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Builder bringing people together

Co-housing communities involve neighbors in home design, each other's lives

By John Rebchook
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Veteran home builder Jim Leach has lived in the same house in his Wonderland Hill development in north Boulder for 25 years, and he's close to his neighbors.

"We might get together for meals about six times a year," said Leach, 53, principal of Wonderland Homes.

That's more than most people do, but nothing like the communal repasts in co-housing communities, which are Leach's major focus these days. Indeed, he is a national leader of the movement, which aims to duplicate the close-knit communities once found in villages and small towns.

"In a co-housing community, you might get together with your neighbors for dinner three times a week," Leach said.

He mused that the press loves to label co-housing as a '90s version of hippie communes.

Not so, said Leach, who graduated from the University of Colorado in 1964 and received his master's degree in architectural engineering a year later from Stanford University.

"Other than living more efficiently and more sustainably, with less impact on the environment, there is no value system attached to co-housing," he said. "That's a big difference because in the old hippie communes of the '60s, people lived and worked there and shared a belief that it was the way to make the world a better place by being self-sustaining."

In today's co-housing, you're more likely to find architects and attorneys living next to artists and appraisers who like the idea of knowing their neighbors better.

Often, a group of 20 to 30 people will buy the land and hire a professional like Wonderland Homes to develop the homes. Typically, the community is evenly divided between working couples with kids, singles and retirees, which makes for well-meshed group dynamics, he said.

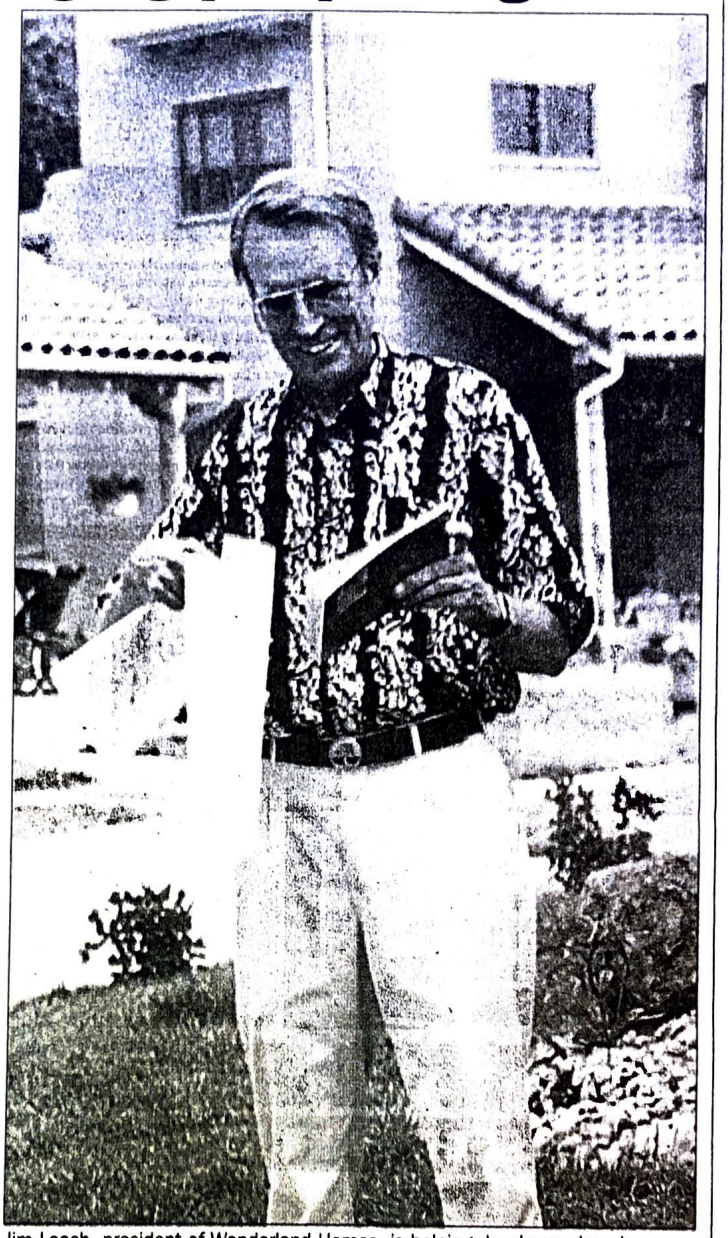
Leach, a recreational runner who tries to never miss a Bolder Boulder 10-K race, increasingly has been a consultant for builders across the country. Locally, he has developed Nomad Co-housing in Boulder, Nyland in Lafayette, Highline Crossing in Littleton, Greyrock Commons in Fort Collins and Harmony Village in Golden. He's also hoping to build co-housing at Stapleton.

He also is developing the Tierra Nueva Co-housing development near San Luis Obispo, Calif.

"It's all passive solar and sits in an avocado grove about a mile from the beach," Leach said. "The 27 owners are from all over the map: One guy works in a nuclear plant, there's an artist, a guy who works with the mentally handicapped, some lawyers and a screenplay writer."

More often than not, neighbors will be involved in the design, building and construction. In addition to sharing frequent meals — usually in a building set aside for gatherings like that — often automobiles are allowed to be parked only on the side of buildings to provide safer areas for children to romp.

"With co-housing, people know what is going up behind the drywall," Leach said. "Although the development guidelines are similar to any master-planned community, people tend to choose upgraded materials and features. I tell people that they can typically expect the cost on a per-square basis to be 10 percent to 15 percent higher than in a typical home."



Jim Leach, president of Wonderland Homes, is helping develop co-housing communities, neighborhoods that strive to be easier on the environment and reproduce the close-knit feel of small towns.

Leach, who continues to build everything from homes under $100,000 to custom homes (former Denver Nuggets' Danny Schayes bought one of his homes several years ago because he liked the way it flowed), got involved with co-housing eight years ago at Nyland after being contacted by residents in the fledgling community.

The closest he ever came to living in a commune was when he was an undergraduate at CU and he and his college buddies thought it would be cool to all live near each other when they graduated.

"Anyone in his 50s can claim to be a former hippie," Leach said. "But I really just missed that real hippie and protest era. I missed the draft and Vietnam because at that time (John F.) Kennedy was giving exemptions to you if you were married. I also got an exemption for being in school."

He is, however, a part-owner in a duplex near Silverthorne that is owned by several families.

"It's kind of a mini co-housing deal. We each get it for one week a month."

Co-housing was a natural extension for his company, which built one of the state's first master-planned communities in 1969.

"We were already doing energy-efficient homes and we were a green builder, and so co-housing was a good fit," Leach said. "We became the developer and builder for that community and put together a whole system and process. It's important to have a lot of structure. It keeps everyone from getting wild-eyed and out of control."

Despite the growth in co-housing, Leach admitted it's a minuscule part of the market.

"We might have 100 units in the Denver area," he said. "It's far less than 1 percent of the market."