



## Families, retirees moving to 'cohousing' neighborhoods in search of community

ERIN GARTNER - Associated Press

BOULDER, Colo. -- Neighbors piled their plates high with freshly cut garlic bread and steaming pasta in an informal buffet line, then settled into a large eating area to share wine and conversation.

The meal wasn't a home dinner party but the weekly community meal at *Wild Sage*, Colorado's newest "cohousing" neighborhood.

Like most *cohousing* neighborhoods, *Wild Sage* was designed to encourage interaction. The 34 homes resemble tightly grouped townhouses. Garages are located on the outskirts and front doors open to sidewalks that lead to a large common house used for community meetings, dinners and activities.

At *Wild Sage*, guest rooms and mailboxes also are located in the common house.

"I just can't walk out and get my mail. It's a 30- or 40-minute event, because I'll wind up talking to 12 people," said Chris Hauck. "It's such a refreshing change of lifestyle."

The first U.S. *cohousing* neighborhood was set up in Davis, Calif., in 1991. Since then, more than 65 have been built across the country and at least 60 more are in the building or planning stages, according to the *Cohousing* Association of the United States.

Unlike the communes of the late 1960s, *cohousing* residents own their homes and pay homeowners fees based on the size of their house and family. These are not necessarily counterculture types, but software consultants, engineers and teachers. There are single parents, families and retirees.

"The concept (of *cohousing*) is unfamiliar to a lot of people. But in a way, it's a throwback to the 1950s," said Richard Rogers, 53, a father of two teens who recently moved into *Wild Sage*. "It's very close to your way of living in a condominium community -- with some perks."

*Cohousing* residents often organize years before construction begins, working with architects to plan neighborhood layout and amenities like common-room hot tubs or communal workshops. Sharing walls saves energy and building up instead of out preserves open space.

Community decisions are made through consensus, from the type of screens allowed on front doors to building a new playground. Residents say it can be frustrating and debates can get heated.

"Once you get a thumbs down, the process stops," Hauck said. "But it's worth the time, because everyone agrees. Everybody's needs have got to be heard."

Residents work on teams to maintain landscaping and common facilities. Others take care of neighborhood finances or baby-sit during workdays and meetings, though Hauck said shared work is only a small part of *cohousing* living.

Friday has become movie night at the *Wild Sage* common house. Community dinners are held Wednesdays and Sundays, brunch is served Saturday, and adult-only dinners are Saturdays.

There are seven different home models at *Wild Sage*, from 600-square-foot single-level units to 2,700-square-foot three-level homes, Hauck said. Prices range from about \$90,000 to \$490,000. It also has low-income homes built by Habitat for Humanity.

Hauck, 42, runs a home-based marketing research consulting firm. He moved to *Wild Sage* with his wife, Jules, and their two young children from a Dallas suburb. He said he didn't know most of his Texas neighbors who, like him, came home from work, drove into their garages and turned on their televisions.

"I didn't want my kids growing up like that," he said.

His wife discovered *cohousing* in a magazine, and the couple was soon helping develop *Wild Sage*.

"We're 34 families from all different walks of life. The mix is incredible," Hauck said. "The one thing we have in common is we want people around our families."

Hy Mariampolski of QualiData Research Inc. in New York, an expert on commune living, said the idea behind *cohousing* has existed for years. Some groups have carried a utopian ideology, he said, but most organize for simple pragmatic reasons such as relieving some of the burdens of child raising.

"There has always been some waxing and waning of communal experimentation, and this seems to be a moment of growth in the U.S.," he said. "In Scandinavia, Germany and elsewhere, commune-like mutual aid and housing groups have been pretty popular over the last 20 years."

Colorado has 10 *cohousing* neighborhoods scattered from Durango to Fort Collins, ranking it behind California, Massachusetts, Washington and Oregon. The largest has 43 units and the smallest has 11 on a one-acre plot.

In southwest Colorado, residents of Heartwood *cohousing* purchased 250 acres of scenic forest near Durango. Their 24 individual and duplex homes are built on only six acres, surrounded by pastures and open space.

"If you want the social interaction, it's here. But the privacy is here, too," said Alice Miller Robbins, 50, an attorney who has lived in Heartwood with her husband, Johann Robbins, 49, for three years.

Cohousers say they're not searching for utopia -- just community.

"We're living here because we want to know our neighbors," says Aaron Brockett, who recently moved to *Wild Sage* with his wife, Cherry Anderson, and their 15-month-old son. The couple, both 31, said it was difficult to get to know people living at their former condo complex in Connecticut.

"Here, you just get thrown into the mix with everybody," Anderson said.