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'Cohousing' bolsters new urban neighborhoods

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Courtesy of McCamant & Durrett Architects

Cohousing communities — developments whose residents share dining facilities, gardens, recreation space, and other amenities — have cropped up in 80 locations in the US since 1991, when the first such project, containing 26 townhouses and community gathering places, was built on a 2.9-acre plot in Davis, California. Now, as the cohousing movement learns how to organize projects faster, cohousing is becoming an increasingly promising option for new urban developments.

Cohousing communities have appeared in a few new urban projects, especially in the West. Wild Sage Cohousing, for example, occupies 1.5 acres in a the 25-acre Holiday neighborhood, in north Boulder, Colorado. Hearthstone Cohousing makes up a 1.6-acre section of the 30-acre Highlands' Garden Village development in Denver. Cohousing seems quite compatible with New Urbanism, since the aims of the two movements overlap. Both try to reduce the isolation of individual households, encourage stronger local ties, and foster a resource-conserving, less wasteful way of living.

New Urban News recently traveled with Kathryn McCamant to FrogSong, a cohousing community completed in November 2003 in the small town of Cotati, in Sonoma County, California. McCamant and her husband, Charles Durrett, are two of the most prolific cohousing architects in the US. After studying in the 1980s in Denmark, where cohousing originated, they led the programming and conceptual design for the first American cohousing project, Muir Commons in Davis, and have since been involved in designing about 50 others. They also wrote a much-read guide, *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*.

FrogSong, produced by the CoHousing Company (a subsidiary of McCamant & Durrett Architects, based in Berkeley, California) and Wonderland Hill Development Company in conjunction with the residents, does many of the same things that new urban projects try to do. It mixes housing of varied prices, sizes, and layouts — from two-bedroom, 900 sq. ft. units to four-bedroom, 1,500 sq. ft. homes. At FrogSong, where the initial prices ranged from \$219,000 to \$380,000, most dwellings are townhouses, but a few units sit on top of ground-level shops. The shops — a café, hair cutter, bakery, and a home décor store among them — face the town's main street and provide services that residents of FrogSong and nearby neighborhoods can walk to. Altogether, the complex's 30 homes, pond, common grounds, 3,600 sq. ft. common house, and 7,500 square feet of retail and commercial space occupy a mere 2.3 acres. They are the antithesis of sprawl.

Cars are de-emphasized. Many of them are relegated to carports at one edge of the project. The development supplies only 1.5 parking spaces per unit. To limit on-site parking, "we generally ask for parking variances," she noted. "We tend not to take standard regulations very seriously."

The biggest advantages of cohousing are social. Residents take turns cooking meals in the common building for the entire group. Eating together three or four evenings a week, people get to know and depend on one another. McCamant and Durrett themselves live in a new cohousing development in Nevada City, California, and previously lived in Doyle Street Cohousing, a 12-unit complex they carved out of an

industrial building in Emeryville, near their office in Berkeley.

“The idea that if you didn’t have enough eggs for breakfast, you would go to the store, is out of the question” in a cohousing community, McCamant said. “You would go to neighbors. Cohousing leads to a less car-dependent world.” As the mother of a 13-year-old, McCamant has found that cohousing makes for a less hectic life. For example, when McCamant has late afternoon or evening appointments, she often leaves her daughter at the group meal or with neighbors.

Typically much of the planning of a cohousing development is done by the residents themselves. “They don’t usually know one another at the start,” McCamant said, “but all of a sudden they’re babysitting for each other.” Ideally the common house is placed where residents walk by, stopping on the way from the parking area to their homes. Pedestrian passages between groups of dwellings are used frequently, further spurring socializing. “We specifically put the garden up front,” she said, noting, “gardens are great connectors.”

FrogSong, with 19 children, includes a shared indoor area for youngsters. It also has two guest rooms, laundry facilities (though each household may install a washer and dryer in its own unit if it wishes), and a large shop with more woodworking tools than most individuals would be able to accumulate on their own. Because so many shared amenities are available, the dwellings themselves can be smaller than conventional houses.

Cohousing complexes tend to be environmentally conscious, sometimes incorporating passive solar heating, handling rainwater runoff naturally (with watercourses, marshes, and ponds), and placing a special emphasis on eco-friendly materials. Not everything is done as a group. Each home has its own kitchen. Nearly all have private patios, porches, balconies, or yards. “This is not a commune by any stretch,” said David Ergo, a software company executive who lives in FrogSong and has his office in one of the development’s storefront spaces. “It’s okay to close your door, to have private time.”

BENEFITS FOR NEW URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Proponents see cohousing as offering several advantages to new urban communities.

- Cohousing reinforces new urban principles. “Walkability is a very high priority,” McCamant said. “New urban developments are very attractive for cohousing. It’s a natural fit.”
- The common building provides a place where the neighborhood as a whole can hold meetings. “There are five homeowner associations at Highlands’ Garden Village, and they all hold their regular meetings in the cohousing common house,” said Chuck Perry of Perry-Rose LLC, which developed the Denver undertaking.
- Cohousers learn the necessity of conducting respectful discussions, and they communicate their civil manner to neighborhood groups. Perry noted, “At a homeowner association meeting in the cohousing common house in which we were discussing a particularly controversial issue involving the whole West Highlands community, the chair of the association — who was a cohousing resident — reminded all of us that we were in his living room and that while we might disagree, we needed to conduct the discussion as we would in our own living rooms with our own families.”
- Cohousing residents require many variances and approvals to carry out their projects, so they tend to become skilled at influencing public officials. This may benefit the overall neighborhood. “It changes the dynamics of the approval process when you can turn out 150 people for public meetings,” McCamant said.

Cohousing also presents challenges. Among them:

- Cohousers tend to want to preserve open areas and to cluster the housing, often in a casual-looking way that differs from the rectilinear layout of many TNDs. Often cohousing units face an internal pedestrian path rather than a public street. In contrast to the new urban placement of parking along alleys, at the back of each lot, or on the streets, cohousers often concentrate most parking at an edge of the complex. A few cohousing projects include alleys, notes Jim Leach, president of Boulder-based Wonderland Hill.

Since cohousing developments are small, their inward-focused plans and peripheral parking areas can be designed so they do not detract substantially from the public realm. Architect Michael Morrissey, a contributor to the New Urban News Technical Page, says, “This model [similar to the Rosewalk section of Seaside, Florida] works well in interstitial parts of a master plan where site conditions are very constrained.” Cohousing can achieve a density similar to that of a TND. Hearthstone and Wild Sage, two of the densest cohousing projects that Leach’s company has produced, have more than 15 units per acre. At Wild Sage the common house has two entrances — one facing the cohousing community’s interior courtyard, the other on a public street.

- Mainstream people initially view cohousing as strange. “From an outsider’s point of view, we are very, very different, even though we have mortgages and kids and jobs,” said Tina Poles, who lives in FrogSong. “Americans are so fearful. What they don’t know, they fear.” Some of this apprehension can be overcome through communication. “We say hi to everyone and chat with others,” said Wild Sage resident Aaron Brockett. “Cohousing creates a culture of friendliness.”

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

“These communities start in any number of different ways,” McCamant said. Often a group of prospective residents comes together to plan a cohousing community, find a site, and get the project built. A resident-led process may move slowly — at the worst, consuming most of a decade. Cohousing specialists, however, are playing a growing role; in many projects, they have shortened the process to two to three years, said Neshama Abraham, president of Abraham Paiss & Associates, a Boulder-based marketing and community development firm that since 1996 has helped developers and cohousing groups across the US. Abraham’s organization, for example, works on teaching group skills such as using consensus decision making, creating vision statements, and establishing the roles and responsibilities of the group, among other services. Her company also acts as a liaison between the group members and the developer, a function that may be especially helpful when the project is a developer’s first foray into cohousing.

“Our experience working with cohousing groups in the United States has demonstrated repeatedly the importance of hiring a development team — developer, architect, lawyer, and other key consultants — that knows residential real estate development and understands the specific needs of the cohousing process,” McCamant and Durrett say in their book.

The latest move forward is development of “elder cohousing,” for people 55 and older, said Abraham. One of the first elder cohousing neighborhoods will be Silver Sage Village, in north Boulder, across the street from Wild Sage. “This places an independent, aging-in-place, supportive neighborhood within a bustling, convenient new urbanist community,” said Abraham. Silver Sage will include apartments for live-in, shared nursing assistance. A workshop on development of elder cohousing is scheduled (see www.ElderCohousing.org).