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The 27-home Sante Fe-style neighborhood at Harmony Village Cohousing, located at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in Golden, CO, was completed in 1996.



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A resident-designed and installed multi-colored brick pedestrian path leads up to the Common House where regular group meals and social activities take place at Harmony Village Cohousing in Golden, CO.

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COHOUSING FACT SHEET

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Definition of Cohousing

Cohousing communities are small-scale neighborhoods created with resident participation which provide a balance between personal privacy and living in a close-knit community of neighbors. Individual homes enjoy convenient access to shared space, including a "common house" with facilities such as a kitchen, dining room, a play room for children, workshops, guest rooms, office space, a sitting area and laundry. Each home is self sufficient with a complete kitchen. In addition, cohousing neighborhoods typically offer optional resident cooked meals in the common house several times a week.

Six Characteristics of Cohousing Communities

According to Kathryn McCamant, co-author of *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* (Ten Speed Press, 1988), cohousing is characterized by six prevailing qualities:

1. Resident participation in the creation of the neighborhood
2. A site design which encourages community interaction
3. Extensive common facilities
4. Full resident management in running the neighborhood
5. Non-hierarchical decision making (most decisions are made by consensus)
6. Residents do not rely on the community for their income source (although many cohousers work from home).

History of Cohousing in the U.S.

The concept of cohousing was introduced to the U.S. in 1988 with the publishing of the Cohousing book (see above) by Kathryn McCamant and Chuck Durrett. This husband/wife design team spent more than a year studying and photographing over 50 cohousing communities in Denmark, where the idea originated. McCamant and Durrett have since founded The CoHousing Company, based in Berkeley, CA, which specializes in the design and development of cohousing neighborhoods. Residents moved into the first American cohousing village in 1991 (Muir Commons in Davis, CA).

Demographic Figures

Currently there are 45 completed cohousing neighborhoods in North America, including 40 in the U.S and five (5) in Canada. States having the highest concentration of completed cohousing neighborhoods: California (9), Washington (7) Colorado (6) and Massachusetts (5). Thirty (30) neighborhoods are now under construction in the U.S. and an estimated 150 other cohousing groups are in various stages of the development process. These stages range from newly formed groups whose members are just being introduced to the concept of cohousing, to those that are well along in the process and have identified or have a contractual arrangement on a site.

Completed Communities and Move-in Dates:

Muir Commons; Davis, CA (8/91)
Doyle Street; Emeryville, CA (4/92)
Southside Park; Sacramento, CA (8/93)
N Street Cohousing; Davis, CA (on-going)
Valley Oaks Village; Chico, CA (5/96)
Marsh Commons; Arcata, CA (5/96)
Sacramento Street; Berkeley, CA (7/97)
Los Angeles EcoVillage; Los Angeles, CA (ongoing) *
Tierra Nueva; Oceano (San Luis Obispo), CA (12/98)
Santa Cruz Cohousing; Santa Cruz, CA (1998) *
Nyland Cohousing; Lafayette, CO (4/93)
Common Ground; Aspen, CO (9/94)
Highline Crossing; Littleton, CO (7/97)
Greyrock Commons; Fort Collins, CO (3/97)
Sunward Cohousing; Ann Arbor, MI (1998) *
Monterey Cohousing; Minneapolis, MN (phased)
Arcadia; Carborro, NC (2/99)
Westwood Cohousing; Asheville, NC (1998) *
Commons on the Alameda; Santa Fe, NM (10/97)
EcoVillage at Ithaca; Ithaca, NY (8/97 completed first of five neighborhoods)
Cantine's Island Cohousing; Brooklyn, NY (1998) *
On-Going Concerns; Portland, OR (4/92)
Trillium Hollow; Portland, OR (10/98)
Lake Claire Cohousing; Atlanta, GA (5/97)
Harrambee Homes; Chicago, IL (1998) *
New View Cohousing; West Acton, MA (11/96)
Pioneer Valley; Amherst, MA (10/94)
Pine Street; Amherst, MA (10/94)
Harmony Village; Golden, CO (6/97)

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Nomad Cohousing; Boulder, CO (1/98)
Cambridge Cohousing; Cambridge, MA (1998) *
Wasatch; Salt Lake City, UT (10/98)
Winslow; Winslow, WA (4/92)
Puget Ridge; Seattle, WA (10/94)
Sharingwood; Snohomish, WA (phased)
Rosewind Cohousing; Port Townsend, WA (on-going)
Songaia Cohousing; Bothell, WA (____) *
Talking Circle; Langley, WA (4/93)
Vashon Cohousing; Vashon Island, WA (phased)
Cardiff Place; Victoria, BC (10/94)
Heddle Road; Nelson, BC (____) *
WindSong; Langley (Vancouver), BC (7/96)
Keetenay Lake; Nelson, BC (____) *
Quayside Village; North Vancouver, BC (1998) *
Terra Firma; Ottawa, ON, (1998) *

Location of Cohousing Neighborhoods

Cohousing neighborhoods are located in urban, suburban, semi-rural and rural settings throughout North America. There are a growing number of projects in urban infill sites that help uplift the area economically and provide a renewed sense of community. Examples include: Boulder, CO; Sacramento, CA; Lake Claire, GA; Berkeley, CA; Emeryville, CA; Chicago, IL; Cambridge, MA; Asheville, NC; and Seattle, WA.

Economic Diversity and Affordability

Residents in cohousing neighborhoods typically have a range of income levels. This economic diversity is reflected in the size and price of homes, which can vary from a one bedroom to a three plus bedroom within the same cohousing village. Homes in a cohousing neighborhood may cost slightly more than the price of a comparable house in the local area. However the cohousing homeowner also gains from the added value of shared ownership in all of the common areas. Common spaces include the common house and its guest rooms, office space and meeting area, as well as being joint owners of the common land, which can be as much as 220 acres (Heartwood Cohousing in San Juan, CO).

To make cohousing more affordable, seven projects have received subsidies from the local city or state government:

Common Ground (Aspen, CO)
Nomad Cohousing (Boulder, CO)
Midtown Cohousing (Denver, CO)
Harrambee Homes (Chicago, IL)
Pioneer Valley (Amherst, MA)
Muir Commons (Davis, CA)
Southside Park (Sacramento, CA)

Profile of "Typical" Cohousers

Cohousers fit the description of the new "cultural creatives," who are actively involved in community organizations and activities, find innovative solutions in creating their living situations, and who place a high value on the quality of their life. Many cohousers work from home; many have higher than average educations; many chose to read over watching television. Another trend is the increasing use of e-mail for communication and the growing use of websites for disseminating information to existing and potential members.

Resale value

Informal tracking of the resale value of homes in cohousing neighborhoods over the last eight years has demonstrated that cohousing homes hold their value at or above other new housing in the local market. This value can be attributed to the advantage of living in a setting where you know your neighbors and have ongoing social and safety benefits. Appraisers are beginning to account for these factors when placing an initial value on a cohousing dwelling. Most cohousing residents live in their home for a miniumum of five years with little turnover among homeowners.

Streamlined Development Model

Historically, it has taken between four to eight years from the time of a group's first meeting until residents move into their neighborhood. Wonderland Hill Development Company of Boulder, CO, under the direction of president Jim Leach, has assembled a national team of cohousing experts to help reduce the development timeline to approximately two (2) years. This latest evolution, called "the streamlined approach," stemmed from the company's experience in developing five completed communities in Colorado -- Nyland Cohousing, Lafayette; Greyrock Commons, Fort Collins; Harmony Village, Golden; Highline Crossing, Littleton; Nomad Cohousing, Boulder, and most recently, Tierra Nueva in San Luis Obispo, CA. The streamlined approach is based on involving, from the onset, experienced professionals working alongside group members.

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Building Sustainable Communities through Media, Marketing and Group Process

Frequently Asked Questions About Cohousing

What is Cohousing?
Cohousing is a form of collaborative housing that offers residents an old-fashioned sense of neighborhood. In cohousing, residents know their neighbors well and there is a strong sense of community that is typically absent in contemporary cities and suburbs.

Cohousing communities consist of private, fully-equipped dwellings and extensive common amenities including a shared club house or Common House and recreation areas. What makes cohousing unique is the strong partnership which is created among the future residents and the professional team. Together the residents and professionals create a custom built close-knit neighborhood managed by the members with a healthy blend of privacy and community.

What is Elder Cohousing?
Cohousing came to the U.S. 15 years ago from Denmark where cohousing is a very successful and established housing model for the senior population. In Denmark, the intergenerational communities gave birth to an age-specific cohousing option for active elders age 50-65. The first elder-only cohousing neighborhoods are just now emerging in the U.S. Each Elder Cohousing neighborhood will be unique based on the needs and interests of the individual members. It is likely that in Elder Cohousing in the U.S. there will be deeper conversations about a variety of topics, including end-of-life issues.

What are the Defining Characteristics of Cohousing?
1. Participatory Process. Future residents participate in the design of the community so it meets their needs.

2. Neighborhood Design. The physical layout and orientation of the buildings and the site plan encourages a sense of community. For example, the private residences are typically clustered on the land leaving more shared open space; the dwellings usually face each other across a pedestrian street or courtyard; and cars are parked on the periphery so people walk to and from their homes to encourage social interaction. The Common House is often visible from the front door of every dwelling. But more important than the physical layout, the intent is to create a strong sense of community.
Elder Cohousing communities are being designed with the special needs of older adults in mind, such as railings, excellent lighting and wheelchair and American Disabilites Act (ADA) accessibility both around the neighborhood and in the private homes.

3. Common Facilities. Common facilities are designed for daily use, are an integral part of the community, and supplement the private residences. The community-owned Common House typically includes a large common kitchen, attractive dining area, comfortable sitting area/library, laundry and may also have a workshop, library, exercise room, crafts room and one or two overnight guest rooms for visiting friends and family. In Elder Cohousing, the Common House may well be designed with main level living quarters for residents whose health changes and who may need to move into the main building. The Common House may also have office and treatment space for healthcare professionals to provide services to residents during the day. Cohousing communities usually have well-landscaped lawns, and organic vegetable gardens. Since the buildings are clustered, larger sites may retain several acres of undeveloped shared open space.

4. Resident Management. Cohousing communities are managed by their residents. Members also do most of the work required to maintain the property, participate in the preparation of common meals, and meet regularly to develop policies and handle business matters for the neighborhood.

5. Non-Hierarchical Structure and Decision-Making. There are leadership roles in cohousing communities, but no one person or persons has authority over others. Most groups start with one or two "burning souls." As people join the group, each person takes on one or more roles consistent with his or her skills, abilities or interests. Most cohousing communities make all of their decisions by consensus. Many groups have a policy for voting if consensus cannot be reached after a number of attempts.

6. No Shared Community Economy. The community is not a source of income for its members. Occasionally, a cohousing group will pay one of its own members to do a specific task (usually time limited such as building repair or maintenance). More typically the task will simply be considered that member's contribution to the shared responsibilities (i.e. handling insurance matters for the homeowner's association).

How does cohousing differ from other kinds of living arrangements?
Some people like to describe cohousing as "intentional neighborhoods." This is probably because the term "intentional community" frequently connotes a shared religious, political or social ideology rather than simply the desire to have a strong sense of community with your neighbors. Cohousing residents privately own their homes and there is no pooling of income, except to pay one's monthly homeowner dues as one does in a typical Homeowner's Association.

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How do I get started?
Some cohousing communities are initiated or driven by a developer who already has a piece of land. Other neighborhoods begin by a core group of future residents who hold the vision of cohousing and contact cohousing professionals to help them establish the basic systems, roles and responsibilities of members. If a pedestrian-oriented community was created without resident participation in the planning stage it may be "cohousing-inspired," but it is not a cohousing community.

If I live in cohousing, will I have my own kitchen?
You may well wonder why we have put this question on this sheet. Frankly, because it is one of the most frequently asked questions of cohousing enthusiasts. Yes, each residence has a fully equipped private kitchen. In addition, there is a common kitchen, where community meals are usually prepared and served in the Common House two or three times each week.

How is home ownership legally structured in cohousing communities?
Most cohousing communities in the U.S. are structured as condominiums or planned unit developments (PUDs). In what is called the "lot development model," members jointly own the common property and facilities, and are the sole owners of the lot on which they build their own single detached house. Sometimes members own just the land directly under their homes (the footprint), or that plus a small back or front "private" yard. In "retrofit" cohousing, existing buildings are renovated so that certain spaces can be used by the whole community for its common activities.

How do people find a particular cohousing group?
For the most part, people learn about cohousing through grassroots marketing, i.e. a friend tells another friend. Once someone becomes interested in the idea, groups usually require attendance at an orientation, several regular business meetings, and perhaps some involvement with a committee before a household can apply for membership. Some groups have associate memberships that require little in the way of a financial contribution, but do give potential members the chance to participate fully in the planning process, and to get to know others in the group. A full membership usually requires an equity investment, part or all of which is credited toward the final purchase price of your house. This investment can range from a few thousand dollars up to 15% of the final cost of your home.

The advantage of joining a group early is that the earlier you enter the community, the more opportunity you have to be part of the design and planning. Early membership also gives you an earlier place in the order in which homes will be selected. Many groups offer a financial incentive for joining the project early in the way of a discount applied to your final house price.

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What if a member wants to move out of the community and sell her home?

Except in a cooperative, any household leaving the community can legally sell their property to anyone they choose. Some communities maintain a "right of first refusal" which means that the seller must offer his or her home for purchase by the community or to an individual within the community before putting it on the open market. In other communities, residents sign a voluntary agreement that they will not lease or sell their house to a person or persons who do not wish to participate fully in the community. Some communities maintain a waiting list of persons interested in being informed if a home becomes available and it is to the benefit of the seller and to the rest of the community if everyone lends a hand in finding new owners. When it comes to re-sales, experience has shown that homes in cohousing have held their value and have appreciated faster than the market as a whole.

Tell me about common meals.

Cohousing communities usually serve between two and three meals per week in their Common House. The meals are prepared by a team of two to four persons for diners who sign up for the meal in advance. Eating common meals is always voluntary. In a few communities cooking is also voluntary, but in most cases it is not. However, there is a good deal of variation in the way the cooking (and cleanup) responsibilities are structured. Typically, each adult is involved in meal preparation and/or cleanup once every five or six weeks. There is also variation in how the common meals are paid for, but one only pays for the meals one eats. Common dinner prices average $5.00.

Many cohousing residents feel that common meals are the glue that holds cohousing communities together. Many communities encourage their cooks to provide a vegetarian option at most meals. Special food requirements are respected, although not every one of them will necessarily be accommodated at every meal.

How large are cohousing communities and who lives there?

Elder Cohousing communities in Denmark typically range in size from 14-20 homes as compared to intergenerational communities which work best with 15 to 35 households. Communities that are considerably smaller and considerably larger have certain advantages over those that are in the range of what has been thought to be "ideal." In a smaller community, you can be sure that you will know every person quite well if you choose to. A larger community usually has enough resources to support more extensive common facilities and enough people to create a greater variety of community activities. Residents of Elder Cohousing neighborhoods are 50 and above, including singles and couples.

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Is cohousing affordable?
The simple answer to this question is sometimes. Since most cohousing communities are new construction and often have very extensive common facilities they typically end up costing the same as homes in the surrounding neighborhood. However, in a number of communities, because of subsidies from either outside the project or from internal sources, truly affordable homes have been built. For Elders, cohousing is much less expensive than the current cost of institutional alternatives. People choose cohousing not for a custom home, but to get a custom-designed and built neighborhood. Many cohousers have the opportunity to work closely with the architect designing their future home as part of the overall design process. In addition, many cohousing groups have a desire to build as "green" as possible, and seek out affordable environmentally sound materials and building techniques. Because homes are built to be highly energy efficient, utility bills are typically 50% less than comparable houses in the surrounding area. Cohousing homes may use radiant floor heating for keeping warm in the winter and ceiling fans for staying the home cool in the summer.

How does cohousing provide for residents of different economic means?
In some states, counties or municipalities and developers of multi-family housing are required by law to have a certain percentage of the new units meet a standard for "affordability." People in cohousing usually welcome this, and often wish they could make even more than the required percentage affordable. Unfortunately, unless the developer can get public or private subsidies or grants, there is a limit to how many affordable units can be built without driving everyone else's costs sky high. Still, at least half a dozen completed cohousing projects in the U.S. have received subsidies from the state. The ElderSpirit Community in Abingdon, Virginia was very successful in obtaining significant state funding for its members and is available to coach other Elder Communities in learning about their model.

What about safety and security?
Because residents know all their neighbors, cohousing provides an excellent neighborhood watch system built in to the communities. Someone who is not a resident is very easily recognized. Everyone helps protect and maintain the property when a resident is out of town. Even in an urban area, many cohousers are comfortable leaving their front door unlocked when they go to the Common House to pick up laundry or mail. Cohousing residents report how safe they feel their community is for day-to-day living.

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Adapted from the web site of The Cohousing Association of the United States - www.cohousing.org