What’s in a Common House?

We know a common house is a definitional feature of a cohousing community, but what makes for a great common house?

To start with, it’s useful to consider the central purpose of a common house, which is to support relationships, connection and time together. One measure of success in cohousing is the number of common house person-hours, with a general understanding that more people spending more time in the common house is good for community. When considering design or changes to a common house it is wise to ask ourselves, “Will this increase the time people spend together in our community?”

For those who haven’t lived in community yet, this can be a shift in thinking. In most public spaces (think a museum or a gym) we tend to prefer not to be crowded by other people. For most of us it is fairly easy to imagine that we could use a laundry, media room or guest rooms as an alternative to maintaining comparable spaces in our own homes. It is a bit more of a stretch to think about walking into a media room, finding someone else already there, and being glad for the connection of watching a movie together rather than watching your own choice alone. Veteran cohousers tend to value both the availability of resources and the relationship building that comes of sharing them. It is wise to hold this perspective when planning spaces.

A common house generally includes a dining room and a kitchen and these are usually the most used and most valued spaces particularly with communities with robust common meal programs. The bigger challenge in design comes around the other spaces. Here are a few ideas to consider.

Incidental engagement - Will people who come to (or walk by) the common house for one purpose be aware of others in the common house and be drawn into conversation? This will have a lot to do with the flow of the common house as well as uses that encourage short daily visits like main collection or recycling. Those accidental conversations are some of the most powerful relationships builders in community.

Differentiation - While our relationships benefit from being more aware of one another, that concept doesn’t extend to a teen foosball tournament sharing space (even auditory space) with a yoga class. You will want ways for very different kinds of activities to happen at the same time without disturbing one another.

Versatility - The range of activities that will want to happen in the common house will (hopefully) far exceed the number of spaces available. Odds are the same space that is used for common dinner (tables and chairs) on Wednesday is also used for a
general meeting (no tables, big circle and a white board) on Thursday and a glorious
dance party (open floor space, sound system) on Friday. It pays to be thoughtful about
how and where the furnishings and equipment will be stored when not in use. Can wall
art that makes lovely ambiance for a meal be set aside to make space for chart paper
or yogi handstands?

Variability - Your community will change and the common house will be used
differently over time. From year to year a given space may be used as a teen hang out,
and then a yoga retreat, and then a homeschool classroom . . . Building spaces that
can be used in different ways is one piece of this. The other is holding “ownership” of
spaces loosely and periodically reviewing use and needs, expecting to make
adjustments. Having these conversations often reinforces the idea that change is a
normal part of community life.

Policy - Welcoming and empowering policy may be more important than the structure
itself in determining how much your common house is used. You will want to find a
balance between asking people to clean up after themselves and avoiding having
people feel they are being policed. Some structure helps people to know what works
and how to use the space collaboratively and safely. Too many rules or too much
enforcement can discourage people from using the space at all. As in so much about
community, balance is key.

---

Events

Top Ten Reasons to attend
the National Cohousing Conference
in Portland May 30 - June 2:

# 10 Portland is beautiful and is known for its parks,
bridges and bicycle paths

#9 Pre-conference offerings include taking a full day
tour, a half day tour or two half day tours

#8 You can experience the famous Portland food
trucks

#7 Pre-conference Intensives allow time to dive deep
into a topic

#6 Portland is also known for its eco-friendliness and
its microbreweries and coffeehouses

#5 There are many amazing conference Sessions to
choose from on Saturday and Sunday

Wed, March 6 Grace Kim
Common House Acoustics
Frustrated by the acoustics in your
common house? Learn the basic
design principles and best
practices.

Wed, March 13 Karen Gimnig
Facilitation: Contracting
Learn how clear contracting within
your community can make meeting
more efficient and effective.

Wed, Mar 20 Crystal Farmer
Housing Segregation and Its
Impact on Cohousing
Location is a huge factor in
recruiting people to a cohousing
community. Unfortunately, the
United States has a long history of
discriminating against home
buyers based on race. We'll
discuss this history and how your
site search may unintentionally
leave out people of color.
#4 The weekend will be all about cohousing, all the time

#3 Courtney Martin is the Keynote speaker

#2 Cohousing helps to create community, one neighborhood at a time

and the #1 reason to attend the Portland conference is to find out: "what's with the bird?"

Register HERE!

How are you going to spend your National Cohousing Open House Day this year?

Are you seeking a community or forming one? Take a look at the list of participating communities and visit one!

Do you live in a community and would like to open your community’s doors, welcome people in and show them how great community life is? Become a participating community!

Click here for more info!

Blog

How does a blog become a blog?

Anyone is welcome to submit a well-written and informative blog for publishing on our website. We hope you will share your cohousing stories and learnings with other communities. Submit to: karencohous@gmail.com
History of Fair Oaks EcoHousing
by Marty Maskell

I started Fair Oaks EcoHousing because I want to live in a friendly community where neighbors know and care about each other. I think we need more neighborhoods like that!

It was Love at First Sight
In Fall 2003, I visited my friend Don's home in downtown Sacramento. When I looked out his kitchen window, I saw a number of other homes facing each other, all with porches, and all facing a beautiful shared green. One of the homes was much larger. My mind was blown. I asked my friend to explain. He said he lived in cohousing. I said "Co-What?"

Purpose of a Work Day
by Karen Gimnig

Does your community have work days? Why?

That second question matters and may be worthy of review. In the broader culture of the US, there is a lot of focus on tasks, work and material accomplishments. This is good. We like beautiful flower beds, roofs that don't leak and clean common house kitchens. The work does need to be done. But why do it together? Why not hire it out? Why not let each person contribute on their own schedule?

In the News

Novato residents pitch ‘cohousing’ village in

‘New solutions’ to housing crisis
A group of local families in Novato hoping to build a more connected community from the ground up is pursuing a Danish neighborhood design known as cohousing.

"When I came to Marin and couldn’t find housing myself, I discovered cohousing and I realized there is such a deep yearning for belonging and community and safety and security in Marin," said Novato resident Judy Slater, project co-founder. “So cohousing just seemed liked the right fit. It’s a place for a simple, affordable, environmentally friendly lifestyle that helps you really get to know your neighbors.”

CoHousing. It’s not about cults, although the real estate agent one Wellington group bought their property through seemed to think it was. And, despite the suspicion of a Whanganui group’s neighbours, it’s not about communes. Think of a CoHousing development as being more like a "high-functioning neighbourhood".

Along with being self-organised and community-led ("a version of local direct democracy"), CoHousing should incorporate sustainability – “in the social sense, the cultural sense, the economic sense and of course the ecological sense”, said LaFond.
Cohousing, CA
Building Now in Rocky Corner Cohousing
Bethany, CT

Ashland, OR
Sunny 3-Bed Jackson Place
Seattle, WA

Bethany, CT
Large 4 Bed/3 Bath
Pleasant Hill
Cohousing, CA

Peterborough, NH
Homes in Nubanusit Neighborhood & Farm

Seattle, WA
Sunny 3-Bed Jackson Place
Seattle, WA

Cohousing Professionals

Caddis Architecture
Fitch Architecture & Community
McCamant & Durrett Architects:
CoHousing Solutions | Design | Home - Community -
Sustainable Neighborhood Planet
Consultants
Linda Herman Consulting
schemata workshop |
Mary Kraus, Architect
architecture & planning

Directory - Find your community now!

Click Here for the Cohousing Directory

Do you see your community listing? If not, please get your community listed (contact me if you need assistance). karincohous@gmail.com

Cohousing Now! will post twice a month!

Not only does our monthly Cohousing Now! eNews have a new look that is based on our new website (making its debut in 2019), we have also added a mid-month mini-eNews edition. See archived issues here.
Thanks for reading

Cohousing Now! provides news and events on Cohousing... Now! provided by The Cohousing Association of the United States. Please forward to your friends, communities, and other lists to spread the word about cohousing!

The Cohousing Association is funded by donations from people like you. Thanks so much for your support.

Donate to Cohousing

karincohous@gmail.com
www.cohousing.org

Connect with us