prompt decision. Some decisions may also be delegated to committees.

## Social Events

Community building shouldn't be all meetings and committees. It is just as important to incorporate social gatherings into the organizing process. Potlucks, hikes, and outings to local events give participants a chance to get to know each other and experience the sense of community that they are working so hard to create. It is this glue that holds a group together during the hard work of creating the physical community.

## Exploring Shared Values

Once a group's structure is in place, the community can focus on exploring shared values.



*Social events make for good community building.*

This is done by discussing people's individual expectations, priorities, and "non-negotiables" (i.e. what you absolutely must have or cannot live with). An effective method is to identify issues and then discuss one or two at each meeting. It is often helpful to break into smaller groups for such discussions. Some issues that often come up in groups are:

- Minimum responsibilities after moving in
- Common facility priorities
- Accommodating different income levels (what does it mean?)
- How children's needs will be facilitated in the community
- Pets and animals
- Individual expectations and non-negotiables (such as, "I have to have a woodworking shop or I just wouldn't be able to live there").

Discussing these issues will help to clarify shared values and differences, as well as greatly increase people's comfort level by learning where others stand. (Our worst fears are generally those we have not discussed.)

People need to understand the options and their ramifications in order to decide what makes sense for them. In some cases, you may want to have a committee research different options (especially the experiences of other communities), which they can then present to the larger group. At this stage the group does not need to agree on how each of these issues will be addressed, but it is helpful to record the different opinions expressed in the meeting minutes. This allows new members to get a sense of the discussion. We have discovered that an individual's non-negotiables often change quite radically as he or she gets more comfortable with the community and its processes. But those needs must evolve at each individual's own pace.

## Site Acquisition

A common question is whether to form the group first or find a property first. The answer really depends on the larger community's depth of interest in cohousing and the track record of previous cohousing initiatives in the area. If you are the first to introduce cohousing in a region, you must start by introducing people to the concept, which in turn will help to build the market for it. In this case forming a group first might be the best strategy. In regions familiar with the cohousing concept, such as Northern California, it is often easier to organize a group around a specific property. (Even so, many community founders have neither the financial resources nor the time to find property.) In either case, a core group must organize around a shared vision that brings together a broad set of resources.

After you have an organizational structure for your group, it's time to get serious about clarifying site criteria, such as:



- Geographic preferences
- Individual financial capabilities and target price range for dwellings
- Desired amenities of the surrounding area (i.e. schools, public transportation, neighborhood shopping, parks and recreation areas)
- Preferred and acceptable zoning densities
- Acceptable neighborhood character

In addition to using questionnaires and group discussions to discover these criteria, it is often useful to take field trips to see potential sites and clustered housing. People will learn a great deal about their own preferences by visiting actual properties. They will also learn more about what is realistic and what tradeoffs may be required. You may find there are criteria for several different types of sites within the group. It is helpful to keep a database of your members' individual site criteria, priorities, and non-negotiables. This allows new members to effectively assess the intent of the group. When potential sites are identified, you can also do a quick check to see how many people have said they would be willing to live in a particular area.

Keep in mind that it is nearly impossible to find a property that meets all of your criteria. Communities often identify the perfect site as being close to open space and parks, mass transit, good schools, and a great coffee shop, all while being affordable. Looking at real properties will help you understand the type of tradeoffs you may need to make to actually acquire a buildable property.

When a potential site is identified, the group, usually acting through an agent, will negotiate a purchase option that, in turn,

allows time to research the site thoroughly. Zoning, the master plan for the area, the possibility and process of increasing the density and getting variances, soils, potential for toxic wastes, the structural integrity of existing buildings, financial feasibility, neighborhood concerns, and the owner's objectives all need to be checked. This information will be used to negotiate the price and terms of purchase with the owner. The purchase option "ties up" the site for a period of time so that no one else can buy it while the group researches its feasibility for the proposed project and seeks planning approvals. In most cases, resident groups try to purchase a site only after the planning approvals are actually granted.

As you decide to commit more funds, it will also be important to consider what happens when someone leaves the group, and if or how their investment is reimbursed. This should be defined in the partnership or limited liability company operating agreement.

## Your Professional Team

During the course of developing a cohousing community, hundreds of people will provide services to the project. Among them are a few key professionals who will interact closely with the resident group. Ideally, these people will have cohousing experience, but at the very least they should be professionals who have worked in housing development before. These are the key roles you'll want to identify early on (ideally before you begin looking at properties):

- Project Manager
- Attorney
- Architect
- Process Consultant

## Project Management

Whether you are partnering with a developer or tackling the project as a group development, you'll need a paid project manager or project management team to keep the ten thousand details coordinated. In the case of cohousing, this needs to be a "people person" who is organized, experienced in housing development, and has excellent communication skills. For example, our firms, McCamant & Durrett Architects and CoHousing Partners, provide

both day-to-day project management services and development consulting to groups, developers, and local project managers.

## Attorney

Over the course of the project, a community is likely to work with several different attorneys with different specialties. Initially, they generally consult an attorney to assist in structuring an appropriate legal structure for their joint investments.

### The Project Management Team

A cohousing group never has to do it alone. A project management team can provide the following services:

- Site and project feasibility studies that include defining physical and financial parameters for a potential site and/or project.
- Assistance in determining the best development scenario for your project, including working out specific scenarios with a developer and an investment/returns plan.

Providing these services means that a project management team will:

- Act as a "point person" who coordinates among client, consultants, government agencies, banks, and potential investors/contributors.
- Manage the project from a "big picture" perspective to ensure issues are identified and resolved before they become problems.
- Keep the project on time and within budget, or at least keep everyone apprised as to how decisions will effect time and budget.
- Coordinate the planning approval processes.
- Coordinate with state agencies, including coordinating the DRE (Department of Real Estate) subdivision process.

- Educate and update the client about the development process.
- Recommend and negotiate contracts with consultants; manage and coordinate consultants.
- Arrange for construction and permanent financing, put together financial package.
- Assist group in analyzing financing options.
- Consult on investment packages; assist in finding outside investors as needed.
- Coordinate sales contracts and closing of permanent loans.
- Provide project bookkeeping.
- Help group frame issues and questions, as they need to be addressed.
- Consult and assist in implementing a marketing plan, including the development of effective publicity materials.
- Consult on legal contracts and management documents from a business and community perspective (not as an attorney).

## Architect

Consulting an architect familiar with cohousing is very helpful in assessing the feasibility of a property for your community. Will zoning allow your proposed use? How many homes will be allowed? How many parking spaces will the city require? How could this all fit on the property? Having this feedback early will not only save time, but may help you avoid costly mistakes.

## Process Consultant

Having a consultant who can help your group refine its decision-making and conflict-resolution methods is often the difference between a smooth process with a few bumps and an encumbered process that can paralyze the group's progress. By establishing a relationship with someone early on, you have an outside mediator who already knows you as a group and has established a relationship with your members, making it easier for him or her to help you through the rough spots.

## Entitlements and Planning

### Approvals

After a site is determined to be feasible for a cohousing community, a core group has expressed interest in pursuing it, and the purchase option has been negotiated, the actual process of preparing to submit for planning approval begins. This is the process that converts a piece of property into a buildable site, although at this stage most of the work only appears on paper. In addition to developing a design that is submitted to the planning department, this process may involve more research in the form of soils tests, toxics analysis, water percolation tests, documenting existing vegetation and structures, and building neighborhood support for the project.

The design process is described in detail in Chapter 28: The Participatory Design Process. Community members can play an important role in the political entitlement process, described later in this chapter. Once the planning commission approves the project, you will finalize the purchase of the site by closing escrow and proceeding with design development and the securing of financing.

## Legal Structures

Before a group proceeds very far in the planning process, it should consider its legal organization and individual and shared liabilities. Legal agreements serve several purposes besides settling questions of liability. Requiring members to sign an agreement, even in the initial stages, clarifies who is able or willing to commit to the project — sorting out those who are serious from those who are still just curious observers. (Observers may be allowed to participate, but have no vote in decisions until they make a formal financial commitment.) Becoming a legal entity also inspires confidence among members and consultants alike. Banks and realtors are unlikely to work with a group of people who have no binding agreement among themselves. Finally, a legal agreement clarifies how the development costs will be divided among the members.

There are generally three stages for which legal agreements are needed, reflecting the needs of each development phase: 1) an initial pre-site acquisition agreement, 2) a development partnership or limited liability company to create the development entity, and 3) the homeowners' association documents or other agreements that define the long-term ownership and management structure.

The initial agreement, drawn up before the group is ready to purchase a site, generally outlines the group's purpose, membership definitions, decision-making procedures, and fees to cover basic operating expenses and consulting services. It may be a simple association or a limited liability company that evolves into the development entity, discussed below. One of the purposes of this basic agreement is to allow the group to open a bank account.

When the group is ready to purchase property and/or hire consultants (architect, lawyer, project manager, and others) for extended services, a more extensive legal agreement is desirable. At this point, the group typically incorporates as some sort of partnership, which will function as the development entity through the design and construction phases. Most of the communities we have worked with in recent years have used a limited liability company as their structure during the development phase, because this is common practice in real estate development. In any case, the community will want to consult an attorney who can advise them on the most appropriate legal structure for their situation.

At this stage the resident group must decide how to develop the actual project. Who will manage the day-to-day details of the development process? How will construction financing be secured? What are the individual and collective liabilities, and what will the bank require to back or guarantee the construction loan?

A resident group that partners with a professional developer typically has a series of agreements that define this relationship. For instance, in many Californian cohousing

projects, the community forms its own limited liability company (LLC), which then partners with a developer — often forming a project-specific limited liability company, which in turn becomes the actual development entity. This project LLC includes both the community LLC and the developer as members. In this case, the operating agreement for the LLC and the project management agreement define their relationship, responsibilities, and obligations. In other cases, the community LLC is the development entity that contracts for project management, design, and construction services to build the project.

Once construction is completed, the long-term ownership structure is put in place. In the United States, this is most typically a homeowners' association, whose bylaws and codes, covenants and restrictions (CC&Rs) replace all previous agreements. It is easy enough to draft the homeowners' association documents to meet the standard mortgage requirements of Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). We recommend that the core of the community agreements (common dinner and workshare systems, for example) be defined as "community agreements" outside of the more formal CC&Rs. This makes it easier for communities to change and refine their systems over time. In addition, banks typically review CC&Rs for mortgages. This separation of agreements means that a group won't have to explain cohousing to the bank every time a resident wants to refinance for a better interest rate.

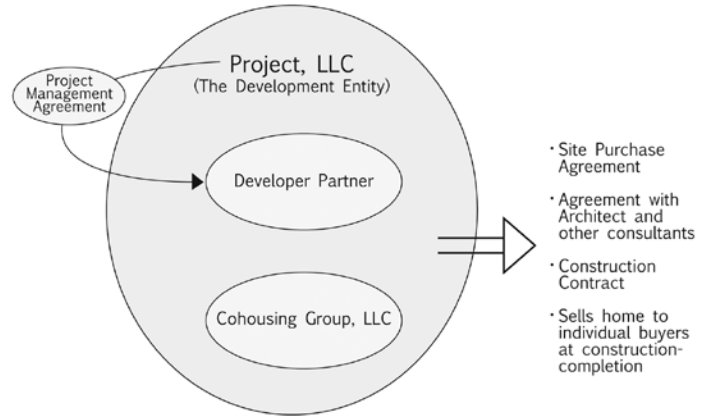
## Financing

Once a resident group is ready to acquire a site, they must begin thinking less as

homebuyers and more like developers who are willing to take the initial risks required to get a project off the ground. Before a resident group can know what is possible for a property — even how many units can be built at what cost — money must be invested (unsecured and completely at risk) to answer feasibility questions on things like soils and toxins analyses, design viability, and cost estimates. While many a community has dreamt of finding a finance angel who will cover most of this initial investment to get a project off the ground, the reality is that most American cohousing communities, including those partnered with a developer, have been built because there was a group of residents willing to take the leap of faith to invest in creating their own community. In this sense, cohousing buyers have become co-developers rather than just consumers.

In the United States, there has not been any reliable source of financing for pre-development funds before the start of construction, and thus, to date, most of this equity investment has come from the cohousing group members and a few cohousing supporters, friends, and family. It is not unusual for a group to raise one to two million dollars in investment before the start of construction. Initially, this is a daunting task. And yet, over and over again, we have seen communities able to raise these funds from within their own resources. It is the willingness of members to put their money behind their values that shows the strength of the community, and which, ultimately, attracts other investors and bank financing.

Banks typically want to see 15 to 40 percent of the project's cost already invested in equity before it will loan the remaining 60 to



*Many communities are the result of partnership between a professional developer and cohousing group.*

85 percent to build the project. This equity is amassed from a number of sources: money already spent on land purchase, project approvals, and site studies; cash from investors, both resident and nonresident; and any amount the landowner is willing to carry until the completion of the project. One of the most significant changes from the recent economic crisis has been the increase in equity requirements for all types of construction financing.

While terms and conditions for construction financing change with the economic climate, banks typically have required that at least half of the units have committed buyers before they will approve a construction loan. On the whole, banks do not understand the cohousing concept — and what they do not understand they are reluctant to finance. As cohousing has built a viable track record, however, this has become less of a problem. Projects by committed buyers, who have already invested time and money into the project and who are partnered with

a developer with a good track record, are usually readily financed.

In fact, this commitment can be a group's most powerful bargaining tool throughout the development process. A bank considering making a construction loan wants to ensure that the project will be completed and that the loan will be repaid in a timely manner. The existence of buyers and, ideally, a waiting list of residents, will ease the concerns of a bank asked to finance a relatively new housing type.

As the number of cohousing communities grows, we can support new communities by investing in communities besides our own. Support Financial, organized by one of the founders of the Nyland community, creates such an investment fund. Most of Support Financial's investors are people who originally invested in their own cohousing community and are now willing to invest in other developments. Support's funds typically go into the project just before the start of construction to fill the last equity requirements.

Once built, cohousing buyers have generally been able to get standard individual mortgages like one would for any townhouse.

### **Resales and Value Over Time**

Buying into cohousing is a self-selecting process. There is typically no approval process, but rather an orientation to assure that the buyer understands the expectations of participating in the community. This might include coming to a community dinner and talking with other residents. In most cases, the actual purchase (sale price) for a resale is worked out privately between seller and buyer.

Getting a real estate appraisal for a cohousing unit can be difficult. Cohousing homes are typically smaller in size, but cost more per square foot than other types of housing. This is because of the extensive common facilities for a relatively small number of homes, and the energy-efficient and green building features. Study of resale prices over the first two decades of cohousing in California has confirmed that cohousing communities hold their value over time, and in some cases even increase in value from their initial costs based on sales prices. A report completed in January 2010 by the appraisal firm Bartholomew Associates concluded that resales in cohousing communities in Northern California sold at 1.7 to 3.12 times the prices of other townhouses and condominiums in the area. When prices were adjusted for specific differences in age, condition, and location, cohousing homes sold at 11 to 63 percent premiums compared to the closest comparables. This data was collected through 2009 and thus includes the years of the "great recession."<sup>1</sup>

### **Construction**

In the case where a community is building all the homes at once, we have found it most cost effective to turn the construction over to a general contractor, and for community members to stay out of the way until the contractor has fulfilled the scope of its work. The key to keeping construction costs in line is minimizing changes during construction and eliminating individual customizations. When you are paying interest on land and construction loans, time is money, and few cohousing buyers have the skills or time to contribute effectively alongside professional builders.

That is not to say that there won't be substantial opportunity for customizations and finishing projects after move-in. But it will ultimately save money if residents can move in and close permanent loans before embarking on do-it-yourself projects. This clear delineation between the professional builders working under contract and residents doing their own work will also help to clearly define the scope of work within the construction contract, as well as liability and warranty issues.

We have found it advantageous to work with contractors who have experience with multi-family housing (not houses) in order to get the most cost-effective construction pricing.

### Primary Role of Community Members

Learning from communities of all sizes, and going back to evaluate the value of their time spent once they have moved in, we have found that it is very helpful for communities to keep focused on the areas of the development process where they add the highest value and which cannot be hired out. These areas include:

- ✦ Community building
- ✦ Marketing and outreach
- ✦ Incorporating new members
- ✦ Working with your project management and design team to get planning approvals
- ✦ Raising the money

### Community Building

Ultimately, a community is about the social culture you create among residents, not the physical buildings. We design the physical

layout to support that social life — to make it a good place to live — but the ultimate goal of community is the relationships we strive to create amongst neighbors. Thus, it is important for community members to keep in mind that while they can hire out almost every other aspect of the development process — the design, the project management, even the marketing — they cannot hire out the community building. Professional facilitation and process training will greatly enhance the community's ability to work together, but the community members need to invest the time to really build community.

### Marketing and Outreach

A community can hire marketing and outreach assistance, but ultimately people interested in community want to meet the community — the other people. For this reason, one of the most important contributions community members make is investing time and training into their outreach and

*Portions of the development lend themselves to do-it-yourself. Here, members of Bellingham Cohousing work on landscaping and gardening.*





*Residents are involved in development decisions from the beginning.*



*Core group members use design programs and models created during the workshop to introduce new members to the community.*

marketing efforts. This requires putting time into meeting with potential members, helping them to understand the vision of the community, what decisions have been made, and where the group is in the process. It also involves helping people work through their concerns and their own decision-making process. People who truly understand the community's vision and expectations, and who have worked through their own questions and concerns, will be better prepared to

actively contribute to the community's efforts and are much less likely to drop out.

### **Incorporating New Members**

The method by which new members are recruited and oriented also affects a group's ability to stay on track. To retain continuity, it is best not to bring in new members in the middle of the early design phase of the development process. In actual practice, however, new members are usually accepted at any time until all units are filled. Recruitment campaigns should be organized at key milestones that can be used for publicity, such as during site purchase, at planning approvals, and before the start of construction. Groundbreaking is an excellent time to get articles in local publications.

New members should learn the history and status of the group — which decisions have already been made and which are still open for discussion. It pays for the resident group to take a proactive role in incorporating new members. Newcomers can be assigned to a veteran "buddy" who can help them understand the process. They should also be invited to join specific committees. Everyone in the resident group should take the time to get to know each new member as a person.

Turnover is an inescapable difficulty of the participatory process. Some families are pressured to find other housing before the project is completed; people may move for job opportunities; and others may become discouraged or decide they are not ready for cohousing. In some projects with long planning periods, only three or four households who had participated from the start saw the project through to completion. However,



the number of residents who participate in the entire process does not seem to affect the success of a project once it is completed. The backbone of the project is the organizing group of people, who are committed to it because they intend to live there.

### Community Involvement in the Entitlement Process

The entitlement process, in which the design is taken through various planning approvals — design review committees, planning commission, and city council — is another area of the development process in which the participatory process can be a real asset. In traditional development, a developer and an architect present how a proposed project will be good for the neighborhood, but these professionals don't have the same sort of long-term view as the people who will live there. With a cohousing group, you have future neighbors talking to existing neighbors. This creates a totally different dynamic. Lack of familiarity with cohousing means that neighbors and local politicians may begin with a lot of unfounded assumptions. It generally takes a patient education process to help people understand that cohousing can be a real asset to the larger neighborhood.

Community members will need to go door-to-door to talk to neighbors and meet with the neighborhood association and local officials. Neighbors tend to fear that cohousing will attract unconventional people and adversely affect their own property values. Once they meet the cohousers, they begin to see that they tend to be conscientious, taxpaying citizens who participate in school and community activities. In many cases, cohousing developments have helped

to stabilize neighborhoods and make them more desirable.

### Community/Professional Relationships

It is critical that the community carefully structure its relationship and communication with its professional consultants and development team. We recommend only one community contact for each professional. The community needs its professionals doing their jobs, not repeating information to twenty different people. Questions to professionals should only come through the committee working most closely with that firm, and ideally in writing. For instance, when we work as a project manager, we typically meet at least once a month with the coordinating or steering committee. Once the programming and schematic design are complete, the architect rarely needs to meet with the community, and then only with the design committee. While it is possible to find a few consultants who are excellent facilitators, most professionals that a community works with are not process experts. It's up to the community itself, with the assistance of its process consultant, to keep itself organized and disciplined.

In considering how to best use consultants, residents must decide how involved they want to be in various aspects of the process.



*Community members can change the dynamic of the entitlement process by meeting with neighbors. Wolf Creek Community members hosted an open site with tea and cookies.*

Whereas the issue of ultimate livability may benefit from group input, countless technical decisions can be delegated to the developer and consultants.

Sometimes professionals within the resident group are able to provide some consulting services. While this may ostensibly reduce costs, it can also create conflicts between the personal and professional interests of the resident consultant. It is important that both the community and the consultant take a clear look before diving too far into this option. Have clear agreements for scope of work and payment like you would for any other consultant.

## Conclusion

Now that we have looked at the key phases in the creation of a cohousing community, from group formation to site acquisition and developer involvement, let's look at the actual design of the community. The next chapter — The Participatory Design Process — outlines how residents can effectively work with their design professionals on the site, the common facilities, and private houses.



## The Participatory Design Process

*When done right, the group design process does not delay a project. In fact, it makes it go much faster, and it works socially. And if it doesn't work socially, why bother?*

Once the resident group is committed to creating a community, they are ready to translate their goals into a concrete reality by working through the participatory design process.

Competent cohousing design begins with a participatory process that will create a design to sustain community long after a honeymoon has worn off. The group makes the key decisions with the architect who leads them through the process, balancing their desires and needs regarding the characteristics of the site, the common house, and the private houses. At the end of the participatory design process the architect will combine the group's key design decisions with building codes and the project budget to create an overall plan for the community. Start to finish, the

schematic design phase typically takes about four or five months and ends with blueprints for the physical community that fulfills the group's explicit goals.

### Participatory Design Is Essential

The participatory design process achieves two goals: it both finalizes the design of the

*Chuck leading a design development workshop with the Fresno Cohousing group.*



*Relationships are built during the design process and are sustained for years to come by the appropriately apportioned common spaces.*



*Just after move in, the role of design in facilitating meaningful relationships is obvious.*



cohousing community and forges relationships among residents that will help build a community from inception. Although small gardens and comfortable, shared outdoor sitting areas and public amenities make it easier for people to meet and talk, the mere presence of these features does not mean that residents will actually interact. Individuals who participate in designing their community,

and are therefore part of an engaged group of residents, *will* use shared resources or spend time in common open spaces — and further build relationships while doing so. The participatory process gives residents a rock-solid foundation for daily interaction.

This chapter gives an overview of the participatory process as it has evolved in our practice and from our experience in Denmark and the US.

### **The Importance of an Efficient and Inclusive Group Process**

The participatory design process has always played an integral part in the evolution of cohousing. As cohousing has evolved, this process has become more clearly defined. The greatest challenge is receiving enough input from the residents to get the design right and instill a sense of ownership, but not so much input as to delay the process, thus making it too expensive or difficult for the residents and professionals alike. Gaining input from a group will make their collective and individual lives easier, more practical, more convenient, more economical, more interesting, and more fun — and is not difficult to generate. This is both a flexible and deliberate process. If the architect knows how to work with the group, and the group is clear about its intentions, both will reach their highest potential. If not, the group will muddle along and the professionals will put on a good show and proceed until they run out of money, time, or both — and will build whatever they have ended up with, good or bad or otherwise.

The participatory design process can be effective, inclusive, and efficient if it is organized well and facilitated by an experienced



*An inclusive and efficient process gives all participants a chance to make a difference in the design. A difference that adds to the long term livability of a community.*

mediator. An efficient process means that everyone involved — from the group to the architect to the builders — will spend less time and money to complete each task. In addition, the resulting cohesive design program greatly helps to recruit and integrate new members into an existing group, and makes the process itself fun.

## Design Matters

A cohousing community's built environment either promotes or discourages interaction among residents, resulting in either a lively or a lifeless place. After visiting and gathering data on 285 cohousing communities, we found that the design can have as much as a twenty-fold impact on the social viability and vitality of the group after the first year of residency. That is, if a community is designed well, people will talk together, be together, and play together up to twenty times more than if it is designed poorly (though they may meet together more often, trying to solve the

### Efficiency Means Progress

The biggest threat to the viability of a cohousing project is an ill-planned and inefficient design process. This threatens a cohousing project because it puts developers and other professionals in the position of wanting to do the job without input from the resident group (mostly because they think they can be more effective on their own). And without the residents' input and ownership, the very foundations of the community will be compromised.

problems created by an ill-conceived design). Most importantly, the design sustains the community. The community will never wane if the design continuously helps stitch it together. The private houses in a cohousing community can be more beautiful and more functional than any home the residents have ever lived in. The space between buildings can create more conviviality and the relationships among the individual dwellings and common

spaces can create possibilities for interaction and activity beyond your wildest hopes. Community does not happen accidentally or even because you hope or even will it to

happen. It is a very deliberate process, and it happened because you formatted the world so that it can keep happening.

## Order of Design

The participatory process is split into three parts: the **Site** program, the **Common House** program, and the **Private House** program, completed in that order. In turn, the design progresses in the following manner:

- ♦ Site program and schematic site plan workshop
- ♦ Common house program and schematic common house plan workshop
- ♦ Private house program and schematic unit plans workshop
- ♦ Design closure workshop
- ♦ Submission to the city for preliminary approval
- ♦ Priority workshop (for budget control)
- ♦ Design development workshop (to finish picking the rest of the materials, especially for the interiors)

The next sections define the design programs for each step in the design process and briefly outline the major considerations of each part of the design process and its relationship to other stages in the process. Details regarding design considerations are outlined in great detail in the following chapter, *Cohousing Design: A Pattern Language*.

## Design Program

The process of moving from the group's goals to a physical community begins with the creation of a design program. In our practice we create the design program in three stages: the site design, the common house design,



*A well-designed community, starting with a great site plan and a comfortable, functional, and fun common house are key to the long-term success of a community.*

## Maximizing Potential

Organized and executed efficiently, a participatory design process gives the group the confidence to share knowledge in a complementary fashion that, in turn, enables group members to make the project work at other important levels, such as:

- Making firm personal commitments: recruitment, payment of initial fees, and more
- Lobbying the municipality to get the project approved, if necessary
- Helping keep costs down with careful planning
- Maintaining a non-institutional feel to the project
- Pushing the percentage of common areas up and the individual house sizes down
- Controlling costs by learning to not demand what you don't need, and where the priorities are.

and private house design. A carefully created design program defines specific goals and translates them to design criteria — the needs and requirements that provide the basis for the architectural design. It also helps the group to rank and choose priorities. At completion, the program outlines the criteria on which design alternatives will be judged, and identifies exactly what functions the private dwelling, the common facilities, and the outdoor areas should accommodate. For example, the site program addresses some or all of the following questions:

What are the goals of the site plan?

What activities facilitate those goals outdoors?

What common facilities, that is, what places facilitate those activities?

An architect can facilitate a group's discussions by laying out the range of possibilities, outlining important considerations, and providing inspiration and resource materials. In this process, clearly defining the functions to be accommodated on the site and in the buildings is much more important than assigning square footage requirements, as in conventional programs. In other words, a design program articulates how many people to seat in the dining room, or what activities the children's room should accommodate. This then allows the architect to determine how much space different design solutions require. Once complete, the design program will include a single, cohesive document that allows both professionals and members of the resident group to focus on their roles. They won't need to tell consultants the same thing over and over again throughout the

process. Later on, the design program is the tool residents and professionals alike will use to evaluate, and decide upon, the design of the actual project.

It is best if as many residents as possible are involved in the design program. The more experience your architect has, the more he or she can make suggestions along the way that help the group turn over every rock, and see all of the possibilities. We have accomplished plenty of successful design workshops with 30 or 40 residents participating. Conversely, we believe this process should never start with less than six individuals. Empirically, this number balances informational needs. We once started a site plan with four residences, but when the project picked up speed, we found that the data was skewed, and had to start over to reach a balanced design. That project is healthy and up and running today.

## The Role of the Design Program

The actual creation of the design program should be considered a learning experience for all participants, including the architect. It will result in a single, cohesive document that will allow members of the resident group to relax; when they face obstacles, they can just say, "Now, what does it say in the program?" Later on, the group can refer to the design program to answer the question, "Did the consultants actually design what we wanted them to design?"

The design program also helps a membership committee do their job well. One of the greatest responsibilities of the committee is to walk new members through whatever has already been agreed. A solid design program prevents wasteful backtracking because new members who join the group after it is

finished will be able to see how thorough the group has been and won't be tempted to back-track. For example, a new participant might ask, "Did you consider how big the front porches should be? I used to have a house with a big front porch and it was great." The design program can be used to explain such decisions. In orienting new members to the community, it's not enough just to hand them

the program. It's best to take them out to coffee and walk them through each line item to help them to feel connected and welcome.

## Site Design Program

The site design program is addressed first because the design of the site will largely determine the type of social environment within the cohousing community. The site design and the site design process is where the neighborhood is re-invented, where it is made anew to reflect the real-life issues of the members of the resident group. The site plan is also considered first because its configuration leads directly to the city planning approval process and key questions about feasibility — cost, the number and type of houses, the number of parking places, and so on.

A few basic rules for site design will ensure that the community becomes a safe, car-free zone that is pedestrian-friendly and conducive to socializing. These rules include divorcing parking from the living environment; creating



*Activities are prioritized by the group before the designing of buildings.*

### **General Site Design Criteria**

- Number of units
- Site amenities to preserve (views, trees, and the like)
- Location of common facilities, residential buildings, open space
- Building type and form (two stories, clusters, detached, and so on)
- Building materials (general)
- Energy considerations (electric, gas, solar, wind, conservation, and more)
- Accessibility considerations
- Parking (location, how much covered/uncovered)

### **Outdoor Areas:**

- Car access on site (traffic-free, access to houses when necessary)
- Open space
- Shared amenities (sitting areas, gardens, and the like)
- Transition between private residences and common areas
- Private outdoor functions (sitting areas, gardens, activity areas, and so on)
- Landscaping, fences, hedges, plantings
- Personalization



pathways that connect parking, common facilities, and private houses; and creating open space that encourages casual engagement. The important aspects of site design are described in the following chapter, *Cohousing Design: A Pattern Language*.

## Common House Design Program

After the site is laid out, the design program considers the common house. The common house design precedes the individual private houses because once group members know the amenities featured in the common house, they will be able to see how these will supplement and become an extension of their private houses. People are much more comfortable with the notion of smaller private houses after they see how the common house will contain guest rooms or suites, laundry facilities, entertainment rooms, a sewing room, and other amenities, as well as a gourmet kitchen and large dining/living space for that twice-a-year party or family gathering (not to mention the all-important common dinners several times a week).

First and foremost, the common house is designed to bring people together, bridging the gap between home and neighborhood. Moreover, while a single-family house design consumes energy, time, and money, the common house can be seen as a way of conserving all three. To create the right common house, we start with a good common house program.

It's through the activities in the common house that we get to know each other and are able to keep in touch. And that carries over to outside, adding life to the street scene.

— Sun and Wind resident

The location of the common house greatly effects the frequency of its use. For the common house to be an integral part of community life, residents must go by it in the course of their daily activities. Passing the common house on their way home is the most important consideration. In this



*During the site planning workshop a house block arrangement is consensed by the group and the outcome is summarized in a Site Plan Program document.*



*Creating a comfortable, functional and fun common house is the goal of the common house workshop.*

## Close Proximity Fosters Community

Americans always look at a cohousing site plan and say, "Wow, that feels like a village." In practice a cohousing community does operate somewhat like a village. A visit to any well-designed cohousing community will demonstrate this. An intelligently crafted site design creates proximities that foster community, privacy, and obvious long-term successes.

way, residents can see if anything is going on, and visiting becomes part of a daily routine. Likewise, if residents can see the common house and the terrace from their own homes, they are more likely to join in when there is an activity. Finally, no dwelling should be

so far from the common house as to make someone feel isolated. Naturally, some residents prefer to be farther from the central action than others (although when moving into cohousing, people seem to move closer to the common house than farther away).

### Highlights of Common House Program

- Functions to be accommodated (dining, visitor's short/long term suites, and so on; whatever the group decides)
- Priority of functions (in case they can't afford everything)
- Desired characteristics (warm, comfortable, easy maintenance)
- Acoustic and light considerations (solar access, visual access to private houses/site)
- Indoor/outdoor relationship (access to terraces and the like)
- Considerations of future needs

### Private House Design Program

Once the common house is designed, the private house discussions go quite smoothly and rapidly. Design of the private houses must accomplish two goals: accommodating the range of household types and achieving a balance between public and private spaces (or enabling privacy when desired). The important aspects of private house design are described in the following chapter, *Cohousing Design: A Pattern Language*.

Standardizing the designs of the private houses is the most effective way to increase efficiency and keep prices down. Although the idea of sweat equity is appealing, residents should instead strive to limit the number of custom features incorporated into the design of houses. Cohousing communities can save money by limiting the number of floor plans to one for each house size, and by keeping finish options (flooring, cabinets, bathroom tiles, and the like) to a manageable number. Residents may be able to accept such limitations if the units are designed from the start so that they can be easily expanded or customized later.

During the private house design program of Muir Commons we solicited the residents' full input in the design of the units, then refined these floor plans with the understanding that they could accommodate a variety of later changes, such as the addition of a kitchen island or the expansion of



*The Nevada City Cohousing common house is on the path between parking and private homes; it is the heart of the community and central to the site plan.*

a room. Setting a careful budget from the start and trying to stick to it can keep the conflict — and the prices — to a minimum. The reward to homeowners for such self-discipline can be lower mortgages and more money for later renovation.

Unfortunately, many groups have discovered the expense of customization through costly experience. Minor custom touches such as an extra wall or different bathroom fixtures, though relatively inexpensive when viewed one by one, have a cumulative effect that can increase the cost of construction exponentially for everyone because they affect larger design considerations and construction timelines. The Winslow Cohousing Group, for example, has calculated that residents would have been much better off had they stuck with standardized designs. Even if every household in this development had then gone back and customized their private homes with their own contractors, they would have ended up spending less in the long run.

It takes a lot of self-discipline to impose limitations on what may be the residents' only chance to design their own homes. It is the private house design program that imposes this discipline.

## Design and Construction Documents

As the design of the project progresses, the design program is translated into actual physical design. The process includes design development and finally results in completed construction documents that detail how the structures are to be built. If an architect has worked with the group via an orderly design program, the actual design phase merely

continues an established process of translating the group's goals and objectives into tangible outcomes.



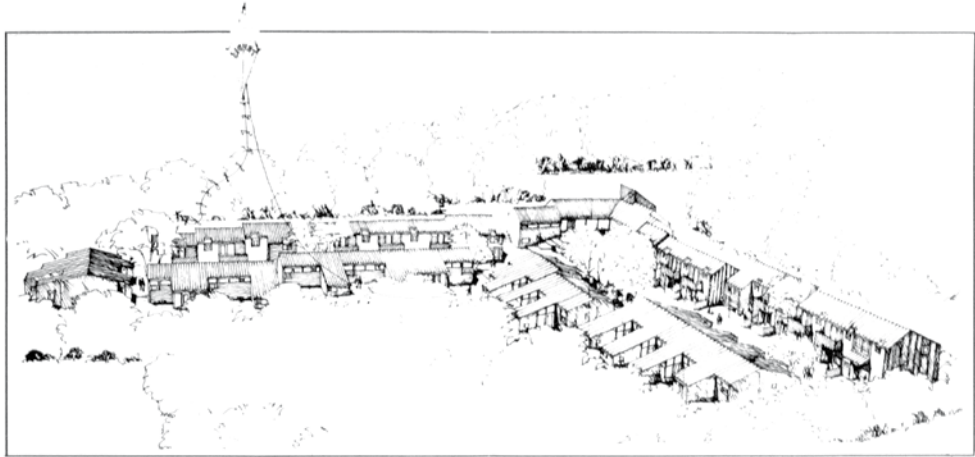
*Standardizing the private house design is important to keep costs down and the quality and comfort up.*

### A Question of Choice

We are often asked, "How can you afford to spend all this time with the group?" It's a good question, but we think the real question is this: "How can we afford not to?"

By choosing to make a better life for themselves — one that fosters human-scale community while lessening their collective consumptive demands — each resident group actually accomplishes much more than their expressed goal of establishing a cohousing community.

After all, if our second highest responsibility as a species is to create a viable society (after replenishing the Earth, which at 6.5 billion and counting appears done), how can we afford not to choose to spend our time creating a better-functioning neighborhood and therefore society?



*Sketch of  
Trudeslund.*

### **Goals and Priorities — Avoiding Feature Creep**

The development program requires tradeoffs — few people can afford everything on their wish list. There is always the temptation to increase unit size just a few square feet more or to add just one more common amenity. This feature creep can kill a budget. Likewise, using poor construction materials isn't the answer to solving budget shortfalls. The discipline of sticking to a deliberate process is the answer. Rather than incurring excessive debt or suffering through inferior materials and services, it's better for a group to establish clear development priorities and stay true to them. That is the best way for the group to get most of what they want.

### **A Word about Architecture and Good Site Design**

All aspects of the participatory process are important, from the design program to site and building design. A bad design program guarantees bad architecture, but a good program doesn't necessarily guarantee good

architecture. Just recently, a woman for whom we were designing a new community asked if we had designed such and such a common house in another cohousing community. We had not, although we did program it with the group. She replied, "Great. Because if you had, I would have serious concerns."

We share those same concerns. The common house in question is cold and clammy, dark and uncomfortable. The program was not implemented with good design sense. That happens because the architect is not a good designer, or because s/he does not know how to control the process for the best results.

A good architect needs to be skilled in provoking and inspiring the group to new architectural heights from a social and aesthetic point of view, and know every relevant detail. Good architecture comes from the heart and a heartfelt appreciation for what a resident group is trying to accomplish. Find a good architect — one who truly appreciates the cohousing concept and who preferably lives in cohousing. The end result is worth the search.

## When Not to Compromise

The most effective participatory design processes recognize both the value of resident input and the professional experience of designers who understand the needs of cohousing groups. Most participants in the participatory design process recommend leaving most technical and aesthetic decisions to the architect, because it is almost impossible for most groups to agree among themselves on these issues. Attempting to find a compromise agreeable to everyone can be very time-consuming, and generally has not paid



*Group discussions yield great design outcomes.*

## Work of Vandkunsten

The work of Vandkunsten, the architects of Trudesland, Savvaerket, and many more cohousing communities, provides an interesting perspective on the relationship between architects and residents. This firm has been an outspoken advocate of resident participation in both design and cohousing. Residents who live in Vandkunsten's projects express great satisfaction with the designs, and in our own research we found that these developments proved among the most effective at translating social goals into a physical environment. Yet both architects and residents recall the design process for these projects as exhilarating, almost too exhilarating. Vandkunsten has gained considerable respect for its cohousing designs — but not because it is an easy firm to work with. Perhaps because of their exhaustive experience, the architects' rapid approach forces residents to clarify their priorities and objectives in a hurry, which produces strong, articulate resident groups.

Other cohousing groups seek architects less vocal about their own opinions and more willing to serve as technicians who simply draw up the residents' design ideas. Although such groups may have enjoyed

making design decisions on their own, in hindsight, many expressed disappointment in the results. In one such case, residents designed their own interiors and the architect "drew it up". Several of the units we saw had basic problems with circulation and layout which most architects would have foreseen. The architect had offered several alternative site plans but provided little discussion of their advantages and disadvantages. A resident commented:

He said you can have this or this or this.... He should have said, "This is a better solution because...." At the time, we thought it was great, making so many decisions; we didn't understand then what the consequences would be.

We have seen very similar problems with too many American cohousing communities as well — architects just doing what the group told them to do and "drawing it up," leading to communities that did not work. The results are common houses that rendered 100 to 150 people hours a week — compared to 250 to 450 people hours for a well-designed common house which cost no more to get built

off in better choices than experienced consultants provide. In order to guide many of the design decisions, we have included a separate chapter in this book that deals specifically with

design considerations, *Cohousing Design: A Pattern Language*.

Finally, good architecture doesn't just come from a particular process. If the cohousing design program is efficiently and clearly accomplished, the architect will have the time, energy, and motivation to make beautiful buildings. Too often, a bad and inefficient programming process doesn't allow the architect to focus on a design that the residents will love. Meaningful places are missing from most institutional settings, and, for that matter, from most private settings. Beauty takes time. Building a community takes time. Make no compromises.

*The outcome of a great process. Cohousing communities are often developed more quickly than conventional development.*



### **“Architecture and Image”: Heritage or Architectural Context**

During our private house design workshops we usually take the group on a walk around the neighborhood to observe local architectural styles, building types, relationships of buildings to the street, pedestrian features, and the amount of quality open space. During the site planning of Southside Park Cohousing in Sacramento, for example, a day-long trip to look at successful and unsuccessful clustered housing convinced the group to put an offer on a property that they had earlier thought was too small. Being aware of context and drawing from a neighborhood's strengths and avoiding its weaknesses (poorly designed buildings and spaces,

or a lack of open space and walkable streets) will help shape the cohousing community to be as resident-friendly as possible and contribute to its surroundings.

The participatory practice of designing a cohousing community takes architecture “to the people.” This is an exciting prospect, especially because architecture has been historically reserved for the rich. (Even today, most residential buildings are “designed” and built by general contractors and builders without input from a trained architect.) Cohousing design combines the style of a location with the interests of the resident group.

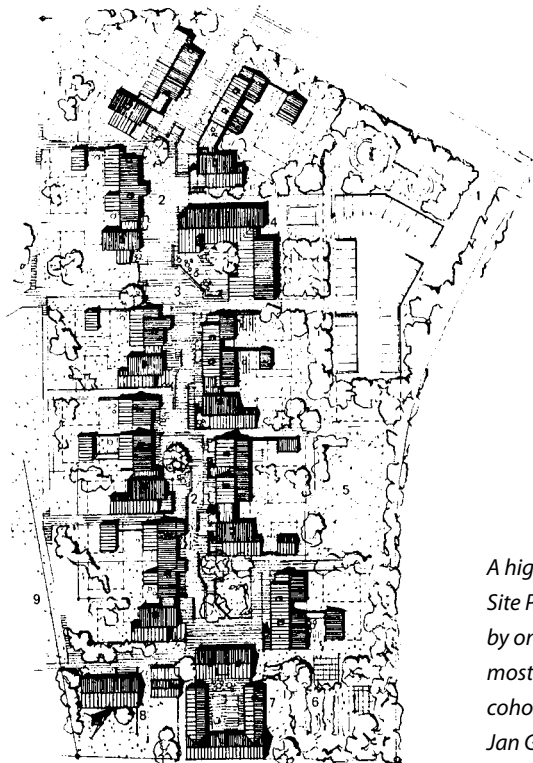


## Cohousing Design

### *A Pattern Language*

With this chapter, our aim is to shape the designing dialogue for cohousing communities. Borrowing from the framework used by Christopher Alexander in his work *A Pattern Language*, we outline important prescriptions for a cohousing site and building design, including common house and private house design. We also include explanations for design decisions from real projects. Our intention is that this chapter, combined with a well-facilitated participatory design process, will help groups understand a few of the important elements of cohousing design before they participate in the design workshops for their own community.

A few years ago, a developer who was working on a new cohousing community in the Southwest called me up and explained that although their brand spanking new project was two-thirds built, they had less than half of the future residents signed up and the number was decreasing. She asked if we would come to her town and do a



*A highly facilitated Site Plan workshop by one of Denmark's most talented cohousing architects Jan Gehl led to this plan.*

public presentation and hopefully help them rekindle local enthusiasm. We said, “we’d love to — that’s something we do.” But we added, “Before we commit, please send us a copy of the site plan, the common house plan, and the private house plans.” Once we received them, we had to call her back and tell her we could not come. She recognized the problems in the design. She said some polite words about the architect, mentioned that they were on a tight budget, that they just didn’t know, that they did the best they could, and so on. Then she asked, “Would you please do future cohousing communities a favor and rewrite your design chapter in the *pattern language* format similar to Christopher Alexander’s well-known design guide? That will make it more difficult to err.” Rooms full of future residents do an about-face when they see the logic of a well-designed kitchen, for example. This work cannot really happen without dialogue, and the Southwest cohousing community clearly did not have an adequately facilitated design.

The following paragraphs are examples of the elements of a *pattern language* design that helps a cohousing development work at its optimal capacity. This is the solid foundation for creating an actual community.

### Community Characteristics

Elements that emphasize the social aspects of community are of highest priority. Without these elements a cohousing community will be little more than a traditional residential development. In fact, the success of a cohousing community depends upon the “common” realm — the places where residents come together for socializing, creating, or just saying hello. These everyday acts are what keep

residents connected. When buildings are scattered across a landscape, the common house gets very little use and the sense of community is diluted.

While cohousing tends to bring people toward the front of their homes, maintaining some privacy is also absolutely critical. A cohousing site plan should consider the varying degrees of privacy that can be achieved by placing houses at different locations on the site.

### Community Size

The best size and number of households seems to be one of the biggest challenges facing cohousing in America. Cohousing communities in Europe have demonstrated that there is an optimum size for a cohousing community. If a community is too big it will have an institutional feel and will lack the intimacy required to make its residents feel as if they have a stake in its success. If a community is too small, it will resemble a large family rather than a neighborhood of actively engaged households. We have studied and designed communities of many different sizes, and have divided them into three different sizes by social and physical characteristics:

*Small Cohousing Developments (8 to 15 households).* Small cohousing developments are simpler to organize and require less land, making it easier to find good sites. Small projects are also less likely to attract neighborhood opposition, and the development budget is generally within the financing capacity of small developers or even the residents themselves. Managing a small cohousing development is less complicated and less formal, because fewer people are involved; most



adults participate in what is as much a discussion as a meeting.

On the downside, many development costs are fixed, no matter how large the project. Project management, for example, costs the same for 15 or 30 houses — so it is often easier to control costs on larger projects. A small community requires more compatibility, allows less diversity, and requires a greater community commitment from each individual. If there is a serious disagreement among residents, it is more common for a household to move out (whereas in larger communities they can just avoid each other for a while). In addition, the common facilities usually require a larger financial investment per household.

When we asked about the issue of size, residents of cohousing developments with 15 or fewer households often commented, “It could be a little larger.” “At only 12 or 13 households, you have to work at it,” was a common sentiment.

*Medium Cohousing Developments (16 to 25 households).* When asked about size, residents of medium-sized cohousing developments usually thought their own was close to perfect. “Twenty houses is just right,” announced Alice from behind the stove in the common house, “because you only have to cook once a month.” There are 32 adults in her community, and with two people cooking dinner four nights per week, each adult cooks just once a month. “It’s small enough to know everyone well,” is a common statement from residents.

To make a case for the medium size is to make a case for cohousing itself — large enough to have extensive shared facilities, but small enough to be easily managed by

direct democracy. This size can more easily accommodate variations in individual schedules; it’s not a big deal if several people miss a meeting or a workday, but when people are there, they have direct input. While decisions are still made through the consensus-seeking process, their implementation can be distributed among the entire community. Although decision-making becomes more formalized than in small communities, it easily includes everyone.

*Large Cohousing Developments (26 to 35 households).* A large community allows for greater diversity of ages and family types, and common facilities can be more extensive and affordable through economies of scale. The participation of a nonprofit organization is more likely to factor in with large communities, thus allowing for government subsidies. But planning approvals and financing arrangements are also more complex for large projects, which are also more likely to attract neighborhood opposition, further slowing the approval process. In fact, we do not recommend that a resident organizing group attempt to build a community of this size without collaborating with an experienced developer and a very experienced architect.

All of the cohousing developments we know in Denmark and the Netherlands larger than 34 dwellings have been divided into small clusters. In Tinggarden in Denmark (79 units), clusters of 12 to 15 households share a common house. The largest cohousing development in Denmark, Bondebjerget (80 units), is divided into four groups with four completely separate common houses. Even Aeblegard, with only 36 units, decided to build two separate common dining rooms

and kitchens because the residents felt that one dining room would be so large that residents would be uncomfortable and participate less often. Vejgaard Bymidte, with 40 units, sold six units off as regular condominiums in order to make the project work socially — always a first priority. If cohousing doesn't work socially, then why bother?

### Project Density

Dense neighborhoods need not be overwhelming in scale, or feel tall and enclosed. In fact, some of the densest residential neighborhoods in North America include modestly sized housing with limited parking. In cohousing, a certain density — usually at least six to seven units per acre and often ten to fifteen — creates enough density so that people feel like they are part of a neighborhood, while enough land remains for shared open space and common facilities. In urban areas, the density could easily be 60 units per acre or more, assuming that a high-rise could have a cohousing community per floor, or one per couple of floors.

There are benefits to higher density: you see more people on your way home, it makes cohousing more affordable (with less infrastructure spread all over), it saves energy (nothing contributes more to energy efficiency than common walls), it helps conserve open space or agricultural land, and less space between front doors creates larger back yards (and more privacy).

### Household Diversity

There is no perfect combination of household types. The right mix depends on the particular makeup of the interested group of residents. While a diverse resident group

is advantageous for an intergenerational community, including too many different unit types to accommodate different household types will also require more time for design and construction. This ultimately results in higher costs. A variety of house types (seven or eight) will drive up costs considerably, whereas fewer floor plans (three or four) can comfortably and affordably accommodate all households.

Although a cohousing community of 33 units has been built using a single house plan, three to five plans per project is more common and fits the various needs much better. In general, we consider houses for small families, couples (young and old), a few units for singles (young and old), and some flats on a single-floor that will be helpful as the resident group matures and the need for handicap-accessible units arises.

### Rural Cohousing Considerations

Rural cohousing communities have both the benefit and the challenge of a land surplus. They should resist spreading houses and common areas out across the landscape. Instead, they should keep the cohousing community clustered tightly, like a village. Clustering residences and common spaces will create a cohesive community by proximity. This strategy also limits infrastructure needs and preserves open space for public use or agriculture.

During the site planning of a cohousing project in Belfast, Maine, the group began with households that were accustomed to living on acres and acres of private land. In the early planning stages, the group scattered their houses across the 30-acre site. We described the advantages of clustering

houses and common facilities to the group — to align with their goal of combining sustainable living with sustainable farming in a cooperative environment — because this seemed more appropriate. It also served the group's goals of energy efficiency and affordability (more infrastructure costs more), as well as their wish to keep agriculture and open space well intact. As it turns out, this design provides more privacy because there is more real estate behind the houses than there is in front of them.

Thirty acres of this 180-acre site are designated for the cohousing community, yet the buildings occupy a mere four acres. The remaining 26 acres of the cohousing site is for community open space and agriculture, and the remaining 150 acres of the total parcel is preserved for agricultural uses.

See also: Clustered Housing; Distances between Houses (page 256)

### Urban Cohousing/Infill Projects

Infill or adaptive reuse projects are great ways to create cohousing while contributing to the reuse of existing buildings. There are several examples in this book of cohousing communities created from rehabilitated buildings. In each case, the cohousing project injected new life into an otherwise unused or under-populated area of a town or city. This is true of both Doyle Street Cohousing in Emeryville, California, and Swan's Market Cohousing in Oakland, California.

Infill and renovation projects present interesting challenges and opportunities. Existing buildings have restrictions, but can also lead to new and creative uses of different building types, such as industrial buildings (as with the Emeryville and Oakland

projects). At Southside Park in Sacramento, California, new buildings were added to an existing but rundown residential area while existing houses were renovated. The location of common facilities and open space presented challenges that would have been non-issues with new construction on a vacant site. We would argue that these challenges, as is so often the case, inevitably led to an inspired design and a stronger community to the benefit of both the cohousing residents and the larger neighborhood.

See also: Relationship to Surrounding Communities (page 253); Cohousing in a Single Building (page 252)

*A rural cohousing site in Belfast, Maine. The houses and common facility will be clustered on just four acres, leaving the remaining space open for open space and farmland.*



*Doyle Street is an example of both urban cohousing and cohousing in one building.*

## Cohousing in a Single Building

Urban infill projects often go hand-in-hand with cohousing in a single building. Doyle Street Cohousing in Emeryville, California, was just such a renovation, in which a one-story industrial building was adapted to create 12 units and 2,100 square feet of common space. Swan's Market in Oakland, California was a converted market building owned and renovated by a nonprofit developer. It incorporates a 20-unit cohousing project and a separate affordable housing project, along with ground-floor commercial spaces that include a children's art museum and several small shops. The design and construction of Swan's Market preserved the shell of the building (including the facades and high ceilings), bestowing the building and the cohousing units with a spacious quality. Most units have second-floor sleeping lofts tucked under the original metal trusses. The building is in downtown Oakland and a ten-minute walk from public transportation to San Francisco and Berkeley.

*Jernstoberiet was a dilapidated factory, but was rehabilitated into a very high functioning cohousing community.*

In Denmark, Jernstoberiet Cohousing exemplifies the conversion of a mid-twentieth-century industrial building. To create the residential units, the original iron foundry was renovated into 21 residential units. The main hall of the foundry was preserved to

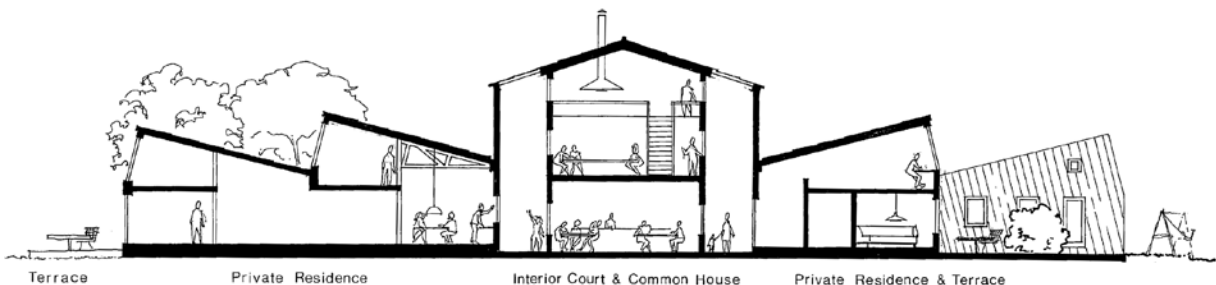
create an enclosed, interior street, with the main entrances to individual homes off this court. A common house was also added to the site.

Design issues for cohousing in a single building are very different from those of an open parcel. Industrial buildings are usually big enough to contain units within the existing structure. The financing, planning, and construction may be complicated by zoning changes (industrial to residential, for example) and by previous uses (contamination). A careful feasibility study has to be performed to discern if an existing building is reusable, or not. The biggest advantage, though, in rehabilitating a building for cohousing is that it is possible to preserve its original character.

## Site Plan

Rural or urban, multi-structure or single-building conversion, the site plan sets the stage for the rest of the cohousing community. At issue are the buildings as well as the space between them. Answering the following questions will help create an environment that encourages a positive social atmosphere:

- What opportunities will there be for casual interaction?



- Will children be able to play safely in proximity to private houses and within view of adults?
- Do open spaces allow for a variety of activities to accommodate different age groups and interests?
- Do pedestrian paths encourage engagement without sacrificing privacy within private homes?
- Does the relationship of the common house, private houses, and parking facility provide for easy mobility without sacrificing safety or causing disruption?

### Community vs. Privacy

There are moments when we, as human beings, need privacy. Likewise, there are moments when we need community interaction. Cohousing is designed to strike the optimal balance between these two opposing needs. Soft edges or semi-private spaces, such as gardens, landscaping, and porches, help create an intermediary zone between private space and the public realm. Individuals may also choose to personalize their homes to facilitate community, or use landscaping and other outdoor spaces to preserve privacy.

### Community vs. Public

It is clear that cohousing adds a realm to our lives. The community domain, or the “common,” is different from most environments that are limited to “public” and “private” space. We have the private realm (our house, where we do our own activities) and the public realm (hospitals, schools, etc.). In cohousing there is also a common realm. Many personal activities happen better in this common realm than they do in the other two.

That is, the community realm gives us the opportunity to lead more fulfilling personal lives by cooperating with thirty, forty, or fifty adults — a scale at which so much more can be accomplished for some of our life’s needs than at the private or public scale.

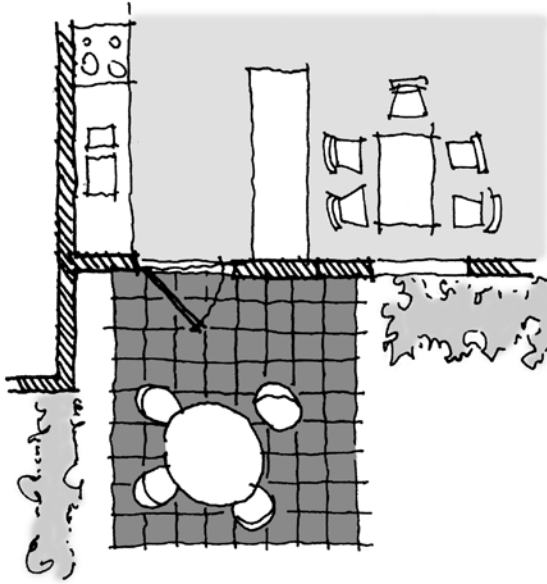
For example, in a public workshop, tools get dull, tools go missing — they belong to everyone and no one. At the same time, you can’t begin to afford everything that you need in a private workshop, not to mention enough room. In a cohousing workshop, everything you need is there, as well as someone who knows how to use each tool. And the accountability at that scale is real. You don’t leave a mess — if you do you know that you’ll hear about it. You know you’ll be upsetting Carl, Jeff, or Tony, people that you care about intensely and don’t want to upset. I (Chuck) leave our common workshop a lot cleaner than I do my small private workshop in my basement.

### Relationship to Surrounding Communities

Early in the history of US cohousing, occasionally there were cohousing communities that turned their back on an existing neighborhood because of a developer’s concern that it would be more palatable for the larger neighborhood if the cohousing community was a self-contained entity. A city or a town would often reflect these desires. Muir Commons in Davis, California, the

*“The beauty of cohousing is that you have a private life and a community life, but only as much of each as you want.”*

— cohousing resident



*Transitional spaces play a role in reconciling the private house uses with a successful cohousing site plan.*

first American cohousing project, is a perfect example of this.

Today this is rarely the case, and cohousing communities are always viewed as a positive contribution to the fabric of an existing neighborhood, bringing new people to an area that can support existing services, community facilities, schools, or shops. The cohousing communities in Sacramento and Emeryville enhance and add definition to the street, while some others even provide new amenities. Common facilities (gardens, bocce court, and the like) can become an attraction to outside neighbors who are invited in to participate. Small design moves can activate these types of connections with the surrounding neighborhoods. Views into the cohousing community, shared recreational areas, and benches or sidewalks that invite people to circulate or gather nearby all help to weave the cohousing project into its context.

At the same time, cohousing communities tend to have more life, and therefore a little more noise. It is important to locate common activities with a respect for surrounding neighbors and private homes in mind.

### Organizing Site Features

In the site design of cohousing communities, we have found three effective organizing features for site plans. These are: (1) pedestrian streets, (2) courtyards, and (3) a combination of streets and courtyards. The accompany diagrams illustrate these arrangements. (page 255)

These organizing features determine where the buildings sit, how they relate to one another, and where activity occurs. Like the main street in a small town, circulation through a cohousing community can be organized along a spine such as a pedestrian lane, or concentrated around a central plaza or courtyard. The choice of an organizing scheme will depend on the site, as well as the feeling desired by the group. Both a courtyard and a central street will facilitate encounters and interaction, but each will have a different effect. The courtyard gives the sense of a common square with centralized activity, while the street lends itself to dispersed gathering spots. While a central courtyard can create a lively space where activities co-exist, it must be small enough not to leave an open void that detracts from the sense of community.

Ideally, circulation between individual houses and parking areas should be limited to a small number of paths. This design increases the chances for neighbors to pass one another, help each other carry groceries, and so on. Activity can unfold between the

houses on a pathway while privacy continues in the backs of the houses. People rarely have the option of interaction when houses are scattered around the site and connected by multiple pathways, since no single route gets used enough.

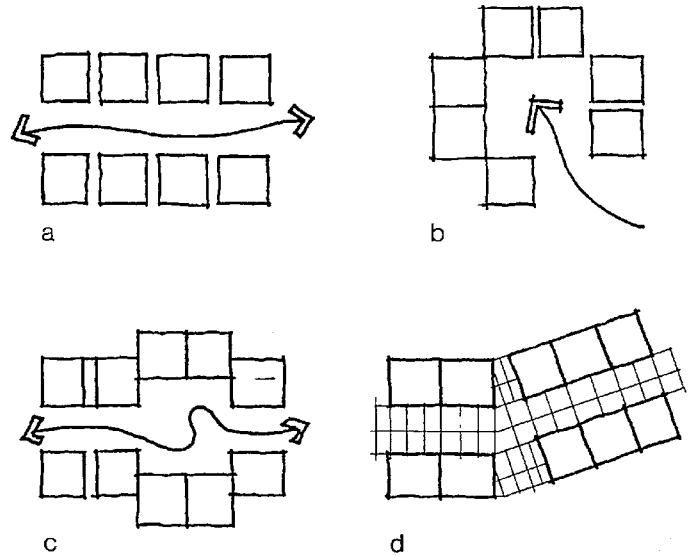
See also: Community vs. Privacy (page 253); Parking and Cars (page 257)

### Mixed-Use Design

Cohousing communities need not be exclusively residential. A site design that includes commercial space (perhaps on the ground floor with living units above), or that provides flexible work or office space to cohousing residents or nearby neighbors, contributes to a sustainable neighborhood because it provides easy access to nearby work areas and services. Add other activities or gathering places, such as a café, and the site becomes an amenity to all and contributes activity to the area. An active streetscape creates a sense of place and encourages even more pedestrian activity.

### Distances between Houses

The distance between houses (front door to front door) plays a tremendous role in the nature of interactions and helps control the contact between the private and community realms. Even in rural environments we encourage a clustering of houses. We have



Top: Different types of site plans:  
 a. pedestrian street  
 b. courtyard  
 c. combination of street and courtyard  
 d. one building (glass-covered street)



Bottom: Cotati cohousing and mixed use. Voted the best smart growth new neighborhood in the US in 2004.

found that somewhere between 25 to 40 feet is a good distance from front door to front door. This distance encourages interaction but reserves privacy in individual homes. It also allows residents to easily gauge the mood of their neighbor, and when they should stop by for a visit or when they should just wave hello in passing, but this distance has to be established in a deliberate fashion with the group.

In order to establish the “right” distance between the houses of a given cohousing community, we have a method that we use in our design process workshops. After two full days of the site planning program, and once the group is beginning to grow into a community and beginning to know each other well, we ask them to form two lines and get two people to face each other 110 feet apart (a common front-door-to-front-door distance across a street of suburban houses). We ask everyone to pretend that it’s Monday morning and you are leaving your house at the same time as your neighbor across the street. Now imagine that you had common dinner with that neighbor last night and that she disclosed that she was going to have a difficult conversation with her grown daughter later that night. Imagine that you have grown to care about this neighbor, and you’re curious about her mood after her difficult conversation. You don’t want to pry, but you care. Then everyone in each line walks toward their neighbor in the opposite line until one of them begins to feel uncomfortable with their proximity to the door across the “street.” When one person in the pair stops, the other one stops.

In a recent project, the end distance between neighbors ranged between 26 and

40 feet; those were the distances between the front doors that we designed for the community. We now live in that community and can regularly tell the mood of our neighbor and when we should stop by or when we should just say howdy. Ninety-two-year-old Meg lives 26 feet from our front door. Recently, when leaving the house in a hurry, I (Chuck) could tell that she “needed” someone to stop and talk. She hadn’t previously, but after a couple of years it was noticeable this time. Of course, we speak often, but this is the first time I felt that she “needed” me to stop. I put it on pause for about ten minutes, and it probably served me as much as her. You can only do this when you can see the whites of their eyes. This is one methodology of hundreds that are too long to describe here, but which make it easy for groups to make smart design decisions.

## Clustered Housing

Clustered housing fosters a sense of commonality, shared responsibility, and mutual support. By contrast, if houses and common facilities are scattered throughout a large site, people will be less apt to use the common spaces, interact with one another, and venture from their private houses. Clustered housing helps to create a vibrant community while still allowing residents to incorporate the distinctive elements that offer privacy or personality to a house.

## Pedestrian Street

The pedestrian street in cohousing is a lively place, somewhere to walk but also to linger. Buildings should be arranged with entrances onto the street to encourage activity, not just movement. The street will not encourage



interaction unless it is a size that feels full when people are in it, but is not overwhelming when people are not. A walkway width of five feet generally works — it enables walking, and is just wide enough for two people, for shopping carts, for baby strollers, and for bicycles, a wheelchair, and a pedestrian.

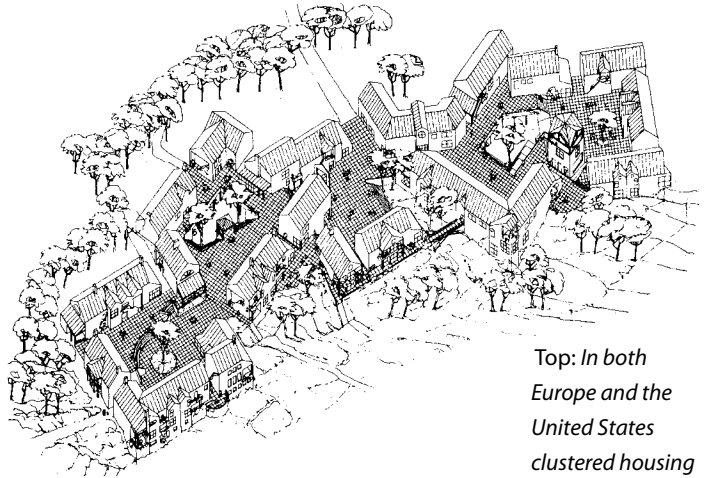
The materials used in creating pathways are critical in supporting or discouraging certain activities. It may be desirable to use permeable surfaces for runoff or to slow bicycle traffic while also keeping in mind that uneven pathways may make walking difficult, especially for young children and elderly residents.

See also: Distance between Houses (page 255)

## Parking and Cars

A key element to a cohousing community is the separation of parking from the rest of the living environment. An environment free of cars is safer for children and free of noise and emissions. Pooled parking at the periphery and a limited number of pathways to and from the parking area offer additional locations for social interaction. Yet occasionally, parking in cohousing is dispersed in several small lots, or located at the end of a street.

The number of parking spaces a cohousing community needs depends on the community and its location. We typically try not to exceed 1.5 spaces per residence in the US, and strive for less in urban areas. (For example, in Portland, Oregon, we designed, with the group, for a single off-street parking space.) Ideally, cohousing allows households to reduce their auto use by encouraging car-pooling, shared tasks, and even shared cars and bicycles where possible. Several



*Top: In both Europe and the United States clustered housing is preferred when attempting to create a social environment, as in this design for senior housing by the architectural firm of C.F. Moller.*



*Center: Because people see the advantages of a functional social environment between the houses, interior pedestrian streets are increasingly common in northern climates.*



cohousing communities have started experimenting with one or two shared cars. In urban locations bike-share programs are viable options to car sharing.

*Bottom: Pedestrian way at Pleasant Hill cohousing.*

Faced with the decision between a car-free zone and having to walk groceries (via a wagon) to their homes, cohousing groups almost always decide to keep cars on the

periphery. Simple garden carts can adequately replace automobiles for this sort of task.

The more the parking area can be shielded from buildings and the community, the less it will be a defining part of the site. Landscaping can help. That said, the parking area often acts as a buffer to shield housing and open space from a road. In addition, surface materials are important; gravel is good for runoff and has the added benefit of discouraging children from biking or skateboarding in the parking area (for safety reasons).

### Common Plaza

Every cohousing community needs a central node or plaza that offers people opportunities for seeing or being seen. Like an old town square, it provides space for larger gatherings and enables people to come together before and after dinner, and hold summer barbecues or other events. Ideally, people will pass through the common plaza on their way to and from their private homes. It should be designed with active edges that encourage people to congregate, sit, observe, and interact.

The common plaza should provide a comfortable gathering space, rather than one that is so big that it creates a void in the community. Seating areas and tables will help “fill” a plaza. After a group has really analyzed its needs, their activities for their terrace, and what they want it to feel like, they rarely build a common plaza that is over 1,200 square feet.

### Community Garden

A community garden can serve many purposes. It can provide the community with

*Parking on the edge of the site makes for an entirely pedestrian friendly environment on the inside.*



*A common terrace at Silver Sage cohousing.*

good, healthy food, and it can be a place of learning, a place for experimenting, and a place for social activity. The community garden should be accessible to all households. If this is not possible, it may be better to create a few small shared gardens. Fresno Cohousing is one example, among several, where the community garden has become a place for cohousing residents and their outside neighbors to work together.

### Solar Orientation for Site and Building Design

Solar orientation should be considered in laying out the site, buildings, and pathways. The optimal space to allow for solar gain in a community of two-story buildings varies depending on the community's location (latitude) and terrain.

Solar gain is an important consideration both for livability and from an environmental perspective, but should not be the defining factor in site planning. The site should be treated with a more holistic perspective. While solar gain is a necessary consideration from an environmental perspective, we strongly believe that when designers sacrifice community for southern orientation, they allow that single consideration to overshadow overall energy efficiency and even livability. In Fresno Cohousing, we had to shift the houses from east-west to north-south orientation to fit all the units on the long, narrow site. Nonetheless, we were able to realize energy efficiency. One energy bill there was minus \$16.00 last year. It might have been minus \$20.00 if the orientation had not been changed — but, more importantly, if the community didn't work as well, if they didn't share energy-savings techniques

with each other, it could have been more than \$1,000 just last year.

### General Building Design

The design of the buildings reinforces aspects of the site design that facilitate community by helping the buildings look into the common spaces while also creating some privacy for every household. The following patterns illustrate some aspects of building design important to cohousing.

### Open Floor Plans

In Western terms, house spaces come in three types: functional (living room, kitchen, etc.), circulation (hallways), and access (an area in front of a bookshelf). In open plans, rooms often have all three characteristics — making them feel more gracious. An open floor plan saves space by creating areas that can have multiple uses, and helps keep the number of floor plans and house designs to a minimum. Moveable objects to enclose or open spaces may be the best alternative to multiple room designs. Spaces for circulation may be used for gathering and activities may be expanded to other “rooms.” Outdoor spaces such as patios or porches, and windows between indoor and outdoor spaces, help small, interior rooms feel larger than they really are.



*Fresno Cohousing has 1.5 Kw photovoltaic per house.*

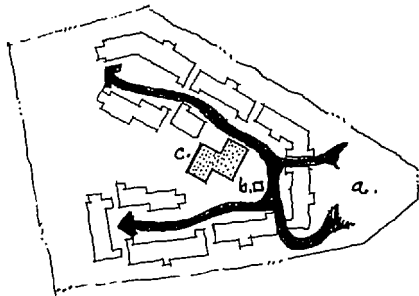
Custom furniture can be used to personalize environments, to create semi-separate open spaces, and to warm the spaces.

See also: Combined Functions for Smaller Houses (page 266)

*Open floor plan.*



*Diagram showing the relationship between the major elements on the site: a. parking, b. community plaza, c. common house.*



*A high-functioning common house is essential. Through the activities there, life is added to the streets. Without it, the sense of community would be hard to maintain.*

— cohousing resident

## Acoustics

Good acoustics can make or break a building's habitability or purpose. Unfortunately, we have visited many common houses that become unusable when more than a small group of people is inside because the noise is overwhelming. It is tempting to create common houses with high ceilings in order to give the effect of the community space we know historically (such as the church or the meeting hall). This is still possible, but it must be accompanied by elements that deaden the noise created by a group of people. Often it is important to hire an expert acoustical engineer, or an experienced architect, to get it right.

Similarly, attached housing is often the most effective and sustainable decision, in terms of site use, construction materials costs, and heating/cooling costs. Nonetheless, attached housing can pose problems in terms of acoustics. Today there are many building techniques to dampen, if not prevent, sound transmission between the walls of attached houses. People usually hear more from detached neighbors than those they share a wall with.

## Common House Design

The common house is the heart of the community, so its design is very important to facilitating social interaction and the workings of the community. Because the common house is the physical and the communal anchor of the community we take its planning very seriously. It is the link between home and neighborhood. The difference between a well-programmed, well-designed common house and one that is not done right can be a difference of hundreds if not thousands of people hours.

The two most difficult aspects of common house design are: 1) making the otherwise-competing uses compatible without interfering with one another, and 2) creating a comfortable space for a large group, while avoiding an institutional feel. For example, the children's play area should be far enough from the dining room so as not to disturb adult conversation or meetings, but also close enough that monitoring is possible from time to time. By contrast, the sitting and dining rooms need to be right next to each other.

It is also important to separate rooms that have entirely different functions. Areas designed for day and evening use should be away from designated quiet areas. For example, laundry rooms should be separated from guest rooms and quiet areas, and mailboxes should be easily accessible but not close to quiet areas, because conversations may begin while people are getting mail.

### Common Kitchen and Dining

Breaking bread together is timeless. In a high-functioning cohousing, residents talk of common meals as the highlight of their cohousing experience. This is why the kitchen and dining room need to be designed to create a positive common dinner experience.

Critical to this common dinner experience is the feel of the dining and kitchen areas. Residents and architects alike must consider this simple question: "Do I feel like being there?" Is this a cold and clammy space, or is it a warm and giving place?

### Common House Children's Play Area

The children's play area is always an essential and active part of the common house. The relationship between the children's



Top: Mailboxes in the common house.



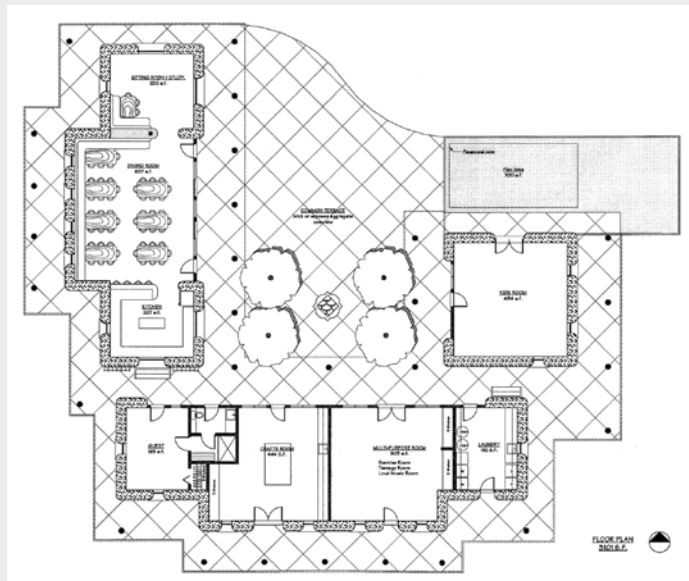
Center: Preparing a meal in the common house kitchen.



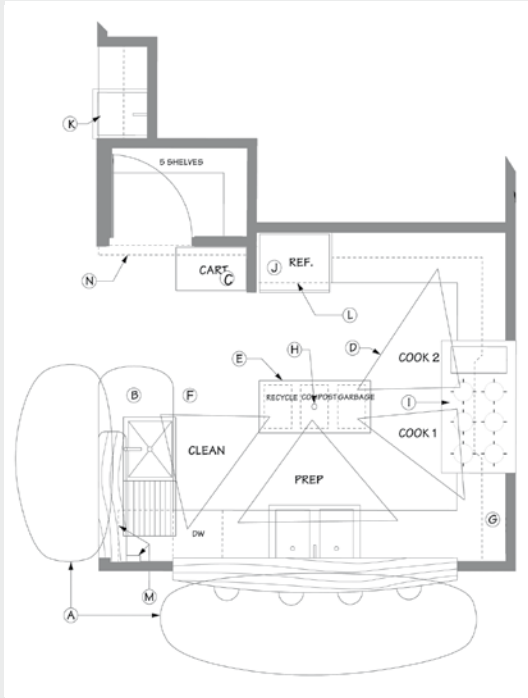
A relationship between the kitchen and adjoining spaces in the common house puts the cook in a social environment while making common dinner.

## Typical Common House Kitchen Dialogue

- A. If there is a **happy interface**, a warm and inviting space open to, but not within, the kitchen activity, then this will be the most utilized square on the entire site. More common people-hours per square foot will occur here than anywhere else on the site. It makes a more open kitchen where people will come to talk to the cook, but not go into the kitchen.
- B. The **countertop** is open and unencumbered, making room for dishes ready to go out to dining and dirty dishes coming back to the kitchen. This eliminates unnecessary walking around the bar, especially when two people are working together — one person puts stuff on the bar, another puts it on the table.
- C. The **cart** takes things to the table and brings them back efficiently. Clean dishes go from the dishwasher to the cart, ready to go directly to the table the next day. There is no extra motion of putting the dishes onto the shelves, only to take them out again. No shelves, no wasted motion.
- D. The theoretical **four activity triangles** (prep, cook 1, cook 2, clean) should not overlap in order to facilitate safety and efficiency.
- E. The **central island** brings people and activities together — it facilitates community. You'll find folks there drinking coffee until the wee hours if the kitchen is warm and cozy, and attracts people. You'll find the lights on there when they are out everywhere else (except maybe the sitting room). Common kitchens are designed to be centripetal, that is to bring people together, to make cooking social and fun.
- F. **Open cabinets:** If there are no doors on the upper cabinets and if most utensils can be seen, working in the kitchen is much easier. We have stayed in the guest rooms of many common houses. In half of them, you could always tell when it was 4 p.m., because you could hear the noise as people went through the cabinets, trying to prepare themselves since they last cooked a month ago. Having things open and accessible, such as the French utensil bar, the pot rack over the island, and the pullout shelves facilitates a j.i.t. kitchen (j.i.t. means *just-in-time* in manufacturing parlance).
- G. **Floor drain:** This saves the cook or assistant fifteen minutes at the end of the evening — just when you need it most. The last thing done is mopping 🧹



*Plan of the Sonora straw bale common house in Tucson, AZ*



the floor. The floor drain makes that a lot easier, and therefore helps keep the kitchen sanitary, too.

**H. Industrial appliances:** This is important. When it's a quarter to six, you're expecting fifty people for dinner, and the pasta water is not boiling, the "wooff" of the 15,000 btu/hr burner is music to your ears. The dishwasher needs to take less than three minutes to get twenty dishes spotless. But this in no way implies that the kitchen needs to feel cafeteria-like or institutional.

**I. Refrigerator** is near the entrance to the kitchen, so it is easily accessible to cooks as well as to people who want to access the refrigerator — to see if that orange drink they left last week is still there, for example. Accessing the refrigerator will be the number one reason a non-cook/assistant will enter

the kitchen. Non-cooks/assistants walking around the kitchen can be dangerous (sharp knives, hot pots, etc). Keeping them out of the cooks' way is important.

**J. Wet bar** keeps the thirsty out of the kitchen.

Grabbing a glass is the second most common reason someone will wander through the kitchen. Placing glasses and drinking water just outside the kitchen, but close to the refrigerator and the dishwasher, is the most efficient solution.

**K. Storage** above for salad and punch bowls.

**L. Phone and cook books** at hand.

**M. Plate rack** over the door to store and display large platters.

**N.** Probably most important is a **cozy feel**. People will want to be in an extraordinary space — and it is essential to the success of the kitchen that people fundamentally want to be there. To accomplish this, the kitchen should be:

- 1. Open:** to see and be seen. This allows for the pleasant distraction of saying hello to a passerby, or the opportunity to be appreciated: "It sure smells good." The cooks need to see folks and folks need to see them. Seeing them will attract other activities. Not seeing them facilitates an otherwise empty common house.
- 2. Warm:** lots of natural wood; rounded wood edging at the countertop; wood cabinets (upper and lower). Besides the custom upper cabinets, I recommend a shaker lower, of which there are many reasonable manufacturers on the market, a deep, rich linoleum color at the floor; natural finish at the door to the pantry; natural wood baseboard; and other warm aesthetic touches.
- 3. Light:** Lighting needs to be up to the task (100 foot candles) without too much general

lighting (50 foot candles). No ceiling-mounted fluorescents.

4. **Gourmet in feel:** “Wow, what a great kitchen,” — like you would find in a nice house, never commercial. Commercial kitchens are designed to

keep everyone separated and task focused.

Cohousing kitchens are designed to bring people together, to make cooking fun — like a French country kitchen — yet also very efficient.

*The common house must be both open and accommodating for large groups, but also functional for more intimate interactions.*



*Kid's play room.*

dining area is also important. Although parents want to be within hearing distance of young children, play areas should be separated from the dining area so the adults can relax after dinner. At Sun and Wind in Denmark, we were surprised to find that residents rushed home after eating, claiming that their small children needed to go to bed. In other communities with many small children, adults liked to relax together after dinner, drinking coffee and talking while children played. The difference seemed to be the common house design. At Sun and Wind, the play area is directly adjacent to the dining room, whereas at Trudslund the playroom is down the hall — still within hearing distance (if a loud yell), but separated from the dining room. This design means the children can play as loudly as they want while the adults relax.

## Designing for Children

One of the main objectives of cohousing has been to design “child-friendly environments” that offer many opportunities for play and interaction. Children in cohousing enjoy more freedom than in other kinds of developments because their playmates live nearby and they know their neighbors well.

## Common House Teen's Room

Teenagers need a space to become independent adults. But they still need adult guidance. For this reason, a teen room in the common house can function as a neutral space that is separate, but still part of, the home environment. Teen rooms frequently include a TV, games, couches, tables, a stereo, and table games. It's worth noting that teens often feel left out during the process of creating cohousing. A lot of time and energy is



spent designing spaces specifically for adults and children. Where does this leave teenagers who are neither and both at the same time? The only logical conclusion is to assure that they have a place that they can make their own — where they can be both adults and children without being judged by either. I (Chuck) walked into our teen room one Friday night and there were 21 teens in the room; only ten of them lived in cohousing. A couple of days later, I read in the *Sunday New York Times* that the safest thing you can do for your teens is to “find a way to keep them at home.” That is not always attractive to teens. Yet our common house is the place to be, and just recently the teens, via their spokesperson on that day (Dominique, age 15), asked to upgrade their teen room, including adding a substantial table for jointly doing homework. Those folks (in my view, those who don’t entirely get the holistic aspects of community) who are searching for data to “justify” cohousing might like to know that the teenagers in our cohousing have about an A minus grade point average. Our daughter never received a B in her entire high school career. She attributes a lot of that to living in cohousing, as did her teachers (she’s a sophomore in college now). And she attributed it to all of the resources she had in cohousing: teachers to read her papers, engineers to help with physics and chemistry and — just as important — peers who wanted to do homework together.

### Common House Laundry

When located in the common house, the laundry facilities receive the third highest number of people hours (after the dining room and the kitchen). Consequently, an

otherwise mundane activity becomes a chance for socializing. Placing the laundry area close to other well-used spaces (such as the children’s play area) helps combine two or more activities. Aside from the social potential of a laundry room, having this facility in common saves money by eliminating the need for a washer and a dryer in every household. This also equates to a construction cost savings per household. In addition, common washers provide the cheapest means we know of for collecting graywater for irrigation and water conservation.

### Common House Workshop

In traditional towns, work and home life were intricately intertwined, often with a workplace or a shop on a ground floor and a living space above. Many of our current neighborhoods are separated by single uses, with residential areas set apart from commercial, office, and industrial uses. Cohousing combines some of the workspaces of bygone days while also eliminating the need for each household to have its own workshop or craft room. Even better, not only do residents have easy access to these facilities in their own neighborhood, but the amount of space and quality of the tools often exceeds what any one household could reasonably afford on its own. People simply get more when they share.

Common workspaces also create venues for sharing skills. In Fresno Cohousing, for example, several of the children spoke of being excited to learn woodworking from their neighbors, and to make things for the common house or the community. In other communities, members have taught each other a variety of skills.

Community  
workshop.



## Private House Design

The private house is just as important as ever. For refuge and respite, for all of the critical aspects of a healthy family life, nothing beats a warm and comfortable home — airy and light, giving and private never go out of fashion. The group invariably comes up with a program of goals that include, for example: a peaceful place, good circulation, spaces for storage, long-lasting, practical, flexible, timeless, friendly, full of light, quiet and so on. Some of these things seem obvious, but it is still important that even the most obvious things, such as light and airy, be remembered from the programming stage to the design stage.

### Housing Types:

#### Attached and Detached

The majority of cohousing takes the form of one-, two-, and three-story attached houses, often referred to as clustered or medium-density low-rise housing. This building type has many advantages over both detached single-family houses and high-rise apartments. It uses land, energy, and materials more economically than detached houses, and its relatively high density supports more efficient forms of public transit. In rural and semi-rural areas, clustered housing can help preserve open space, which has become a sensitive issue in places where demand for

housing conflicts with agricultural needs. We have designed cohousing sites with single-family homes as well as apartments or flats in multi-story buildings. This configuration typically works well in an intergenerational community where some residents may be more comfortable without stairs. We have also come to realize that elder residents are not always uncomfortable with stairs, so nothing should ever be imposed, just proposed.

Residents who are moving from single-family houses are often wary of attached housing because they fear too much noise or too little privacy, both between residential units and in outdoor space. This need not be the case, as there are building techniques that can eliminate noise between units. We have been able to successfully make attached houses quieter than detached houses, where people hear each other through nearby windows. Given this concern, it seems that the environmental architects of the future will be those who best know how to mitigate sound, given all of the ecological advantages of attached housing.

#### Combined Functions for Smaller Houses

Cohousing homes are smaller than traditional single-family homes, but they need not feel smaller. With fifty cohousing projects behind us, we've had a lot of experience and feedback

on private house design. Our strategy is to combine functions to give spaces multiple uses. We routinely design 1,000-square-foot houses for people moving from 2,000 square feet, and they are comfortable.

Sleeping lofts, mezzanines, high ceilings, level changes, light, and open floor plans can also help make small areas feel larger. Ceiling heights and window placement can also have an enormous effect on how a room is perceived. If we keep thinking about how spaces can serve multiples purposes, we find that we can figure out how to make a small house feel big.

### House for a Small Family

Many of the households in a cohousing community will be for small, three- to four-person families. The common facilities of a



Attached houses.

### What is the biggest misconception about cohousing?

That I won't have enough privacy. No one complains about privacy — you pretty much always have as much privacy as you want.

## Designing for Seniors

Seniors require special design considerations in order to maximize the cohousing experience for all community residents.

### *Accessibility and Mobility*

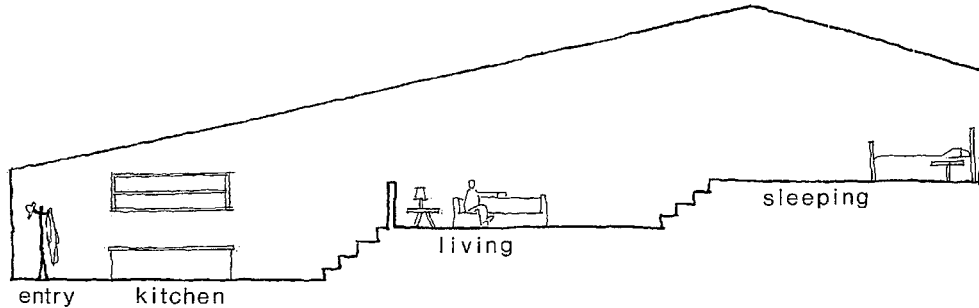
Some seniors may prefer single-story homes. This can be accomplished with single-floor flats with seniors on the ground and non-senior residents above. However, because of either cost or site area constraints, there are times when the group decides that this design is not necessary or possible. In some cases, having a few one-story residences on a site allows for some relocation, if necessary, or for certain periods of time (such as during times of convalescence). There are a few other design issues to consider for senior residents, including smooth pathways, easy accessibility to common facilities, and a caretaker unit in the common house. Certain

accessibility standards can be used that include specifications for rooms. Likewise, flexibility is an important consideration. For example, house designs with a downstairs room that can be converted to a bedroom (if mobility becomes a challenge) are crucial for successful aging-in-place plans.

### *Age-in-Place Qualities*

Although design decisions have significant impacts on quality of life, some of the preeminent ways for seniors to sustain health and well-being are the simplest. In a word: community. When seniors have an active social life among caring neighbors, a sense of belonging and ultimately a sense of identity emerge. The bottom line is that site, common house, and private house design can foster a sense of community and support independence without looking like it is "accessible."

*Mezzanines, sleeping lofts, and level changes make small dwellings seem larger.*



### Highlights of Private House Design

- Distribution of house types (number of studios, one-bedroom units, multiple-bedroom units, shared households, and others)
- Functions to be accommodated (dining, sleeping, work, and so on)
- Desired characteristics (combined kitchen/dining/living room, open floor plan)
- Acoustic and light considerations (solar access, visual access to common house, neighbors, and more)
- Indoor/outdoor relationship (access to terrace, for example)
- Flexibility and future additions

#### *Construction Phase Upgrades*

- Individual upgrade options
- Post move-in options

cohousing community allow for smaller private houses, but it is still a top priority to give the family the space and privacy they need. The house should consist of three distinct parts: a space for the adults, a space for children, and the shared or family realm.

The most vital spaces are the kitchen and a comfortable place to dine and relax together as a family, with room for a few friends. In addition, the inclusion of private space is

essential. This may include bedrooms as well as a shared library or study. The relationship between adults and children will be reinforced in the family home, as will the relationship between a couple. It is important to have space where the family can gather as well as private spaces where kids can be kids and where adults can get away from the noise and activity of a child's space.

### Porches

Direct access between private dwellings and semi-private porches increases the use of outdoor space. Front porches are a space between house and community — to be a part of the common space but still keep some privacy. People flow easily between indoors and outdoors many times a day when it is easy to just “pop out” and say hello. Design should encourage this by avoiding impediments between indoor and outdoor spaces.

A porch needs to have an adequate amount of usable space. In our house design, porches have a 6'-6" minimum depth, which allows room for a table and chairs at a minimum. Any narrower and the porch simply becomes a buffer around the house, not an actual useable space.

We have generally found that cohousing households spend 80 percent of their time

at the front of their house and 20 percent at the back. This is the exact opposite of typical neighborhoods. Something happens when you know each other. You don't mind your neighbor approaching you as you read the paper on the front porch — in fact, on occasion you anticipate it. Back porches are saved for more intimate occasions, and here privacy should be well respected.

See also: Community vs. Privacy (page 253)

### Decks and Balconies

In cases where porches are not possible because of space constraints or cost, a deck or a balcony (in the case of a second-story unit) may be a good substitute. Both provide outdoor space and a way of being engaged with the outdoors and the community while still allowing some privacy and choices regarding social involvement.

In cities throughout Europe and parts of North America, balconies make a residential street or neighborhood come alive. The fact that balconies overlook pedestrian areas and not busy streets with traffic makes a cohousing site even more appropriate for balconies.

### Accommodating Future Change

Communities and individual lives evolve, and houses, buildings, and environments in cohousing can be designed to allow these processes to unfold. A stable resident group is vital to any neighborhood, especially in a cohousing development, where the social aspects of life create the community as a whole. If people must move simply because their house no longer fits them, the long-range benefits of a stable community are jeopardized. The birth of a child, children leaving home, divorce, or

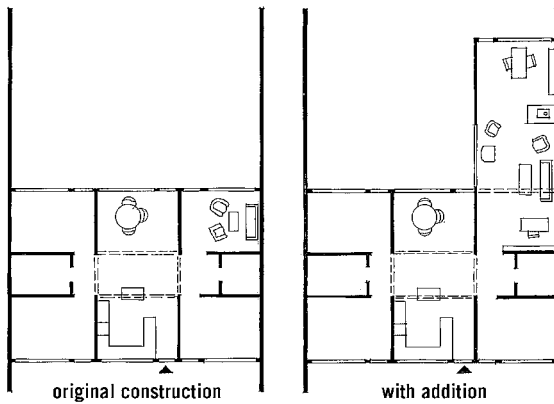
the death of a spouse affect a household's spatial requirements. Such events also mark the times when people are most in need of a supportive community.



*Private backyard/  
deck.*

### Kitchen Design — Learning from Community Design

When designing Emeryville Cohousing, one resident mentioned, "Chuck, we successfully accomplished centripetal environments (environments to bring us together) as a community in the landscape, so let's talk about how to be centripetal in the house — in a way that brings the family together." She was concerned because as a single mother with a 15-year-old daughter, she saw their lives growing apart and did not want their new house to facilitate that further. We ended up putting a large peninsula in her house type, and anytime I looked in the window before knocking, I noticed Fran making dinner while Michele did her homework, or Fran making lunch while Michele was on the phone, or Michele sitting with friends at the peninsula.



*Saettedammen's one- and two-story dwellings are designed on a 4x3.3 or 4x2.2 meter module using post-and-beam construction between concrete bearing walls. This construction method allows for changes and additions as households' needs fluctuate. In this example an addition accommodates a home office.*

A variety of dwelling sizes allows residents to move within a cohousing community as their needs dictate. Sometimes this occurs when a household leaves a community and a house becomes available. Other times, two households within the community may want to exchange. Some communities have found that a rental unit or supplementary rooms in the common house are the most economical means to offer some flexible space for short periods of time.

In Nevada City Cohousing we have had more than five households who have changed houses for various reasons, going from larger to smaller, smaller to larger, renter to owner, and owner to renter.

## New Designs and Community

We have discussed design issues that are of specific importance to cohousing. But we believe that the lessons learned in designing cohousing can and should be translated to all housing types. Ideally, designers of all housing types should work with future residents to meet their actual desires and priorities. The discussions in this chapter can be used to broaden and direct the dialogue between designers and residents. Both residents and designers must consciously consider the activities they want to occur later.

Communities were once maintained by inherent relationships. In small towns, one neighbor bought groceries from another who owned the store. They went to church with the principal of their children's school and their kids played with the banker's kids. These types of relationships are rare in today's urban and suburban environments. To compensate, we need to be more conscious than ever of the physical communities we build and the methods we use to build them.



## Part Five

### Sustainability, Longevity, and the Cohousing Legacy

The process of creating a cohousing community begins with a thoughtful, thorough dialogue. Through this process, future residents — working with designers — demonstrate incredible achievements in sustainability. In the process of creating a community, a shared vision and shared resources help, not only from an environmental perspective, but economically and socially as well. Sustainability is the natural order of cohousing.









## Cohousing and Community

### *The Secret Ingredients to Sustainability*

The environmentalists of the future will be the developers who can take their eyes out of focus and see the critical opportunities — critical to our planet and to the quality of life of our fellow citizens. The market will follow. The builders who demonstrate environmentalism at its best will be those that have developed cohousing communities — either directly with residents or in concert with a professional developer. And the environmentally conscious government agency will be the one that aggressively partners with these developers and embraces these issues.

Cohousing communities succeed at being sustainable because they achieve sustainability in several facets: environmental, social, and economic. Their architecture often includes green buildings, renewable energy systems, water conservation measures,

sustainably harvested wood, and non- or low-toxic materials. But just as important as the use of sustainable materials are the

*Sustainability = environment + social measures.*



*Cohousing facilitates socialization.*



*Center: Infill/density = sustainable living.*



*Bottom: Mixed use puts services in close proximity to housing.*



social aspects of cohousing: the placement of cohousing communities within existing neighborhoods, the sharing of resources, and the positive group education around sustainability. This type of development brings social benefits — being close to friends and neighbors — as well as reduced consumption, all of which make cohousing a more sustainable lifestyle. As such, cohousing is a regional, national, and international model for sustainable community development at large.

Cohousing residents are at the forefront of the green revolution. They include plans for optimizing energy efficiency when designing their communities (solar panels, rainwater capture, ventilation systems that reduce dependence on air conditioning). On a day-to-day basis they share cars and laundry facilities, champion recycling, and create a community-wide composting effort. The collaborative nature of both designing and living in cohousing facilitates a continual educational process around environmental awareness and green living. A cohousing community is the very definition of a sustainable neighborhood.

### **Cohousing as a Model for Efficient Sustainable Development**

Institutionally, cohousing addresses development issues such as community building, proximity to services, energy conservation, and environmental stewardship, as well as key neighborhood design elements that include pedestrian-friendly, senior-friendly, and earth-friendly development. Cohousing communities include appropriately scaled houses in safe, car-free, walkable neighborhoods. Many cohousing sites are close to

downtown and public transportation with easy access to services and are built on infill sites with greater density than their suburban counterparts.

Many cohousing communities have reintegrated work and housing by providing on-site office space and inserting work spaces and housing into livable city centers. FrogSong Cohousing in Cotati, California, for example, includes a row of commercial spaces that offer some basic amenities to the residents and augment the existing services near the site. Other cohousing communities have set aside space for residents to work within the common facilities. Such shared work space provides an alternative to commuting to an office and a social environment that is missing for individuals who telecommute or who work alone at home.

At an average size of 15 to 35 units, cohousing developments are relatively small. However, by addressing larger urban and regional design issues, cohousing provides models for better development practices in which residents benefit from the opportunities available in their immediate vicinity. In all of these ways, cohousing communities contribute to mixed-use, mixed-income, and intergenerational communities that are more similar to traditional villages — and a dramatic change from typical suburban communities. In doing so, cohousing design builds on and exceeds many of the principles of contemporary neighborhood design such as transit-oriented development (TOD), smart growth, and traditional neighborhood development (TND), and far exceed the standards for the US Green Building Council's LEED for Neighborhood Development.



### Sustainable Design Elements

In general, many cohousing projects include groundbreaking approaches to energy efficiency and resource conservation within an affordable budget. The results are notable. Research has shown that, depending on the design, residents of a cohousing community use 50 to 75 percent less energy for heating and cooling than they did in their previous homes (for a family of three). Cohousing residences are about 60 percent the average size of a new house in the United States. Cohousing neighborhoods, on average, occupy less than half as much land as the average new subdivision for the same number of households, and 75 percent less land as the same individuals did before moving into cohousing. Cohousers also drive about 60 percent less than their suburban counterparts. These cost-saving and environment-saving strategies are directly transferred to the cohousing residents, as well as their larger communities and regions.

In the context of normal construction practices, cohousing communities are more

*Places for socializing close to home.*

sustainable than “traditional” housing. The following are typical features in cohousing building design:

*Solar, -\$83 bill.*



### Energy Efficiency by Design

In our single-family house in Nevada City, where we lived before moving into the Nevada City Cohousing, our energy bill ran \$150/month in both winter and summer. Living in Nevada City Cohousing, our electric bill was minus \$83.84 in 2008. Even in a hot summer climate, a tight building envelope and passive cooling measures (cross-ventilation, holding the night cooling) eliminate the need for air conditioning. By contrast, all other new houses built in our area and almost all old houses employ an air conditioner. Accompanying our utility bill last July was a letter that said our house emitted ten tons less carbon emissions for the year than the average household in our town. The difference was due to our one kilowatt of photovoltaic cells (solar panels). The real result is 20 to 30 tons less emissions because of other energy-saving measures — the solar panels are only a small part of the total energy package. The other 33 residents in Nevada City Cohousing have energy bills similar to ours.

- ♦ Infill development or sites near public transit and services
- ♦ Sustainably harvested lumber and flooring materials
- ♦ Advanced framing techniques (about 25 percent less wood than typical framing per sq. ft.)
- ♦ Tight building envelopes
- ♦ Passive heating
- ♦ Passive cooling
- ♦ Radiant floor heating systems
- ♦ High R-value blown-in cellulose insulation
- ♦ Renewable energy systems
- ♦ Low-water- and low-energy-use appliances
- ♦ Fly ash in concrete (more durable, requires less concrete)
- ♦ Pervious paving to increase water absorption
- ♦ Low-toxic and low-volatile organic compounds (VOC) adhesives, sealants, and paints
- ♦ Waste stream management
- ♦ Permaculture landscape principles
- ♦ High-grade erosion control
- ♦ Low-energy use fixtures
- ♦ Greywater recycling (drip system)
- ♦ Cool roofs

And more ....

These design elements speak to a larger issue beyond the choice of materials and their use. By choosing an infill site, a group is not adding to sprawl. By choosing smaller individual homes, together they can afford community-sized amenities like renewable

energy systems. Even more importantly, this long-range approach engenders a sense of long-term viability. Cohousing is the essence of sustainability.

## The Trend Toward Smaller Houses and More Common Facilities

Cohousing residences are significantly smaller than the average single-family home in the United States or Europe. Over the course of our research in Denmark and our design work in the US, we have seen the average size of private residences within cohousing communities shrink dramatically; between 1975 and 2010, it has gone down by nearly one half, as family size shrank and people learned to use the community's kids' room, the workshop space, and the other common facilities as an extension of their private house. House design has also evolved. The front and the back porches have grown into extensions of indoor space, and architects have got better at designing small but magnificent environments. These decisions have helped the culture morph from "big is better" to "small can be better" (less to clean, less to maintain, less to heat, less to pay, and so on) while still accommodating a household's needs.

We've also seen the design of cohousing communities evolve to include greater density or a closer clustering of houses. Cohousing site design has shown Americans that an attractive, better quality of life can be achieved by increasing density above what they were familiar with. The size and quality of shared facilities in a cohousing community also save resources during both construction and maintenance of the project. All of these trends help contribute to a living environment that is more resourceful and less consumptive.



Top:  
*Photovoltaics on the common house roof.*



*Photovoltaics on the car ports at Nevada City Cohousing.*



*Fresno's sustainability goals start, but don't end with a livable, child friendly, walkable site.*



*1.5 kW photovoltaic panel per house, a tight envelope, and shared community resources make for very low energy bills.*

## LEED and Sustainability Criteria

In 2007, we finished our first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) project. It is a Unitarian Universalist church next door to the site of a now-complete cohousing community in California's Central Valley. LEED is rapidly becoming a desired minimum for environmentally sensitive construction.

The cohousing project next door uses far less energy for lighting, heating, and cooling per square foot than comparable housing. Overall, there is considerably less embodied energy per square foot. However, the resident group was more concerned with the actual energy-saving effectiveness and overall performance than with getting a LEED certificate for the project, and therefore chose not to be LEED certified. We took the extra \$50,000 — the cost of LEED

certification — and put it into the buildings instead. The overhangs, envelope, and insulation help maintain a comfortable indoor air temperature, and the lightweight concrete floors and extra-thick and dense gypsum board walls suck up cold air at night and absorb heat during the day.

The LEED standard is definitely valuable, as it presents an effective standard for architects who haven't built green architecture before. However, some cohousing communities, like Fresno, far exceed green standards without needing LEED. Rather, they took the green features further with the money they saved by not being certified. Cohousing communities often do a good job of making themselves accountable.



*Members of the group teach one another to make a quality neighborhood.*

### The Advantages of Group Education and Motivation

Like all successful developers of cohousing communities, McCamant & Durrett Architects views people as a necessary part of the sustainable design process. The collaborative design process — a key characteristic of

every cohousing project — means that future residents are involved in all aspects of project design, from site planning to decisions about common facilities and private house design. Through this process, cohousing groups often achieve sustainable measures, not only because of their own motivation but, more significantly, because they educate each other on how to attain them.

Again and again we have found that the collective nature of cohousing nurtures an ongoing educational process. Cohousing is not just about combining strengths to help one another, it's also about stewardship of the land. And it's not just about a well-designed site plan or common house, it's about getting together with neighbors regularly to discuss and teach each other how to use the community's sustainability features, and to therefore learn how to use less. We are always happily

surprised by the way residents are able to achieve sustainability through collaboration, and help each other to live up to the rhetoric of living “greener.”

While we were planning a cohousing community recently, a woman raised the question of using sustainably grown lumber. In a quiet demeanor, she asked everyone in a group of about thirty people, “Has anyone in the room seen a clear-cut forest lately? Clear-cut forests are deleterious to habitat, to the watershed, and to the air.” Within a quarter of an hour, this woman with a \$25,000 annual income had convinced the group to spend \$2,000 more per house on sustainably grown lumber.

### Social Advantages

While energy and resource conservation is critical, so is replenishing the social capital that individuals rely on to thrive. The ability of neighbors to meet and cooperate is a necessary ingredient for creating livable communities.

Cohousing is for people who not only want to live with environmental awareness, but who value a community of others for friendship and support. And a strong support system offers its own sustainability. Cohousing is a healthy living environment for seniors who might otherwise be secluded in large, private homes. Cohousing is for children who might not otherwise have playmates in their immediate neighborhood, and for mothers and fathers who can share childcare, parenting advice, and the companionship of other adults. One resident of Nevada City Cohousing with five children talks about how he previously planned two to four playdates a weekend, schlepping his

kids to and fro. In the two years since he moved into cohousing, he hasn’t needed to plan a single playdate. Another neighbor describes how her family used less than a tank of gas getting their kids’ social needs met over a summer season. The children mostly played on site, or carpooled to sports and other activities. Residents of senior cohousing talk of savings of over \$1,000 per month, compared to their previous living situations, through lower energy bills, less driving, more on-site activities, not having to own a second vehicle, and more.

Similarly, cohousing can bring life to an entire neighborhood, especially one in need of activity and services. A cohousing community adds to the social fabric of an area, helping to make it safer, more livable, and more enjoyable. How many parents do you



*Kids play safely near home.*



*Safe place for all.*

*Cohousing facilitates education, and intergenerational interaction.*



know who still let their children—four-, five-, and six-year-olds—walk to a friend’s house alone? How many seniors do you know who would feel safe leaving their house after dark? Yet cohousing communities in towns and even inner-city neighborhoods provide the proximity and the security — “the eyes on the street” and the “knowing each other” — that give residents a great sense of safety and security in their homes and immediate living environment.

### **Cohousing as a Redevelopment Strategy**

We hope that our success at utilizing infill sites (Emeryville and Swan’s Market cohousing in the northern California) will provide a model for more inner-city development and will continue to catalyze additional development. Adaptive reuse of urban buildings for cohousing projects is one of the best and most ingenious means of making the most of existing resources — and often brings new residents to an existing neighborhood, where they can benefit from its existing qualities. Renovations of existing buildings contribute to an area’s redevelopment while benefiting from a city’s existing public transportation and infrastructure.

### **Cohousing Is Living Sustainability**

As much as we’d like to take credit, as the architects, for creating sustainable communities, our job is really little more than provoking the group into action, sharing our experience and then, as best we can, facilitating the co-education process of the participants. The participatory process of planning a cohousing project builds social ties and lends itself to a cooperative environment once the

*Center: Urban infill at Swan’s Market cohousing.*



*Bottom: Sustainable and social.*





community is complete. What impresses us most about working with cohousing communities, during the planning process and once the project is complete, is watching people's

first intentions percolate up to the collective consciousness of the group. One quiet voice can inspire an entire group into meaningful acts of sustainability.

## Emeryville Cohousing — Urban Infill and Neighborhood Rejuvenation

Most people are leery of marginally safe inner-city neighborhoods, which is understandable. But we have seen over and over again that people who build their own neighborhood to reflect their specific needs, and move into it at the same time as thirty or fifty other people, feel nowhere near as threatened as if they were to move into the same neighborhood on their own.

We moved from an old bucolic Berkeley neighborhood to the rough-and-tumble, formerly industrial center of Emeryville. This was at a time when few residents lived in the area. Those who did had barred windows or felt safer living on the second floor (with the downstairs used for storing autos). One resident had graffitied his house with the slogan "Fort Apache" to scare off would-be intruders.

We moved to Emeryville with our one-year-old daughter in 1991, when this underdeveloped "donut

hole" of the Oakland–Berkeley area had only 2,100 people. We would never have moved there without the comfort, sense of community, and support that cohousing provided.

Today, there are almost 10,000 people living in Emeryville. Nora Davis, the mayor then and now, continually refers to the cohousing community a significant catalyst in the city's turnaround. Jerry Carnillia, who lives beside the cohousing community, says that before it was built, someone dumped a pickup-truck load of garbage on the street just about every week. After the cohousers moved in, it only happened once, long ago.

As developers of cohousing, we are able to show how it can utilize infill sites that other developers wouldn't bother with. We have seen developers shy away from such sites for fear of neighbor opposition or a perceived lack of demand. Conventional developers and even nonprofit housing developers are often hesitant to take such "risks." Unfortunately, this attitude often leads to even more unsuitable development. It goes without saying that when developers choose sites away from existing neighbors, sprawl results.



*Urban revitalization at Doyle Street Cohousing.*



## Happily Ever Aftering in Cohousing

**W**e've talked about how to imagine, and then create, cohousing. But how do you live in a way that is mutually sustaining and enriching for both you and your neighbors? Let's start off by assuming that your group got the design basics right and went through a participatory design and

development process. All that remains is quality of life.

Managing a cohousing community can be both simple and entertaining. Successfully managed cohousing communities contain four key components:

1. It's not cohousing if you don't have common dinner. You don't have a basic, timeless bond.
2. Expectations about community participation are clear
3. The number of adult residents should not exceed fifty
4. Equitable and fair (no one is taken advantage of) maintenance of the community is crucial

### Common Meals and the Success of Community

It is imperative that a group plans out common dinners before move-in. If they don't organize this adequately, some people will



*To break bread with neighbors goes a long way towards making neighborhoods work. And as the Danes would say: it is not cohousing without common dinner.*

move in assuming that common dinners will occur on a regular basis and will be disappointed if they do not. Conversely, others will move in and be dismayed to learn that they are supposed to cook, just like everybody else.

Breaking bread as a group is a timeless means of stitching together a society. It is a ritual that serves as the foundation of community. In cohousing, more activities stem from common dinner than any other. Ski weekends are planned. Art projects are formed. Playdates are made. Common dinner brings us together in many, many ways.

As we have said elsewhere in this book, common dinner makes life more convenient, more economical, more practical, more interesting, and more fun. It is a point worth overstating. The Danes specify that to have high-functioning cohousing, residents need to have common dinners at least twice a week in the common house. Otherwise this thing called cohousing is little more than a quality condominium project — it might be cohousing-like, something inspired by cohousing, or even something that started out to be cohousing, but because the ritual of common dinner was not established at the beginning (before move-in), the community waned and therefore ceased to be cohousing. Community is the cornerstone for sustainability. And community is fostered through common dinner on a regular basis in the common house.

### Community Participation: Avoiding the Tragedy of the Commons

Before 1792, Danish farmers typically lived in small, compact villages of one to three hundred people surrounding a humble church. They walked or rode out to their small farms

every morning. On Saturday mornings they participated in what was called *villinage*, or village work — that is, they beautified the graveyard, and in so doing connected with their neighbors and their ancestors. They patched the slate roof on the church, repaired the cobble on the main road in the village, and in the winter shoveled the snow to allow those who were less able-bodied to get food and firewood. The consequences of not participating were clear — purgatory.

There were serious rumblings for democracy in Denmark, as there were in the rest of Europe. So the king of Denmark passed a new law of the land: “All farmers from this day forward will live at their farm itself or be taxed double.” So rather than dividing their time between the village and the farm, farmers moved to their farms permanently. The villages were gradually depopulated and democracy was delayed for another 20 years. The king knew, as we all know now, that divide and conquer as a political strategy really works.

The Danish concept of *villinage* lives on in cohousing. That is, cohousing residents take personal responsibility for “public” works, and

*Common dinner — a place you know you'll see your neighbors.*



the expectations for community participation are clear and obvious before move-in. If they are not clear, if people don't know what is expected of them to pull their own weight, if good volunteers are taken advantage of, then what follows is the "tragedy of the commons."

## Maintenance That Works

The first two years of living in Emeryville Cohousing, we had voluntary workdays one Saturday a month for four hours. Two people acted as coaches/coordinators, and resident volunteers could come and go fixing whatever the maintenance committee had agreed upon. It was a completely voluntary system — and a complete and total disaster. Five people would show up and paint the gate and the fence. In the course of four hours, other residents would leave their houses, walk toward the parking lot looking at their shoes, pass people who were working and shyly state that they were busy, say they were so sorry that they couldn't help, and walk away feeling guilty. Those doing the work felt righteous, used, and angry.

After much acrimony, two women in the community proposed a much better system. They started with a survey that helped the members put things into context: "Before moving into cohousing, how many hours did you spend working to maintain the exterior of your (former) house?" The average was 12 hours per month.

If it had taken the residents 12 hours a month to preserve the value of their previous house, and since our cohousing units were new and tight, designed to be low maintenance, and on much less land, then the new proposal for Emeryville cohousing was that every adult would do 12 hours a year of maintenance on the exterior of the building. The entire community agreed to this plan. Workdays were shifted from four hours to three hours, one Saturday morning a month. The coaches would have the tools, materials, and refreshments ready to go. The first 15 minutes were spent on project orientation. People who

*A successful work crew results in beautiful landscaping.*



*Cooking common dinner together (with non-spouses) stitches relationships together. After cooking 200 common dinners I (Chuck) find that I give my co-cook the benefit of the doubt for many, many months afterwards, I listen more intently, I hear them better and I'm willing to work hard to find a way to agree with them — not because I have to, but because I want to. Similarly, I lived in one cohousing community where by rotation, you ate at a neighbor's house once a month. When you have been hosted by someone, you work hard to care about what they care about. In other words, the relationships of the buildings, in combination with the lifestyle choices along the way is what makes managing cohousing easier.*

arrived on time got breakfast and worked on the most enjoyable parts of the project; late-comers mostly cleaned up after others. Older folks would make coffee and do the shopping — but don't get us wrong, sometimes they were the best workers. Individuals who didn't log 12 hours for the year were charged \$20 per hour missed (since raised to \$40 per hour). That money was allocated to maintenance supplies or to pay an outside professional to complete any work that wasn't finished during the workdays. Special projects were set up for someone who could not attend enough of the scheduled work "parties." However, because the official workdays were so much more fun, the frequency of alternative work assignments diminished precipitously.

## Community Building

As we discovered in Emeryville, the concept of *villinage* must be created. No matter if a group is young or old, primarily renters or handy homeowners, community participation will never just *happen* on its own. In cohousing, community participation must become a conscious effort that recognizes the difference between what is effective and what is fair, and must include a systematized means to keep it that way. It should be a means that strives to encourage individual participation in community affairs without becoming personal. Expectations and consequences should be straightforward and clear. Unfortunately, this seems to be the only way to overcome the tragedy of the commons.

## The Number of Residents Makes a Difference

When over fifty adults reside in a cohousing community, community decisions are more

difficult to make, especially by consensus. Seemingly trivial issues can bog down a decision and create a crosscurrent of competing, albeit well-intentioned, concerns. Simply put, when the group exceeds fifty adults, it is difficult for people to use dialogue to resolve issues of mutual concern. Traditional neighborhoods solve this problem by employing professional city and county managers, who in turn control the community's decisions through formalized processes: hearings,



Top: A little party on the terrace, with guests, at Doyle Street cohousing.



Bottom: Common dinner at FrogSong cohousing.

forums, codes, permits, and paperwork. In a word: bureaucracy.

A cohousing community that exceeds fifty adult residents runs into the same issues faced by a small local municipality. But because a cohousing community is managed by a consensual decision-making process, the full engagement of the residents is critical to its long-term viability. This process requires a delicate balance of people and a common understanding of how to address community concerns in a healthy, neighborly manner. Regardless of a community's unique mixture of its residents — their age, gender, race, economic status, religious beliefs, and political persuasions — this balance is achieved when the community does not exceed fifty adult residents.

The Danes give the following seven reasons for this fifty adult limit:

*Playing the fiddle  
on the Nevada  
City common  
terrace.*

1. It's too difficult to achieve consensus with more than fifty adults. Even if less than

fifty adults come to the common meeting, you are still considering the opinions of those absent when you make decisions.

2. If there are more than fifty adults, there are too many items to manage in a monthly, two-and-a-half-hour common meeting. Not all items can get onto the agenda, and too many line items mean that too little time is designated to each one. So items must be delegated to committees, which means that decisions will be made without the input of key people who might care about the item, or without some people even knowing about it. Hard feelings and grudges result.
3. A group that is too large encourages individuals to make so-called executive decisions. When items cannot be on a community's larger agenda, frustrated residents either take it upon themselves to address a concern (the executive decision) or split off and form an unofficial, ad hoc group.
4. As in a small town, you have to discuss cutting down a tree with the four or five people who really care for and love that tree before proposing to cut it down. If that number is six or seven, too many discussions ensue, and someone says, "I'll just cut it down. (I wasn't able to discuss it with everyone who cares and I wasn't able to get it on the agenda anyway.)"
5. A too-large group encourages anonymity. An adult group that does not exceed fifty individuals engenders a sense of personal accountability for the larger community. Individuals will not leave behind a mess in common areas like workshops and the kitchen of the common house. Moreover,



individuals do their fair share of community work (assuming the agreements are in place) because they are personally accountable to the community's well-being. It's too easy to "get away with" things and shirk responsibilities when it feels public and not common.

6. An adult group of fifty individuals or less fosters personal relationships. Individuals can take interest in the ebb and flow of the daily life of each neighbor. People connect. Simple events like birthdays are remembered. Neighbors become lifelong friends. These relationships make management easier and therefore serve the long-term interest of a functional community.
7. Similarly, when the adult group is too few, there is less opportunity for individuals to find good friends within the cohousing community.

## Happily Ever Aftering

It happens. An individual or family moves into a cohousing community, discovers that cohousing is different from what they thought it would be (but nonetheless gives it a try), and along the way discovers that cohousing just isn't for them. That's life.

It's worth noting that the turnover rate in cohousing is quite low, especially compared to the turnover rate in traditional housing. In the United States, a country where families move every seven years on average for a total of eleven moves in a lifespan, cohousing residents are about two to three times more stable. River City Cohousing in Sacramento, California, had two move-outs in the community's first ten years; Harmony Village in Golden, Colorado, had two in the first

five years (out of a total of twenty-seven households).

Despite this low turnover rate, a cohousing community should still be designed with the resale of individual residences in mind. Indeed, a well-designed community has a



*Stability. Harmony Cohousing had only two move-outs in the first five years of existence. That is about 10% the rate of transition for the average single-family house neighborhood.*

## Learning from Our Mistakes

It is our understanding that the larger cohousing communities in the United States use their common houses very seldom. This is true of East Lake Commons in Atlanta, with 67 units, whose second common house was never built. Nyland Cohousing in Colorado, with 42 units, rarely has common dinners, which makes it more like a nice condominium complex. We are now at a stage in the US where we have learned so much and can stop setting people up for a compromised experience. Instead, we can provide new and successful possibilities for community, communication, cooperation, and sustainability — but only by considering the effective and ineffective elements of the entire process.

consistently high resale value (see Chapter 27: From Dream to Reality for a detailed explanation). The demand still far exceeds the supply.

This low turnover rate is simply a result of how a cohousing community is created. Most people discover if cohousing is for them during the collective design and development process. If this is done correctly, the

longevity of a cohousing community is quite literally a built-in feature.

### Is Cohousing Worth It?

A better way of life for the individual and a fighting chance for the planet are good enough reasons to live in cohousing. But for those who are not yet sold on the idea, there are many other incentives; providing a model for figuring out how to get people to work together is just one.



*A diversity of social activities are shaped by the interests of the cohousing residents themselves.*



*A party at the common house . . . always popular.*

## Dealing with Conflict

Whenever we give a public presentation someone invariably asks, “Yeah, but what if a jerk moves into your cohousing community?” Actually, it can even be worse. What if you move into cohousing only to discover that you’re the jerk!

While this is a valid question, it is sometimes misplaced. The cohousing concept is a self-selecting process: individuals who discover that cohousing isn’t for them either do not move into a cohousing community in the first place, or eventually move out. Even so, there are a lot of “naturally occurring” social

mechanisms that help us avoid long-term conflict. These mechanisms are in no way unique to the cohousing concept, hence anyone with a basic grasp of social conventions can immediately relate to them.

So how do we answer this question, as put to me in a public presentation? It goes something like this: “Generally speaking, you’re not going to make your neighbors mad on Thursday if you’re going to ask them to babysit for you on Friday.” In other words, you learn that it is in your best interest, short-term and long-term, to not be a jerk.





## The Legacy of Cohousing

### *Proving the Possibilities for Community*

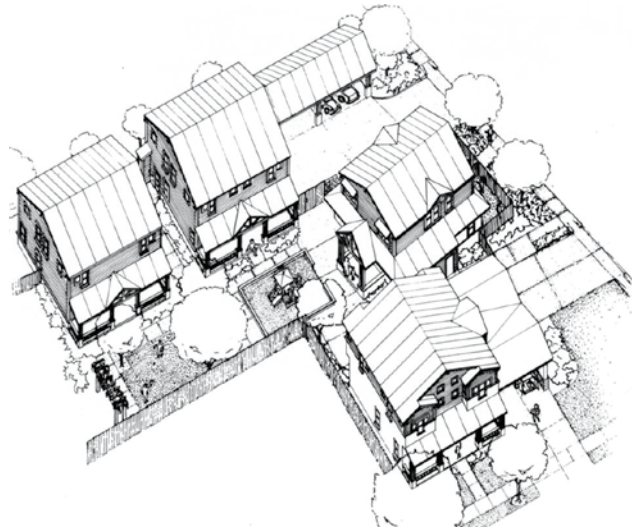
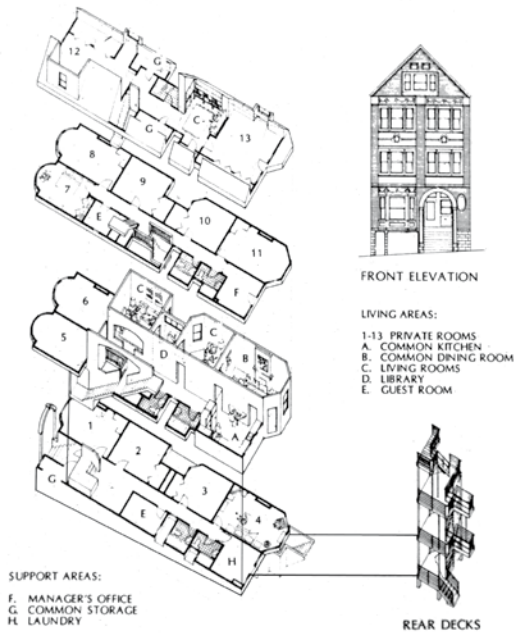
The cohousing model offers a new perspective on Western society's concept of home and community. The examples in this book illustrate how ordinary people, with the assistance of a few skilled professionals, can organize to build housing that truly

addresses their needs. Cohousing is as much a *new process* for developing housing as it is a *new housing type*.

Cohousing has already had an effect on housing in the US. Our architectural firm, McCamant & Durrett Architects, has



*There are more and more housing projects in the US inspired by cohousing like Petaluma Avenue Homes in Sebastopol, CA.*



*A single room occupancy hotel in San Francisco, CA modeled after cohousing.*

*Depot Commons: A subsidized housing project for mothers and children who are in need of help — modeled after participatory and cohousing projects.*

### Thirty Years Later ...

More than thirty years after the first cohousing community was built in Denmark, less than 1 percent of the Danish population lives in cohousing (although, according to a recent national housing study, 40 percent of the population says that it would like to). However, the full spectrum of the housing market has seen its influences.

Almost no Danish multi-family housing project is designed today without at least the involvement of a focus group. This process nudges a project toward a more livable outcome, every time. Some multi-family projects undergo complete participatory design processes. While they might not be cohousing, cohousing is the development model.

Similarly, residents elsewhere understand that they have a say in their existing neighborhood. For

example, on streets with single-family houses, the residents might vote to create a car-free zone. This often means that they decide to park all the cars at the end of the block and walk the half block to their houses. This scenario even has a formal name, a Chapter 44 Street (after the law). This one, seemingly small, choice facilitates community and fosters neighborly relationships in a dramatic way. Residents walk past play areas, sandboxes, picnic tables, and front porches and say hello to their neighbors on the way home. And as people get to know each other, the neighborhood is transformed into a community.

It is not difficult to imagine that the legacy of cohousing in America will be much more than cohousing itself, as is already true in Denmark.

worked on many developments modeled after, but not identical to, cohousing (and which we therefore don't call cohousing). We have designed many multi-family housing projects with input from the future residents, much in the vein of the participatory design process of a cohousing project. The innovation is in the concept that ordinary people actually help build neighborhoods that truly address their people-friendly, child-friendly, senior-friendly, and earth-friendly needs.

### **Affordable Housing with Cohousing Elements**

Using the cohousing model to approach affordable housing, multi-family housing, and urban infill housing has been a part of our practice for the past twenty plus years. Even as the first generation of cohousing communities was being built, the groundwork was being laid for future alternatives. In 1992, together with a nonprofit developer, McCamant & Durrett completed the rehabilitation of a three-story, earthquake-damaged Victorian building in San Francisco for use as single room occupancy (SRO) housing for 13 homeless individuals. The project involved gutting three dilapidated apartments and adding a basement and a fifth floor. In an SRO, every resident has a room, with kitchen and living space shared by all, and bathrooms down the hall. An SRO acts as low-cost transitional housing that provides residents with a stable environment in which to begin rebuilding their lives. In this case, the old building was transformed into a high-functioning community with common dinners six nights a week, cooked and planned by residents and completely self-managed.

A typical SRO has 15 to 20 percent common area (space outside of the private rooms). But because of the emphasis put on community by the residents and the nonprofit, they settled on 35 percent. This priority led to the creation of a large and comfortable common area with two living rooms, a library, a kitchen, a dining room, a laundry facility, and an arts-and-crafts area. Residents take turns making a common dinner, which discourages the dangerous practice of using private hot plates.

Although the surroundings are simple and the construction budget was low (\$650,000), the residents came up with good solutions to their housing needs through active participation in the process. And after working together to solve design issues and design criteria, they were better prepared to manage the community themselves. As the first SRO in the area (and probably the country) to be designed with input from the residents, this project has profound implications for the future of such housing. The involvement of the future tenants in the design process not only improved the design, but also gave them a strong sense of emotional ownership and pride in the finished product. The resulting transitional housing is easier and less costly to manage than its counterparts, which are designed without residents' input. And although new residents rotate in, the formative group started a certain can-do culture that is passed on to newcomers.

We believe that about every ten years, a community needs to engage in "yes, we can" projects in order to re-invigorate its "yes, we are" culture. And the cohousing concept offers a model for translating these can-do ideas into reality.

## Depot Commons: Single Parents on Government Assistance

Depot Commons is another affordable project that utilized our skills in participatory design and contains elements of a cohousing community. Finished in 1995, Depot Commons, located in Morgan Hill, California, is a 13-unit project for single-parent households on government assistance. The parents (all mothers) must be in school in order to qualify for a residence. Childcare, cooking, and other shared facilities are provided on site. One of the four buildings contains a childcare facility with an on-site childcare provider, so the moms can have childcare within the community while they are at school during the day. Within the shared homes (each family

lives in an extended suite with bedrooms and a bathroom and shares a kitchen, dining and living room; there are four suites to a “house”), residents are able to share cooking responsibilities and even childcare duties in the evenings. This allows others to do homework or spend time with a child who needs help with homework.

Although it should be self-evident, innumerable studies have shown that young, single mothers have a very difficult time completing their studies when trying to balance homework and work, with one hundred percent of the parenting responsibilities. They are greatly assisted by a more supportive environment such as cohousing or this cohousing inspired project. Knowing this, before starting we insisted on working with the future residents: we didn’t want to decide what the moms would share and what they wouldn’t. The moms got housing that responded to their needs, and Catholic Charities, the developer, found that of all their subsidized housing developments, Depot Commons is the easiest to manage by a huge margin. Their participation in the design process gave the residents a sense of emotional ownership, and they were therefore invested not only in their own success, but also in the success of the other residents and the development itself.



*Depot commons.*

*At the grand opening of Depot Commons, the assistant secretary of HUD and the local congress woman agreed that it was appropriate that we worked with the future residents.*



## The Legacy of Senior Cohousing: Casa Velasco

We have also worked on senior developments modeled after cohousing. One such project, Casa Velasco, is a 21-unit senior housing project in Oakland, California. Originally a three-story, 1920s building designed and built to accommodate telephone switchboard

operators, the renovated structure became a five-story senior residential apartment building. A common house was added on top and the basement was excavated for common facilities such as laundry, personal storage, mechanical, recycling, and garbage. To us as architects, the project presented a set of interesting challenges. To reuse this complicated brick-clad concrete and steel structure, already damaged by several earthquakes, we needed to physically stitch it all together and make it stable (lots of shotcrete on the interior walls took care of stabilizing the building). But the social fabric was just as critical. There are many other “projects” that are more structurally sound than they are socially cohesive.

### **Casa Velasco: Sometimes Community Comes after the Fact — But Not by Accident**

Once the renovation was completed, we were confronted with a more interesting challenge: how to stitch the resident seniors (18 singles and 3 couples) together to form a stable social community. About a month after move-in, I (Chuck) went around to all 21 apartments, inviting folks to a workshop that night, the first of three. I asked them to please join us all in the common room, and added that we would provide a dinner. I also asked them how they liked living there. They all said, more or less, “Fine. *They* leave me alone.” All of the residents nonetheless attended, drawn out, no doubt, by the free dinner, and their curiosity.

We started the first of the three community-building workshops by asking: “What activities might you do together that would make *your* life easier, more convenient, more



*Casa Velasco: 21-unit senior housing inspired by cohousing.*



*Casa Velasco has a complete common house on the roof.*

economical, more safe, and even more fun than doing them alone?” After a long, pregnant pause, the residents began to generate a list. Once they got started there was no stopping them. All told, they came up with 19 possible activities they could do as a group.

The second night was spent prioritizing the 19 suggestions. To my surprise, their number one group activity was walking to the grocery store together. It turned out that Paratransit (Public Senior Van Transportation) for the elderly was located several congested miles from the building. Individual residents were calling Paratransit to come and drive them the two blocks to

*Neighbors spend quality time together in the common house. For a month after the design there was no one in the common house. But after three community building workshops, there was.*



the grocery store, because they did not feel safe walking alone. But there were many problems with using this service for grocery shopping. Paratransit would ask the individual to wait in the lobby, and then would often be an hour late. Then the driver would take a person to the store but not wait while they were inside. Residents would have to call them again from the store and then wait another half hour or so to get a ride the full two blocks back home.

### **Casa Velasco: Defining a Community's High-Priority Activities**

Before the third workshop, I stopped by every apartment to personally invite each individual to attend. I did this because the purpose of the third workshop was to define the group's highest-priority activities.

During this final workshop, we would decide exactly what going to the store together would look like. Would residents meet in the lobby every other day at a set time, would there be a grocery shopping phone tree, or would they find another system? As it so happened, in the week that had passed between workshops, the residents had already started walking to the store together. This third workshop merely formalized what they had already started doing. Afterward I asked them individually, "How is it living here?" They answered, "Great, they come and get me when it is time to go to the store." When you don't know people, you want to be left alone; when you know them, you want to be included. It reminded me a little bit of high school — when you're included, it's more fun.

Building a community by finding ways for people to work together to solve their issues is not just about building more housing — it is the living legacy of cohousing. Cohousing teaches us the potential for working together. Then we use this skill elsewhere. Contrast this with other nonprofit senior housing projects where, when residents make trouble, they get evicted. It is an impersonal system by design.

We at McCamant & Durrett Architects feel that typical nonprofit affordable housing developments do not utilize one of the most valuable assets of a project: the individual and the collective resourcefulness of the residents themselves. Call it social capital or just old-fashioned usefulness. If those hours of watching television can be translated into a recycling program or attending landscaping classes or playing games or even cooking for a neighbor in need, then an impersonal development can be transformed into a meaningful community. And this can

be started by something as simple as getting people to walk to the store together.

One person sitting at their television in one house and someone else sitting at their television in another house (seniors watch TV 6.5 hours per day on average), rather than the pair of them sitting together on a front porch talking about the issues of the day, leaves too much humanity on the table. Some argue that hoping for a convivial environment is idealistic; others argue that it is doable if not essential. If we don't preclude it with a bad physical design, we can achieve a living environment that provides the basics for healthy personal development, thereby creating and sustaining a viable society.

### **Petaluma Avenue Homes: An Affordable Rental Community**

Completed in 2009 in Sebastopol, California, Petaluma Avenue Homes (PAH) is a 45-unit, affordable rental community for households that make less than 60 percent of the area's median income.

Working in collaboration with Affordable Housing Associates (AHA), a nonprofit housing developer, McCamant & Durrett Architects designed the community with many of the elements of cohousing. We included extensive common facilities (a large kitchen, dining area, sitting lounge, and children's play area), large front porches, a centrally located community garden, and edible landscaping. Financing from state tax credits and other subsidies made the community an affordable option to prospective residents, but these subsidies came with restrictions that made it impossible to pre-select residents prior to construction. Nevertheless, we facilitated a participatory



*Top: An early rendition of Petaluma Avenue Homes with the common house at the center.*



*Center: Pathway to houses at Petaluma Avenue Homes.*

*Bottom: The grand opening day at Petaluma Avenue Homes, very much inspired by cohousing and designed as close to it as possible without future resident input.*



## Affording Affordable Cohousing

Not counting subsidized projects like Depot Commons and Petaluma Avenue Homes, “market-rate” cohousing has a very attractive track record from an affordability perspective. For example, Berkeley Cohousing (14 units) has four units at \$120,000 right in downtown Berkeley, where the average house cost is over \$400,000. A preschool teacher was able to buy a house in Bellingham Cohousing for just over \$100,000. At Doyle Street Cohousing in Emeryville, units started at \$130,000, and at Nevada City Cohousing units ranged from \$255,000 to \$425,000, in a town where the average house price hovers somewhere around \$500,000.

It’s great when cohousing or cohousing-like projects receive subsidies, but when these are not available, creativity and discipline will emerge. This is to say, we love it when a group of thirty organized people contacts us and says, in effect, “We have very little money, help us figure out a way to make a community.” Often, the community already exists in one form or another — it just needs to be coalesced.

design process with neighbors and affordable housing advocates. Perhaps most importantly, Affordable Housing Associates, who is responsible for ongoing property management, hired cohousing facilitator Eris Weaver (who lives in FrogSong Cohousing in Corati, California), to provide community-building services for the first couple of years of occupancy, as well as a sympathetic resident manager. A diversity of households moved in; some were expecting cohousing, others had never heard of it.

While all communities have to deal with varied expectations upon move-in, PAH has a particularly broad spectrum of expectations. This has led to some disappointment among those who were expecting cohousing. In addition, the tight finances of lower-income households make some typical cohousing systems more challenging. For example, households are generally not able to finance the supplies required for a large common dinner. On the other hand, AHA says it has never seen such buy-in amongst tenants.

It will be interesting to see how this community evolves over time. But it is clear already that, while the residents may not have the level of commitment we have come to expect in owner-occupied cohousing, incorporating both the design elements and community process of cohousing has enhanced their sense of community.



Top: Plan of a Santa Cruz shared house.

Center: Section of the Santa Cruz shared house.



## The Shared House Model

Once cohousing became “popularized” in the early 1980s in Denmark, it opened up a wide range of new possibilities for people to get together and organize housing that fit their lifestyle and budget. One new housing type that emerged was the shared house model



— a single house designed specifically for multiple households.

In this model, each household has its own suite — that is, bedroom(s) with a sitting area(s), bathroom(s) and even a hot plate and a sink. The common areas are elaborate: a big screen for Friday night movies, a gourmet kitchen, and a stately dining table for shared dinners several times a week and special occasions.

Inspired by this model, our firm designed a shared house in Santa Cruz, California. This house consists of four private residential units and a common area. The program was shaped by the future residents — high-powered careerists who relish privacy but are also interested in having a good time with others. These are people who want the ability to garden or spend time with others when a spouse is out of town, or even help raise a child (someone else's). They also wanted to live considerably lighter on the planet than they would in a single-family house.

For individuals and couples with this sort of lifestyle, a shared house offers a cohousing-like solution, in that it is built around their real need for community and the actual requirements of their professional lives. In this case, they thought that it would be fun to help raise a child, if they were fortuitous enough to attract a professional, single parent who was interested and who, because of their job or other interests, couldn't be home every evening to help with homework or had to travel on occasion for work. This particular shared house is like cohousing in that it is built around the notion of: "Hey, let's just pause here for a moment to determine what really makes sense for our real lives — not for the 1950s."

## San Francisco State University Children's Center: School as Community Center

Beyond housing, cohousing is leading the way in community building. At San Francisco State University, for example, the Children's Center has become the hub of community life for many parents. The reason is simple: the center's design encourages parents who live in cramped, non-child-friendly housing to interact. Parents bring their homework, hang out in the comfortable family room, and talk about taking their young children to the zoo together on Saturday. The lack of common facilities in their individual homes



Top: Model of the San Francisco State University childcare center.



Bottom: Children playing outside at SFSU.

*McCamant & Durrett Architects often design childcare centers which often form the center of a child's community. They feel like a small village.*



means that some parents even make dinner together on a Friday night, at the childcare center!

The design of the Children's Center doesn't communicate: "Leave. This place is not for you." Even to the children, it feels like a village — a home away from home, among other homes. This is no accident; this sentiment is designed into the space. In other words, a sense of community, so capably reinvigorated by cohousing, can translate to public places — childcare centers, workplaces, schools — where people spend time connected to other people.

### **South Auburn: Mixed Use in a Village Hamlet**

In 2008, McCamant & Durrett Architects started a schematic design for South Auburn Street, a new, 18-acre mixed-use neighborhood on the edge of Grass Valley, California, a city of 12,000 in the Sierra foothills. Grass Valley is a historic, well-preserved gold mining town and the development is next to Empire Mine Historic State Park, a recreational area with 845 acres of protected land and 12 miles of trails. The site is also within walking distance of town, thus offering access to nature, entertainment, and amenities.

In total, the site and its two neighborhoods are designed as a model for new, neighborhood-scaled environmental sustainability, with 90 units of pedestrian and environmentally friendly, multi-family housing. The site plan is oriented around a new pedestrian street with both commercial and residential uses, including live/work lofts. Again inspired by cohousing, this pedestrian-only street leads from the mixed-use area to two residential neighborhoods with shared



*A site plan of the South Auburn mixed-use village, inspired by cohousing and intended to revitalize commerce on this side of town.*

*Perspective sketch of part of the commercial area in the South Auburn mixed-use development.*



open space and pathways leading to the protected wetlands and woodlands adjacent to the site. Parking is kept to the perimeter, in the model of a cohousing site. The proposed architecture is in a style and scale that reflects the area's gold mining days. In an attempt to promote zero-carbon development, residential units come with a community supported agriculture (CSA) subscription and a shared car. The design is in the schematic phase.

### The Next Step: Moving Toward Sustainability

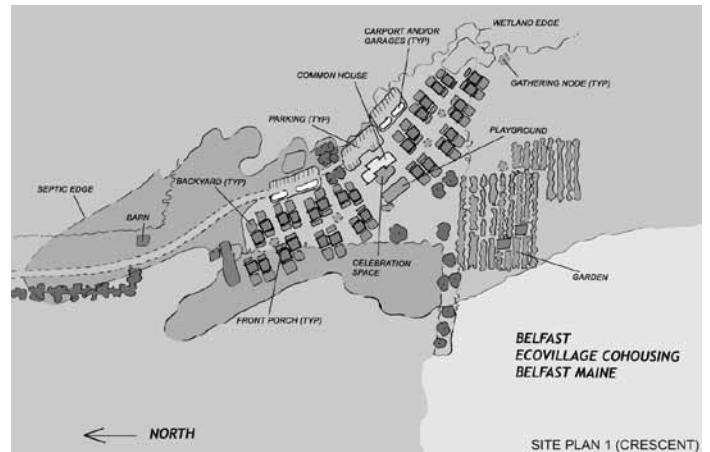
The cohousing model has also served as a potential building block for several proposed ecovillages in Maine, Los Angeles, British Columbia, and other locations. Based on a successful European model, these villages incorporate ecologically sound technology and green building and agricultural practices into almost self-supporting small town-like environments. If they are successful, ecovillages will provide yet another housing option for the changing needs of our society, while also meeting our environmental goals. And they often use cohousing as a building block.

McCamant & Durrett Architects has worked on the site design for ecovillages to create relationships with nearby farmland as well as commercial services. This combination allows the villagers to grow and sell food locally and to provide for their own shopping needs — by walking, not driving. The ecovillage also shows, by example, how to alter the nature of sometimes disparate neighborhoods, areas with no obvious center, and instead create a vibrant, larger, neighborhood-wide center. Such a place allows neighbors to relate to each other, or for teenagers to hang out while being mentored by

older neighbors. This model is our chance to re-establish the small town-like square.

All of the projects mentioned above, from a shared house to a cluster of full-scale ecovillages, offer examples of successful living environments that contribute to sustainable living and build social capital. They also offer solutions for urban infill, adaptive reuse, and redevelopment strategies. In combination with shared resources and a solid commitment to live more sustainably, cohousing can be both a catalyst and a model for building and rebuilding neighborhoods and communities for the long term.

*Original site plan for the Belfast Ecovillage. Houses are clustered on 4 acres of the 30 set aside for the cohousing. The remaining 180 acres will be an organic farm and natural preserve.*



*Perspective sketch of the mixed-use area for the Yarrow Ecovillage in British Columbia, Canada.*



*Yarrow Ecovillage,  
the original site  
of a Mennonite  
dairy farm.*

### **Critical Aspects of the Building Process**

Many professionals in the United States are not organized enough to build cohousing, even though they might try. As a result, they rush the process, especially the group design work — the least tangible but most critical component for creating community. In fact, rushing this one step slows down the larger project considerably. And of course, there are others who would simply like to build a cohousing-looking development and ignore the social-building aspects of the process itself. These developers tend to design elements in ways that compromise community, such as by making the common house too small. Although they mean well, these developers aim to Americanize cohousing into “fast cohousing.” Suffice it to say, there is no soul in fast food and no soul in “fast” cohousing.

To the untrained eye, building cohousing appears to be a slow process. In fact, cohousing is typically created much more quickly

than a typical project. For example, in Cotati, California, a 30-unit cohousing community with commercial space, took three years to complete. Such is the power of a motivated group. By contrast three other, comparably sized developments that surround this cohousing site took an average of six years to complete, which is not atypical in areas with existing neighbors.

### **When Not to Call It “Cohousing”**

We have a simple request. If it isn’t cohousing — if the resident group does not participate in a meaningful way to building the community; if the common house is poorly designed and thwarts community; if cars creep into spaces that should be reserved for people; if cars creep into the houses themselves; if residents don’t have anything real in common; and if the residents don’t have regular common dinners — then please do not call it *cohousing*. It is something else.

On the positive side, developments created to look like cohousing or that mimic some group process typically do provide a greater sense of community for their residents than do boxes set equidistant across the landscape (single-family houses) or regular apartment buildings. As stated earlier, the greatest legacy of cohousing is not that everyone is living in it (still less than one percent) but that it has had, and continues to have, a deep and real impact on every other type of housing development.

Cohousing provokes us to make better neighborhoods. It asks us to create living environments that are optimally responsive to its residents, our culture, and our aspirations for building a better society and living lighter on the planet. When you walk by a

cohousing community, you see that it is a profound expression of our most basic human needs — needs so palpable that it's obvious why so many people involved in housing would like to emulate the cohousing concept as much as possible.

## How to Begin with Cohousing?

If you are interested in moving into cohousing — or starting a new community — the best thing to do is to contact one of the many practitioners around the country, folks who proactively assist others in starting new projects. The organizations that have helped get their projects built in North America are:

McCamant & Durrett Architects  
The Cohousing Company  
CoHousing Partners  
Wonderland Hill Development Company  
Kraus Fitch Architects  
The Cohousing Collaborative  
Cohousing.org  
Canadian Cohousing Network

There are several databases in the US and Canada to help others who want to create a community in their area. Send us an email with your contact information and we will put you on the list, and put you in contact

with others in your town (info@cohousingco.com; 530-265-9980).

We hope the future will see more and more folks getting together and asking themselves, “Are we ready to figure out how to best live our lives in a way that allows us to experience life at its highest potential — and leave nothing on the table?”

Too lofty? We think not. Achievable? Very!

*Newsletters and articles about cohousing from the US, Canada, and Britain.*



## Afterword

### Conscious Participation

People remember the good neighborhoods they once lived in, if they ever did — towns and neighborhoods with a keen sense of place, cooperation, and participation. Cohousing, by comparison, is also firmly grounded in “place” and cooperation that evolves into relationships. Community building literally happens between the buildings and on garden pathways, grounded in the practical tasks — the “common” and individual acts of daily life. It is also grounded in the future residents “creating” the place through participation.

We need to take neighborhoods seriously, as a critical component of a well-rounded life experience. How can we espouse world peace if we can't even communicate effectively with our neighbors?

We doubt that anyone who lives in a cohousing community would deny the role that this experience plays in shaping them as a parent, a partner, a neighbor, and a citizen.

For some people, cohousing is just a natural extension of their otherwise culturally creative lifestyle; for others, it is the first out-of-the-box choice they have ever really made. But even for them, it is a natural extension of a conservative lifestyle — almost reminiscent of historic neighborhoods when you could count on a neighbor. Or as Chuck was introduced in Cleveland, Ohio: *“Chuck is here to talk about putting the ‘neighbor’ back in the ‘hood.’*”

When we imagine two next-door neighbors sitting in their respective houses, watching TV and having dinner alone, versus sitting on one of their front porches and chatting about the issues of the day, we imagine so much missed opportunity. So much opportunity for mutual, practical, and even emotional support. In our increasingly globalized society it is clear that we can rely less and less on community to just happen naturally. Cohousing is just one of the various attempts to say, “Hey, if we are going to

have community in our neighborhoods, if we are going to relate to each other in a healthful manner, it has to become a conscious act.”

For now it appears that the future of communitarianism in Western culture depends on conscious participation. As the sense of community wanes in America, and the recognition of its importance waxes, we expect that it will take movements like cohousing and other forms of participation to bring it back to life. To us, this would look something like the bird’s-eye view of Bellingham Cohousing, which reminds us of the footprint of an ancient Chinese village or a Greek island town where people ventured out of their doors and where human interaction was the norm, not the exception. If you believe, like we do, that our first priority as a species is to build a viable society, then we need to consciously construct a world that allows for something like Bellingham Cohousing to be created — and to bring us back to the village. In fact, Danish cohousers would often say that they were simply consciously creating the kind of community and environment that used to occur naturally. Small town-like environments full of interdependent relationships, as in, “I don’t want to upset Karen on Thursday if I am going to ask her to watch my kid on Friday.” With close-knit relationships like this, people go out of their way to be kind.

### **A Growing Concept and Reality**

In 2008, Americans drove 2.9 trillion miles to playdates, soccer games, music lessons, and social events of all sorts, as well as driving to work and shop. In cohousing, of course, kids still have soccer practice and people still need to get to work, but they carpool with

neighbors and friends. They live in a more village-like setting where it is easy, even natural, to conserve resources — where it’s not a compromise, but an enhancement to quality of life instead. We all have a community, we have to, we’re social animals, but it’s normally based on our auto, our telephone, and our date book. Proximity and community is the secret to easy quality of life and ease of sustainability.

While the number of cohousing communities is still relatively few, at 120 communities nationwide, the concept has already significantly impacted the American discussion on housing, community, and the meaning of neighborhood. Many hundreds of non-cohousing projects (for profit and nonprofit) are adapting to create much better-than-average housing (such as car-free streets), as described fully in Chapter 32: The Legacy of Cohousing. Cohousing is now an American housing option; no book or seminar on American housing would be complete without mention of it. For those of us living it, it’s now just ordinary, everyday life.

### **The Common Denominator Across Cohousing Communities**

As the case studies in this book illustrate, every cohousing community is different — a product of the initiative, imagination, and participation of its residents. Wherever you build your project and whoever you are as a community, you are unique. Yet after designing fifty different communities with fifty different groups, there are a few truths, a few predictable patterns:

- \* There are many more similarities than differences.

- ✦ Every group wants their project to meet their needs.
- ✦ Every group wants their project to be affordable to their members.
- ✦ Every group wants their project to be energy-efficient and sustainable.
- ✦ Every individual wants to be heard, and listened to.
- ✦ Everyone wants the process to be thoughtful and thorough. Everyone wants it to be fair.
- ✦ Every group wants to be proud of their home and community, and how it feels and looks.
- ✦ And no one wants it to take too long; no one wants to discuss every line item twice or three times. Therefore, everyone wants to have an efficient group process, which of course facilitates the success of the other, above, line items.

At the end of the day, each common house, for example, is about 25 percent different from another. But that 25 percent may mean the difference between 350 and 100 people hours per week — even though both common houses cost \$300,000. Zooming in on the local culture is the context of a known process — a process that involves learning how to turn over every rock, examine the possibilities, and help a group reach its potential.

### How to Make Cohousing Happen

Creating a successful cohousing community requires experienced facilitation. Otherwise, a group bumbles along until they are tired, out of money, and out of time, and either just builds what they have or dissipates. We

restate this only because we are weary of seeing groups fail under the weight of their own inexperience.

This book is full of information about how to make cohousing happen and how to get the most out of living there. We have no intention of making it sound foreboding, but like an airplane flight or a whitewater rafting trip, with proper piloting any voyage can be positive and the journey can be just as interesting and fun as the destination. But, let a bus driver take over the flight panel, and it can be all too risky. There are half a dozen “pilots” in the US now who know cohousing and can take you through the turbulence. Our biggest piece of advice for new cohousers: work with people who know what they are doing and have successfully demonstrated it.

If someone were to ask us, “If you were to be able to choose any ten architects you could to design the most sustainable towns possible, who would you choose?” We would always choose the architects who know how to organize people. Someone who knows how to bring people together will always help a group achieve their best outcome. The possibilities for what those solutions might be are readily available, if not entirely obvious, and then getting a group to agree to them is really the “only” challenge.

### How Far Have We Come?

As we sit at common dinner tonight at Nevada City Cohousing, it’s hard to believe that there were ever doubts that cohousing could work in the United States. For five years we’ve been eating dinner together several times a week, and sharing tales, advice, and comforts. We finish the meal with a tasty homemade dessert of rhubarb and strawberry



shortcake with fresh whipped cream. There is so much that we take for granted here that is unusual in most American neighborhoods... like the people and the relationships that we care about, and the care and regard that we feel from them. It's hard to imagine anything

as gratifying as living in a neighborhood that you helped to co-create — a neighborhood in the image of what really makes sense to you and your future neighbors that you have come to trust.

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## Notes

### Chapter 2

1. Nevada City Cohousing is a large cohousing community. While this community was originally designed well within the 50 adult limit, six formerly single women paired up soon after moving in (we think that's a story for an entire book itself), thus increasing the number of adults in the community. In addition, three households adjacent to the community wanted to join. The group welcomed them, of course, even though these households would add to management issues. (See *Chapter 31: Happily Ever Aftering in Cohousing* for a discussion on managing a cohousing community after move-in.)

### Chapter 3

1. Green features include a photovoltaic system for each home, passive solar heating and cooling, and low-toxic building materials. The homes were built with almost no clear-cut lumber (FSC

certified). Advanced framing techniques were used, meaning that 25 to 40 percent less lumber was used to build the same square footage as for a typical new house. The buildings are infused with natural light, which reduces daily energy consumption.

### Chapter 6

1. For more information on the community's energy system, see Per Madsen and Kathy Goss's article "Shared Lives, Shared Energy" *Solar Age*, (July 1982): 16–19.

### Chapter 8

1. The cooperative financing law required that the average dwelling not exceed 1,023 sq. ft. (95 m<sup>2</sup>) to qualify for financing.

### Chapter 11

1. Nonprofit housing developers utilize special financing available through the Danish government (typically subsidizing about 20 percent of the development

costs) to build rental housing, which is then owned and managed by the nonprofit.

#### Chapter 14

1. David M. Longdon, *Whatcom Watch Online*, January 2000, Volume 9, Issue 1.
2. Kathleen Nolan from Bellingham Cohousing: "124 Creating Our Own Neighborhood Cohousing," Peak Moment Television.
3. Kyle Parker, *Fish Tales Magazine*, NSEA Newsletter, Winter 2007, Volume 15, Issue 1.

#### Chapter 22

1. Patrick Meyer, "Greening Cohousing a Step at a Time," *Cohousing: The Newsletter for Cohousing in Canada*, vol. 17, issue 2, Fall 2009, pp. 1, 5.

#### Chapter 26

1. For financial reasons, the town of Yarrow was consumed by the larger neighboring city of Chilliwack (population 80,000), because it could not afford its own in-town infrastructure (sewer, water, schools, police, fire, administration). Yarrow was incorporated with the city of Chilliwack in 1980.

#### Chapter 27

1. *Cohousing Value Trend Report*. January 2010. Bartholomew Associates Real Estate Appraisal and Consulting.

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## About the Authors

Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett are the husband-and-wife architectural team who introduced the cohousing concept in the United States with the publication of their first book in 1988. Since that time, through their firms, McCamant & Durrett Architects, The Cohousing Company, and CoHousing Partners, they have been working



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to assist resident groups and developers in creating cohousing communities across the United States, Canada, and around the world. In addition to working professionally to create cohousing, they have lived in cohousing communities for most of the last two decades. In 1992, Kathryn and Charles moved into Doyle Street Cohousing in Emeryville, California, in the heart of the San Francisco Bay Area, with their one-year-old daughter, Jessie. Fourteen years later, they moved to Nevada City Cohousing in the Northern California Sierra Mountains.

Both licensed architects, Kathryn and Charles have lectured widely on the topic of cohousing. In addition to architectural services, their firms provide workshops and consulting in the areas of group formation and facilitation, site search and acquisition, entitlements, project management, financing, and all areas of developing cohousing. McCamant & Durrett Architects also specializes in designing affordable, multifamily

housing; child-care facilities; town planning; and adaptive reuse of existing structures.

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