July / August 2001 www.hopedance.org #29

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Cohousing Neighborhoods Provide Sustainability and Affordability

By Neshama Abraham Paiss

According to Margaret Mead, the world-renowned cultural anthropologist, for 99% of human history, humans have lived in tribes, extended families and small villages. Given this, how can we be surprised that today's life-styles are not only unsustainable, but also downright destructive to both our environment and ourselves.

As a native New Yorker and a 15-year resident of a Manhattan apartment, it was commonplace to come home from my fast-paced job, say hello to the doorman, perhaps greet a fellow resident in the elevator, and then disappear into my 750-square-foot flat, not to see anyone again until the next morning. Is that any way to live? Yet, how many people do live without any connection to their neighbors?

For me, all of this changed when I moved into a cohousing community in Boulder, Colorado, 3-1/2 years ago. And now, there is a new cohousing neighborhood well underway in Paso Robles: Oak Creek Commons, a neighborhood which combines the advantages of private home ownership with the benefits of shared resources and activities. It is a rare blending of privacy and community not easily available in any of the standard neighborhoods springing up all over this country.

Cohousing neighborhoods offer a more sustainable lifestyle in a number of different ways. Since moving into my cohousing neighborhood I see and interact with my neighbors everyday. These interactions are usually spontaneous and make my life fuller and more meaningful — all qualities I attribute to sustainability. I define sustainable as something one could "will to be a universal," as the philosopher Emanuel Kant would say; something that if repeated over and over again would enhance, not take away from personal lives or the environment.



Weekly story telling in the Nomad courtyard for kids in the neighborhood.

I see a number of ways in which cohousing contributes to a more sustainable lifestyle. Examples include: optional community meals, wise land use, built-in playmates for my children, integration of work and life (many cohousers work from home) and closer ties with neighbors.

By having the opportunity to eat dinners several times each week with my neighbors, I end up simplifying my life and saving time, money and resources. I appreciate not having to cook every night, only paying $3.50-$5.00 per adult (less than a third for a dinner out with our family) and knowing that there is only one stove being used to feed our entire neighborhood.

Where a typical developer might spread out six single-family detached homes across a property with plenty of fences dividing each private lot, a cohousing community will tightly cluster the homes keeping most of the land as open space for everyone to enjoy

During the last 10 years since the first cohousing community was completed in the U.S., there has been a growing trend for cohousing neighborhoods to be built in urban in-fill sites where the land was previously vacant or where an old building once stood. Our community in Boulder is a good example. Instead of having more urban sprawl, we built our 11-household neighborhood on a one-acre site next to a community theatre. By re-developing our existing neighborhoods, we can keep urban sprawl to a minimum and increase sustainable land use.

It has been well documented that the automobile is one of the largest contributors to urban sprawl and air pollution in most major cities. A study sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency about the Nyland Cohousing Community just north of Denver, Colorado, found that cohousers made 25% less auto trips as compared to a neighborhood of similar size (42 households). Imagine the profound effect on our environment if neighborhoods were designed to discourage car use?



Nomad cohousing's central courtyard in springtime.

All of the 52 completed cohousing neighborhoods in North America have pedestrian pathways that lead to the homes with cars parked on the periphery of the property so they have the smallest impact possible on resident life.

Because of the resident's commitment to environmental sustainability, the vast majority of cohousing communities have built-in systems to recycle a substantial portion of their solid waste. At my community, we not only recycle the typical newspaper, glass, metal and office paper, but also have a team of people who take paperboard, cardboard, plastic containers, magazines and household hazardous waste to our community-wide recycling center.

All of our food waste is used in our composting center. This spring will be the second year we have made organic compost for our garden. Over this past weekend, the children helped put a fresh batch of the compost on the garden to prep the soil. It felt wonderful to show them how leftover food can be recycled back into the soil for our vegetable garden and then it will return to our bodies as food again.

While our cohousing community is contributing to sustainability, is this lifestyle also more affordable than a typical single family home? The answer is yes for a number of reasons. First, the cost to buy a new home in a cohousing neighborhood is comparable to the purchase price of a condominium, and less than a new single detached home. However, for the cost of your home, you are also an equal owner in all of the common land and the common buildings. In a community such as Oak Creek Commons in Paso Robles, residents will have shared ownership in 14 acres of land, plus a pool, hot tub, a large Common House for community meals, guest rooms for overnight friends and family, and spaces for yoga, art or music.

Second, even greater savings come when you look at the ongoing costs of living in a cohousing community. Because cohousing residents strive to reduce their impact on the environment, homes in a typical cohousing community are built to be resource- and energy-efficient. Making the homes very "tight" often does this, along with high quality windows and a

passive solar design oriented to maximize heating during the winter. In the Nyland Cohousing Community mentioned above, the utility bills were 50% less than comparable size homes in nearby neighborhoods.

Plus, because cohousers typically maintain their property themselves, the cost of hiring people to mow lawns or stain porches and decks is eliminated. This is often accomplished by holding twice-monthly workdays where everyone who is available comes out to help. What would normally seem like a chore if you were alone, becomes a lot of fun when eight to 10 people are out there with you. Moreover, we purchase our lawn mowers jointly, instead of one for each household, and share equally the cost of buying fertilizer, trees and flowers.

Having two young daughters, I notice how much easier it is to live in such a close-nit neighborhood. I don't need to make phone calls, coordinate schedules or take my children someplace for a "play date." All we need to do is go outside in the grassy courtyard in front of our homes and there's a group of kids to play with. In addition, my daughters are forming strong relationships, not just with neighboring children, but with other adults who have become an extended family.

Looking back over the past couple of years, I have experienced enormous personal growth because of staying open in my communications with my neighbors and resolving conflicts as soon as possible. Plus, I am raising my children in a community setting which is the way we lived for eons before we became "civilized."

The new cohousing neighborhood being created in Paso Robles Oak Creek Commons — offers a chance to try this lifestyle. As of this writing, the Group has 26 committed households of the 31 needed to complete the community. They will be building 31 townhomes and there are 5 lots for single detached homes. The site for the future neighborhood will facilitate the practices of sustainable land use mentioned above: they have a 14-acre property and will only build on four acres, keeping 10 as open space for organic orchards, edible landscaping, and vegetable gardens.

The Oak Creek Commons Group is also committed to creating a strong community before moving in. The have monthly business meetings and monthly "open heart" time for non-business sharings. Site tours and orientations for new people are on Sunday mornings at 10 a.m. For more information, please call 800-489-8715 or visit their website at www.oakcreekcommons.org. ❍

Neshama Abraham lives in the Nomad Cohousing Community in Boulder, CO. She and her husband are raising two daughters.

Life in Cohousing - The First 10 Years

2001 North American Cohousing Conference
Friday, July 20-Monday, July 23, 2001
Location: College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley Campus (also a co-sponsor of conference).

Featured activities include:
Opening night address with **Eric Utne**, founder of the Utne Reader on "Changing the World and Yourself by Creating Community" Friday, July 20, 7:30pm, International House Auditorium at UC Berkeley, 2299 Piedmont Ave. $10 at door only

"Getting It Built Workshop," designed for people wanting an overview of the cohousing concept and to know what it takes to go from idea to reality. This day-long workshop will be presented by the founders of cohousing in North America — Kathyrn McCamant and Chuck Durrett, autho.s of theCohousing book and principle architects of The CoHousing Company based in Berkeley.

Professional's Day on Monday, July 23, will be devoted to those individuals and organizations working professionally to help cohousing communities get built. This session is geared toward architects, builders, developers, group process facilitators and financial, legal, marketing and public relations professionals.

Two dozen additional presentations and workshops for people wanting to start a cohousing neighborhood to those already living in cohousing. Presenters and attendees will include cohousers from around the globe. Workshops topics include marketing and membership, finding a site, common house design, affordability, conflict resolution and much more.

Childcare will be provided at a minimal price per child per day. Special lodging rates with meal packages are available. Register via the internet at www.cohousing.org or 303-413-9227 Additional information by phone at 510-834-7399.