



COHOUSING FACT SHEET

For Immediate Release
Last Updated: April 2007

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Definition of Cohousing

Cohousing communities are small-scale neighborhoods created with the active involvement of the resident residents. Neighbors know each other before move-in, are co-creators of the project, and continue to work closely together after they move in. An important aspect of living in a cohousing community is the balance between personal privacy and life in a close-knit community of neighbors. In cohousing, individual homes are privately owned or rented and are self-sufficient with a complete kitchen, dining area, bedroom, bathroom, etc. In addition, members enjoy convenient access to shared amenities, including a community-owned club house or Common House which may include a large kitchen, multi-purpose dining area, multi-media space, workshop for shared tools and bike repair, rooms for overnight friends and family, office space, a sitting area/library, healthcare treatment room(s) and laundry facilities.

Six Characteristics of Cohousing Communities

1. **Participatory Process:** resident participation in the creation of the neighborhood.
2. **Design Facilitates Community:** Neighborhoods are designed with sitting spaces and a pedestrian path which encourage social interaction.
3. **Private Homes Supplemented by Extensive Common Facilities:** People own their own home and benefit from shared land, community gardens, workshop area, parking and the Common House.
4. **Complete Resident Management:** Residents manage the neighborhood after move in through their Home Owner's Association.
5. **Non-Hierarchical Structure:** Community members have leadership roles, but no single person is the leader of the community. In addition, residents work together to make collaborative decisions most often choosing consensus as their decision-making model.
6. **Separate Income Sources:** Although a large number of cohousing residents work from home, neighbors do not rely on the community for their source of income. Cohousing is not a commune!

Benefits of Community Living

Cohousing neighborhoods support people in all stages of life, including singles, couples, families, empty nesters and retirees. People join a cohousing community to enjoy a closer connection with their neighbors as well as to avoid the loneliness and isolation that is unfortunately so prevalent in modern society. Cohousing neighborhoods offer a healthy balance between privacy and community, and are being looked as an important housing model for social and environmental sustainability. Cohousing elders report that they “stay young longer” by actively participating in community life and by having regular contact with young people. Retirees are increasingly choosing cohousing as a nurturing environment in which to spend the last phase of their life. In the 90 multi-generational cohousing communities in the U.S. families appreciate the benefit of having their children growing up in a safe and nurturing environment. Singles enjoy close friendships and a social life right in the neighborhood. Retirees and empty nesters benefit from living in a close-knit nurturing neighborhood where they can actively participate in village life with people of all ages, and “age in community.” For all residents, safety is a major advantage of living in a cohousing community. Residents know their neighbors and watch out for each other and their property when someone is away.

Challenges of Cohousing

Creating and living in cohousing is not for everyone. Challenges include: the time commitment required to participate in regular meetings to give input in your future home and neighborhood; the willingness to relinquish some degree of autonomy in the creation of one's home so that you are creating a "custom neighborhood" rather than a custom home; being able to find the balance between one's personal privacy and being part of a community; and the need for strong communication skills in dealing with different personality styles, setting personal boundaries and learning to work effectively with others.

History of Cohousing in the U.S.

Originally a Danish idea, the concept of cohousing was introduced to the U.S. in 1988 with the publishing of the book *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* by Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, a husband and wife architectural team who spent a year studying and photographing over 50 cohousing communities in Denmark. Cohousing is now in its second decade in the U.S. The first cohousing neighborhood in the nation is Muir Commons located in Davis, California, completed in 1991. More information is available via the website of The Cohousing Association of the United States. (<http://www.cohousing.org>).

Location of Cohousing Neighborhoods

Cohousing neighborhoods are located in urban, suburban, semi-rural and rural settings throughout North America, Europe and Asia. There are a growing number of cohousing projects in urban in-fill sites. These projects help reduce urban sprawl and rejuvenate the surrounding neighborhood by providing a renewed experience of community. Cities with urban cohousing communities where the sites were previously vacant or dormant include: Berkeley, CA; Emeryville, CA; Oakland, CA; Sacramento, CA; Boulder, CO; Denver, CO; Fort Collins, CO; Washington, DC; Atlanta, GA; Chicago, IL; Cambridge, MA; St. Louis, MO; Portland, OR; and Seattle, WA.

Economic Diversity and Affordability

Residents in cohousing neighborhoods typically have a wide 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 four-bedroom town home within the same community. Homes in a cohousing neighborhood are comparable in price to a similar home in the surrounding local neighborhood. However, the cohousing homeowner receives the added value of shared ownership and use of common areas, such as the land, community garden and the Common House.

Cost of Living in Cohousing

It costs less to live in cohousing than in a typical American home because of lower utility bills, home-cooked community meals and neighbors sharing resources. According to a study done of over three dozen cohousing neighborhoods in the U.S., community meals typically take place between two to three times per week and average \$5 or less per home-cooked meal. According to an EPA study done of the Nyland Cohousing Community in Lafayette, Colorado, their utility bill was up to 50% less than homes in the surrounding neighborhood. It is common for residents to share garden tools, cars, bikes, and other resources. Neighborhoods typically have one or two lawnmowers and commonly-owned garden equipment, rakes and shovels. The common house often has a laundry area so residents don't need to have a washer/dryer in their own home. In addition to the economic benefit, sharing resources also makes chores such as weeding, shoveling snow, raking leaves, and laundry social activities where you can chat with neighbors while getting the task done. Additional savings include: reduced gas consumption from car-pooling, shared cars and increased use of mass transit; group purchases for food and home maintenance items; shared children's play equipment and cooperative childcare among several families; lawn care handled by residents versus hiring out work; and the opportunity for co-operative healthcare (e.g. resident caregivers living in the Common House.)

Demographics

Currently there are 90 completed cohousing neighborhoods in the United States and eight completed projects in Canada. U.S. states having the highest concentration of completed neighborhoods are California (21), Washington (11) Colorado (10), and Massachusetts (9). In addition, an estimated 100 cohousing groups are in various stages of the development process.

Environmental Building

Cohousing neighborhoods have won numerous awards for their environmental design and energy-efficient homes. Houses in cohousing regularly receive Five Star ratings or above, surpassing state mandated standards for energy-efficiency. Factors include the community's solar orientation, tight building envelope, shared walls, \ low energy heating and cooling systems. A number of projects are utilizing innovative technologies for heating and cooling buildings and for creating hot water. Examples include ground source heat and cooling systems (Eastern Village Cohousing in Silver Spring, MD; Takoma Village in Washington, DC; Cambridge Cohousing in Cambridge, MA), common boilers for each building (Wild Sage Cohousing in Boulder, CO); and centralized community heating system (Westwood Cohousing in Asheville, NC).

Sustainable Lifestyle

Cohousing neighborhoods are sustainable both by their physical construction as well as by lifestyle. Resident prepared, optional meals in the Common House create an important social fabric in the neighborhood. Community meals give neighbors an ongoing opportunity to spend time together, the convenience of saved time in meal preparation and clean up where two to three people cook and cleanup for 30, and the pleasure of your neighbors preparing home-cooked meals several times a week. In addition, less resources are consumed in community meals using the electricity of one kitchen instead of 30. Many neighborhoods actively compost; have an extensive recycling program; avoid the use of pesticides on their gardens, use non-toxic stains on the exterior of their buildings, and serve organic produce in community meals.

Affordability

To make cohousing more affordable, the following projects have received subsidies for a percentage of their homes from local city or state government as part of an "Affordable Housing" program:

ElderSpirit Community (Abingdon, VA) – first Elder Cohousing neighborhood in the U.S.	
Island Cohousing, (Martha's Vineyard, MA)	Muir Commons (Davis, CA)
Nomad Cohousing (Boulder, CO)	Pioneer Valley (Amherst, MA)
Southside Park (Sacramento, CA)	Ujima Place (Chicago, IL)
Wasatch Cohousing (Salt Lake City)	Wild Sage Cohousing (Boulder, CO)

Profile of Cohousers

Cohousers fit the description of the new "cultural creatives," people who buy with their values; are involved in community organizations and social and political activities; find innovative solutions in creating their living environment; and who place a high value on the quality of their life situation. Many cohousers work from home and have higher than average education with a leaning to read more than watch TV. Cohousing residents tend to be high users of the Internet and email for obtaining and disseminating information. Cohousing residents are of all ages and stages in life, including individuals, single parents, families with children, couples without children, and elders ranging in age from 55 to close to 100.

Resale value

Informal tracking of the resale value of homes in cohousing neighborhoods over the past 15 years has demonstrated that cohousing homes hold their value at or above other new housing in their local market. This value can be attributed to the advantage of living in a setting where you know your neighbors and have the ongoing benefits of social contact and safety. Most cohousing residents stay in their home for extended periods with little turnover among homeowners. A study by Support Financial Services, a Colorado-based company specializing in financing for cohousing neighborhoods, found that 81% of residents said they plan to stay more than five years, while 70% of residents said they plan to stay for over 10 years in their community. Almost half the re-sales in cohousing neighborhoods are to residents already living in the neighborhood which allows members to upsize or downsize without leaving the community. This preference by residents to stay in their neighborhood promotes stability, a benefit not only to the cohousing community, but also to the surrounding neighborhood and city.

Design

The design of cohousing communities is diverse and is largely based upon the site factors and the size and priorities of the resident group. Cohousing may be arranged as a single building, around a courtyard, along a pedestrian pathway, or a combination of the above. The homes in a cohousing neighborhood may be single-family detached homes, attached houses, town homes, and stacked condominiums. Cars are typically parked at the periphery of the site and residents are encouraged by design to walk through a common space (e.g. a Common House, courtyard or a pedestrian path) to reach their homes. Much of the daily social interaction and communication occurs spontaneously in these common spaces. Density typically ranges from four to 20 per acre. Styles vary depending upon the context and aesthetic taste of the community. Most cohousing neighborhoods share a common desire to maximize the use of sustainable design and cluster the homes to preserve the greatest amount of open space possible. Residents actively participate in the design process, and work closely with the project architect and developer in the creation of the homes, site and community buildings.

Land Use

As desirable parcels of land become harder to find and more costly throughout many parts of the country, many developers and perspective homeowners are seeking ways to increase density and decrease costs. Cohousing is compatible with this goal. Even on larger lots, cohousing site planning will cluster the homes in a compact arrangement, primarily to facilitate a cohesive and economical pedestrian-oriented community. One of the major growth areas for cohousing is having these small-scale neighborhoods as components in larger New Urbanist neighborhoods where the cohousing project brings a daily experience of community to the larger neighborhood. Examples of this trend include: Hearthstone Cohousing, a 33-unit cohousing community in Denver, Colorado, located in an 250-home New Urbanist project Highlands' Garden Village; Wild Sage Cohousing, a 34-household community within the 250-home Holiday Neighborhood in Boulder, Colorado, and Muir Commons, a 26-household community on 3.1 acres in Davis, CA.

Streamlined Development Model

One of the most significant changes over the past 10 years has been the “streamlined model” of cohousing development. This process has reduced the time to complete a cohousing neighborhood to on average of two to three years. Historically, it had taken from five to eight years to build a cohousing neighborhood from the time of a group's first meeting until residents moved into their community. This more developer-led approach to creating cohousing was pioneered by Jim Leach of Wonderland Hill Development Company of Boulder, Colorado, builders of 20 completed communities in the U.S. The philosophy is designed to minimize the financial risks to the community and reduce the length of the project timeline. In this approach experienced cohousing professionals handle the technical aspects of the project, including building and development, engineering, architecture and design, project management and group process. This allows the future residents to be able to focus on getting to know their future neighbors and community building.

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