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Building neighborhood from scratch

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Martha Bowers is helping her 4-year-old daughter, Lizzie, navigate the pool on an inflatable raft while Kay Rodabough adds more ice and rock salt to the ice-cream maker. Dorcas Claunch sits in the shade greeting a handful of arriving guests.

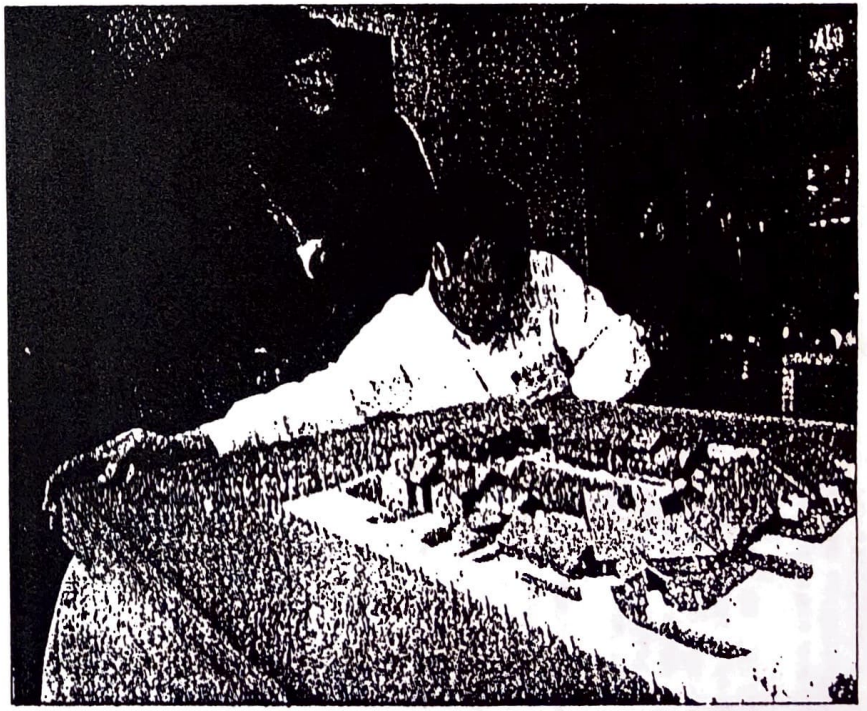
On first glance, the pool party looks like a typical family reunion or block party. Although these dozen party-goers call themselves neighbors, their neighborhood won't be built for almost a year.

Such is life in a cohousing community.

Begun in Denmark in the 1960s, cohousing combines the autonomy of private dwellings with extensive shared facilities. Future residents build a sense of community through years of meetings to choose a site, hire a builder and architect, hammer out rules and decide on design features.

Texas' first cohousing neighbor-

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The Dallas Morning News Richard Michael Pruitt

Architects Terrance J. Wright (right) and Clifford W. Holasek III set up a scale model of the Meadows on Buckingham cohousing community.

New communities offer shared facilities

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hood is in the final planning stages. Construction of nearly two dozen homes will probably begin in late summer on a site located on the Richardson/Garland border.

But that's not stopping the future residents from already acting, well, neighborly.

"I like getting to know the neighbors before ever moving in," says Ruth Davenport, a future resident of the development to be called Meadows on Buckingham. "I know these people better than I've known people in my current neighborhood, and I've lived there 12 years."

Love thy neighbor

Cohousing neighborhoods are designed to foster a sense of community, according to proponents. Typically, the neighborhoods include walkways and a shared greenspace in front of the homes instead of streets (with cars limited to the periphery), front porches and no fences.

Many of the neighborhoods include a common house or "clubhouse" equipped with a library, workshop, guest rooms, kitchen and dining room, where several evening meals are prepared and shared by residents.

"My current neighborhood is pretty typical for Dallas, with all the privacy fences, and driveways that cross the sidewalk for half of the houses, alley entrances for the other half," says Ms. Bowers, whose family was among the first to commit to the new neighborhood.

"I had safety concerns once Lizzie started riding her tricycle. I know of two kids under the age of 10 who have been hit when coming out from behind the fences — people in cars can't see around them."

At the Meadows, youngsters will be able to play in the front greenspace without the worry of cars; all the kitchens face the green-space, "so we can watch our children from there if we need to," Ms. Bowers says.

Ms. Rodabough was active in getting her current Carrollton neighborhood to form a neighborhood association. But she says they lack a community house that would accommodate socializing and meetings. "No one's house or yard is big enough. I like being able to influence the design of the new neighborhood to make the housing more friendly."

Real estate is traditionally location, location, location. But for cohousing communities, "at the beginning, usually the location hasn't even been chosen yet," says Ms. Rodabough. "People have to be convinced to buy into something that doesn't exist yet, that they can't even see."

The cohousing concept was introduced in the United States in the 1980s by the California husband-and-wife architecture team of Kathryn McCamant and Chuck Durrett. Since then, 29 cohousing communities have been built, 26 more are under construction and more than 150 are in the planning stages, Mr. Durrett says.

"I'm amazed at how many people like to be in on the long process of planning a cohousing community," says Mr. Durrett, who travels the country helping design cohousing neighborhoods.

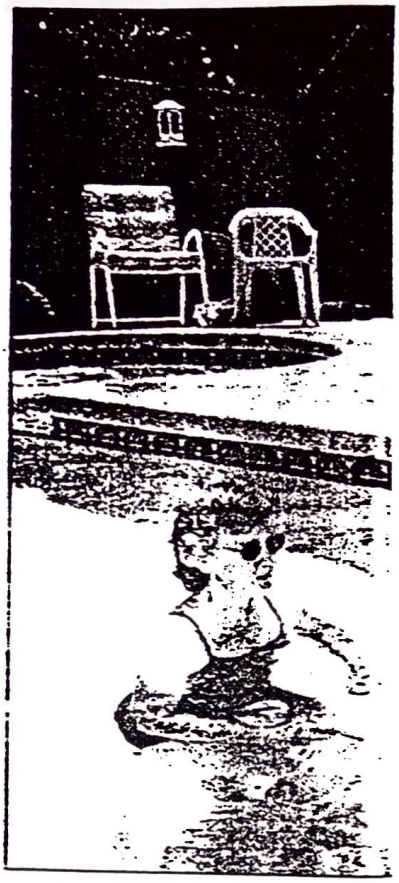
Tony Cortese, associate professor of sociology at Southern Methodist University, sees cohousing as a reaction by consumers "against large developments, the chain stores and strip malls and large conglomerates buying up businesses."

Planting seeds

Typically, new cohousing neighborhoods start with a small, dedicated core group who exchange information with other cohousing leaders and established groups around the country. The Meadows on Buckingham, for example, began after Ms. Rodabough visited cohousing neighborhoods in Denmark.

"I was attracted to the intergenerational makeup of these communities," she says. "Because so many families are fragmented today, with children living across the country from grandparents, children need to see healthy aging — see how people weather life's difficulties. I wanted to help create a community where this would be possible."

A series of conferences in 1993 organized by Ms. Rodabough and supported by the American Association of Retired Persons and various other community associations attracted the group's first members. As Ms. Rodabough had hoped, the ages of future Meadows residents range from 4 to 88, and they include stay-at-home moms, single and married professionals, retirees and single parents.



Although their cohousing co daughter, Elizabeth, are alre

"It will enhance the quality of my life and my daughter's," says Ruth Mintline, a single parent.

"I certainly couldn't depend on most of the neighbors I've known to look in on Erin if she was going to be home alone. Or I couldn't call them and say, 'I'm going to be late — would you mind letting my dog out?'"

Ms. Mintline feels she could do that in cohousing and also looks forward to sharing the mowers, garden tools and workshop.

Purchasing members of the Meadows currently pay a nonrefundable $1,000 reservation fee, which goes toward the down payment on their home; a one-time membership fee of $100; and monthly dues of $15. That doesn't include additional money for architects and advertising and other expenses. Members are also expected to participate on at least one committee, such as marketing or finance. After