

The Dallas Morning News

Cohousing catching on in U.S.

Move revisits commune idea in a more grown-up format

09:44 AM CST on Tuesday, January 30, 2007

By BOB MOOS / The Dallas Morning News
bmoos@dallasnews.com

Baby boomers Connie and Rex Fountain belong to the generation that made communes popular in the 1960s. Now, as retirement approaches, they and others their age are considering another kind of collective living.

The fiftysomething Arlington couple have joined about 60 area residents interested in building their own "cohousing" community, where neighbors treat one another like members of an extended family.

"I don't want to grow old in a neighborhood where people hide behind fences and act afraid of each other," Mrs. Fountain said. "I want to live in a community where people sit on their front porches and visit."

Cohousing residents own their homes but share a common building that includes a kitchen, dining area and living room.

Community members enjoy meals together two or three times a week and divide up chores.

"Cohousing combines the privacy of one's own home with the security of belonging to a close-knit community where people look after each other," said Neshama Abraham, a Boulder, Colo., consultant who works with cohousing groups. Cohousing communities aren't cookie-cutter projects. Each is unique. Prospective residents are intimately involved in the planning, though they may rely on an architect and developer to handle the technical aspects of design and construction. Projects usually consist of 20 to 30 households.

The idea originated in Europe and is taking root in this country. About 5,000 people live in 93 communities, according to the Cohousing Association of the United States. An additional 107 communities are in some stage of planning or development.

An old twist

The latest twist to the nascent trend is cohousing exclusively for people 55 and older. The first two communities opened in Davis, Calif., and Abingdon, Va., in the past year, and a third is under construction in Boulder.

About 25 others are under discussion, including ones in the Dallas area, East Texas

and the Texas Hill Country.

Experts say cohousing is suited to baby boomers, who will be looking to remain in control of their lives when they retire. Communities reach decisions by group consensus, not by a top-down hierarchy.

A poll by the MetLife Mature Market Institute and AARP found that 22 percent of respondents 50 to 65 would be interested in building a home to share with friends that included private space and communal living areas.

Members of several Dallas-area Unitarian Universalist churches formed the North Texas cohousing group last year because they want to re-create the strong sense of community they remember from their childhood neighborhoods.

"We're trying to build an old-fashioned neighborhood in a new way," said Janet Martinique, a retired customs broker who volunteered to be the group's facilitator.

The group has met several times since fall to learn about cohousing. Once enough people have made commitments to the project, Ms. Martinique said, they will discuss possible sites and consider developers.

The 60 people who have expressed an interest in the community range in age from 50 to 75. Half are retired. Many are Unitarians, though that's not a requirement to join. Almost all have been community activists.

Help with planning

Mary Leggitt, who's 71 and lives in Red Oak, said she looks forward to spending the rest of her life in a community she'll help plan.

Especially appealing to her are the occasional meals the residents will take turns preparing in the common house's kitchen. "You should know that I make a pretty mean dish of chicken," she pointed out.

Ms. Leggitt said conventional senior communities would have made her feel too much like a patient in an institution. In cohousing, she said, she'll keep her independence and have a say in managing the community.

"I'll also have the comfort of knowing my neighbors are nearby if I need help," she said.

In senior cohousing communities, residents pay for their own home health care when they require it. But their collective living arrangements may enable several to share the cost of a single aide.

Experts say cohousing isn't for everyone. The planning often takes two years or longer. Residents meet regularly to talk about what their community should look like and what everyone's responsibilities should be.

"Give-and-take is the name of the game," Ms. Abraham said. "People who think they always should get their way will find they don't have the right personality for cohousing and will weed themselves out of the group."

As a group moves ahead with hiring an architect, lining up a developer and arranging the financing, members cover those costs. Ms. Abraham said the upfront fees usually amount to 5 percent of a home's cost.

Experts say cohousing isn't necessarily cheaper to buy than conventional homes of comparable size, but the communities' emphasis on energy efficiency and shared living arrangements may produce some long-term savings.

"Thirty households might be able to get by with one lawnmower, for example," Ms. Abraham said.

Residents typically pay homeowners' dues to keep up the common areas. Depending on the community, residents do the gardening and maintenance themselves, or they hire outside help.

Cohousing groups can trim months, if not years, off the planning process if they work with developers who understand this kind of housing, but finding such builders can be challenging, according to Charles Durrett, the California architect who's credited with bringing the cohousing concept to America.

Tightrope walk

"Groups walk a tightrope here," he said. "They need to find a developer who will guide them through the process without controlling it."

Cohousing projects don't appeal to many developers because they're small and out of the ordinary, Mr. Durrett said. Still, they appeal to some because they offer builders a group of committed homebuyers and, therefore, less risk.

Jim Sargent, a custom homebuilder in Waxahachie, said he's interested in developing senior cohousing on land he owns in Red Oak. He said he considers most suburban housing a failure and wants to right a wrong.

"Nobody knows his neighbor anymore. That's OK as long as you work. But once you retire, you're alone all day in a big house," he said. "Your friends don't have to be across town; they can be across the courtyard."

Mr. Sargent said he'd like to begin construction by the end of the year and price his homes under \$150,000.

At the ElderSpirit community that opened in Abingdon, Va., in early 2006, residents say their years of planning have paid off. Thirty-eight people from 10 states have moved in and begun to live like members of an extended family.

Homes sold for \$90,000 to \$114,000. Monthly dues run \$150.

When someone becomes sick, a committee of residents coordinates the care that neighbors will give. It might be driving someone to a doctor's appointment, bringing over hot meals or just stopping by to visit.

Patricia Gaskin, 69, sold her house in northern Michigan to live in ElderSpirit. Still grieving from her husband's death three months earlier, she found her new neighbors especially understanding and supportive.

Ms. Gaskin now fills her days with gardening, poetry readings, film history classes and potluck dinners.

"I don't feel so alone anymore," she said. "I'm part of something much larger than myself. I can't tell you what a sense of security that gives me."

FEATURES

Though each cohousing group designs its own community, there are common characteristics.

- Each private home is a complete house in and of itself, but it's usually about half the size of a traditional home.
- The common house becomes an extension of each home, with guest rooms, laundry facilities and workshops that residents can use when needed.
- The private homes are often built around a courtyard, or they're clustered to create broad, open spaces.
- Cars are parked on the outskirts of the property to encourage residents to use the walkways and mingle.

NEXT MEETING

The Dallas cohousing group's next meeting is at 4 p.m. Saturday at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Oak Cliff, 3839 W. Kiest Blvd., Dallas. Anyone interested in attending can contact the group's facilitator, Janet Martinique, at zucchi5684@sbcglobal.net or 972-322-4327.

RESOURCES

Organizations involved in senior cohousing include:

Cohousing Association of the United States: www.cohousing.org

Elder Cohousing Network: www.eldercohousing.org or 303-413-8066

ElderSpirit Community, Abingdon, Va.: www.elderspirit.net or 276-628-8908

Silver Sage Village, Boulder, Colo.: www.silversagevillage.com or 303-449-3232

Chuck Durrett, architect and author of *Senior Cohousing: A Community Approach to Independent Living*: www.mccamant-durrett.com or 530-265-9980