



Cohousing Cultivates Low-Impact Communities

by [GLI Editors](#) in [Eco Home Living](#)



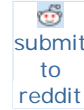
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Imagine coming home from work in your carpool Friday night to your small community. Although it is dusk, your children are still out playing with their friends on the neighborhood greenspace playground. The green is surrounded by passive-solar homes, each of whose owners you know intimately well. Several retired neighbors are keeping an eye on the children in the park.

You're tired, but you know you won't have to cook that night—a group is cooking the neighborhood dinner and the neighborhood teens have selected a movie to follow, to be shown on the high-definition widescreen television that the neighborhood collectively owns.

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This isn't a utopian dream—it's a typical real-world experience of those living in cohousing developments across the U.S. and in Europe. Cohousing is a style of living sometimes called *intentional neighborhoods*. It differs from other intentional communities most significantly by the fact that it consists of **clusters of privately owned, self-sufficient homes surrounded by pedestrian-friendly common land**.

There is a large "common house" for group activities, and various other amenities are owned and managed in common. The goal of the cohousing movement is to create close-knit neighborhoods that offer a balance of privacy with a sense of community and mutual support often lacking in modern life.

Most cohousing communities adapt land-use planning instruments designed for condominium developments. The residents jointly own the whole common property and facilities, but each is the sole owner of their private home—although not the land their home stands on. Using an existing financial model familiar to the banking industry gives cohousing groups a big financing advantage over other cooperative living arrangements.

But cohousing is far more than a mere planned development . . .

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The Six Defining Characteristics of Cohousing

- **Participation in the planning and development process by the future residents.** Virtually all aspiring cohousing groups work with some professionals, such as developers, architects, financial planners, and group-dynamics/community development facilitators, but the decision-making process is driven by those who will actually live there.
- **Community-oriented site plans.** Homes are usually clustered around a pedestrian street or green, with the common house as a focal point. Cars are typically parked on the periphery and the neighborhood is pedestrian-friendly.
- **Shared spaces.** A common house with a gourmet kitchen, eating area, lounging area, children's playroom, and laundry space is typical. Some also have such amenities as a library, crafts room, workshops, exercise facilities, and guest rooms. These shared facilities are always supplemental to the private residences, which have their own kitchens. Because the houses are clustered, non-urban cohousing developments usually contain large open spaces for the community.
- **Management by residents.** Cohousing residents make all the decisions and do most of the work required to maintain the public areas—they usually do not hire management companies. Residents prepare the common meals together—typically two or three a week—and wash the

dishes afterward.

- **Consensus decision-making.** Cohousing developments require a certain level of participation in meetings and discussions. Although everyone is encouraged to contribute in their area of expertise, there is no hierarchy. Some cohousing groups have a fail-safe policy of majority rule if consensus fails, but it is rarely invoked.
- **No shared economy.** Unlike some other intentional community forms, cohousing communities do not pool their incomes, provide paid work for their members, or have a shared economic activity.

The cohousing idea arose in Denmark more than thirty years ago, but it has been slower to catch on here than in Europe. There are slightly less than a hundred cohousing developments in the U.S., although at least a hundred more are currently in various stages of planning. Yet cohousing is not so much a new idea in America—it is an original concept that may soon experience a revival. Early American settlements were very much like cohousing communities, with clusters of houses around a village green and a culture of mutual support.



Cohousing as a Green Alternative

Cohousing not only makes social sense, it makes ecological sense. Cohousing developments are gentler on the earth than conventional residential housing, in part because they **pool resources**. Usually:

- There are **centralized laundries** and a **large television in the common house** instead of several small ones in each house.
- **Landscaping equipment** such as lawnmowers are communal items.
- The community does some **bulk purchasing of food** as well. Although everyone has their own kitchen, the **communal meals** simultaneously operate as a big part of the social fabric and an energy saving process.
- **Carpooling and car sharing** is common, and there are fewer outside destinations anyway, since there is more entertainment and socializing within the community than there is in a typical neighborhood. Car trips to ferry children to play dates, sports fields, and daycare are substantially diminished because these activities can often be found right at home.

Because there are usually guestrooms in the common house, **individual houses can be built smaller**, since they don't have to provide for occasional population overflow. This single fact—that residences can be built significantly smaller with no loss of any amenities—is a huge resource savings in every way, both in the initial building and furnishing costs and in terms of running expenses.

Cohousing participants are looking for sustainable alternatives to the way things are ordinarily done, and thus development designs have an environmentally sensitive focus, to the extent that individual budgets allow. There is typically **communal recycling**, **community gardens**, and **composting areas**, and **passive solar house designs** are common.

Fears about Cohousing

Meetings. The idea of spending your free time sitting in meetings trying to get a large group to all agree on something gives many people a sinking feeling. No question, consensus can be a difficult process. Americans are not used to this kind of decision-making, and **trained facilitators** are often brought in, especially in the beginning, to help people develop these skills.

- Most people discover that consensus decision-making is a deep and rewarding experience. Each person, even the quietest, is assumed to have a piece of the truth and the solution within them, even if they are not in agreement with the majority.

Elitism. Cohousing has some similarities to other planned communities, but elitism is not one them. The **cohousing ethos is one of inclusiveness**, and one of its stated aims is diversity. Although cohousing developments have the same economic constraints that more ordinary ones have, they strive to make at least some units affordable to lower income buyers.

- For example, in one cohousing community, Bartimaeus in Bremerton, Washington, those who can afford it agree to build an extra unit and offer it for rent. The community also has reserved one unit for families in transition, which they are able to rent at a reduced price for up to a year, while the community helps with job hunting.

Costs to buy into a cohousing development are usually a little higher than ordinary housing in the same area, but subsequent living costs are substantially lower because of energy-efficient designs and the many pooled resources. Most cohousing communities have a quite broad spectrum of incomes.

Cults. On the other end of the spectrum of fears is that cohousing is a kind of commune or cult. **Cohousing participants do not have to share any ideology other than a commitment to cooperative neighborhood management.** They are probably somewhat to the left of the general public because of this, but otherwise individuals are free to adhere to any belief system they prefer.

Disputes. What happens if you disagree with someone, or even the whole community? Well, you can be sure this happens. The philosophy of the cohousing movement is that **conflict is not inherently bad**; in fact, if handled properly, it is a force for positive change. The main cohousing website and its list serve provide information about techniques for solving common problems.

- Some communities designate special conflict-resolution teams to work with the disputants. If the dispute is particularly intractable, communities sometimes call in outside mediators.

Privacy. Cohousing communities recognize and design for the human need to be alone. They aim to **strike a balance between personal privacy and social interaction.** Although one might imagine that cohousing members need to be convivial types, in actuality the majority of them are more introverted than not. That said, it is true that some people just don't really want all that community feeling—cohousing isn't right for everyone.

Flexibility. What if your life changes in such a way that you need to move out? Because residences are individually owned, this isn't a problem. Fully built-out cohousing communities often have a waiting list, and it is **easy to sell or rent your cohousing unit** to someone who wants to join.

Design and Community

Retrofitted Cohousing

Especially in urban areas, and where land prices are high, creative cohousing adherents have turned to retrofitting existing buildings and streets. In Davis, California, the N Street cohousing community used easements at first to create a nearly 20-unit community over two streets, taking down fences and creating pedestrian walkways. Later they were able to get the city to rezone their block as a planned development.

- Retrofitting makes the initial financial burden, significant in new development, much more accessible to many families. For example, N Street is about 40% rental units.

Elder Cohousing

Most cohousing communities are a mix of all ages and family groupings, including the elderly. But, as our population grays, more and more people are looking toward alternative living arrangements for their later years. In Denmark, active senior cohousing communities have flourished, and they are just gaining recognition here as well. Elder cohousing arrangements:

- incorporate accessible design for those of limited physical ability
- sometimes offers living quarters for home health aides whose services are shared by those residents who need them
- are often built adjoining a regular cohousing development so community members can enjoy the benefits of intergenerational socializing while still attending to their own specific needs

Visit the [Elder Cohousing Network Web site](#) for more information.

How To Get Started

Most groups need professional help to move from what typically starts as a few people with big ideas and no land talking in a living room, to a business group with fundraising goals and a realizable development plan. [The Cohousing Association](#) has a wealth of information about how to start and where to get help. They offer a community directory, a list of cohousing professionals of all kinds, a reading list, and much more.

Cohousing is a proven alternative to the atomized, lonely, and resource-wasteful pattern of residential construction that has characterized modern building practices. Revisiting the concept of the village green might just be the next wave in residential living design...

Article Contributors: Arthur Okner

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Green Living Ideas provides ideas, tips, and information to help you improve the environmental sustainability of every aspect of your life: home energy, green building and remodeling, cars, food, waste recycling—and everything in between. GLI's editorial voice is driven by founder Sean Daily, and written by an amazing staff of author and interns.



2 Responses to “Cohousing Cultivates Low-Impact Communities”



1.

Colleen

Feb 29, 2008

Interesting concept. Reminds me of living in an apartment complex, except the residents have more at stake so they contribute to the community.



2.

Guest

Sep 11, 2008

Hello everyone,

I wanted to let you know of a senior cohousing group for active adults in Grass Valley, California. It is called Wolf Creek Lodge, and I am a member. The architect is green award winner Chuck Durrett who, with his wife Katie McCamant (our developer), brought the concept of cohousing to the U.S. from Denmark. Our website is <http://www.wolfcreeklodge.org>. Please take a look. We have just started construction and are open to new members.

We are a green project: green built, energy efficient and walkable to shops and services. One-third of our 8 acres will be left untouched as wooded open space along beautiful Wolf Creek. We believe in sustaining community and living in harmony with our environment.

An intergenerational cohousing community, Wolf Creek Commons, is a child friendly group that is scheduled to be built later on the same site.

Suzanne

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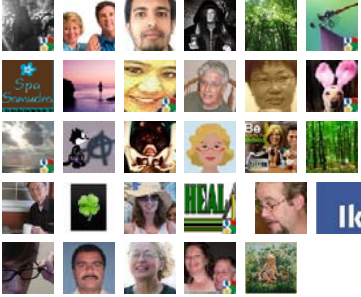


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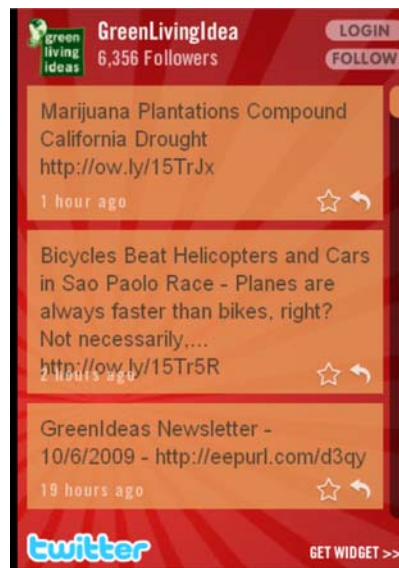
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