Cohousing: A Model for Sustainable Communities

Allan Rosen

This article investigates the potential of cohousing as a model for sustainable communities. Cohousing is a new form of residential development which has become popular in the United States over the last five years. It is conceived as an alternative to conventional tract-style subdivisions. Cohousing communities utilize a community-based design process and are intended to foster more cooperative lifestyles among their residents.

The first section of this article provides background information to familiarize the reader with the basics of cohousing. Included is a formal definition of cohousing, a brief description of its origin, and a summary of the current status of cohousing in the United States. The second section investigates cohousing’s relationship to sustainability. It begins by delineating the sustainability movement into three agendas for action: the environmental, equity, and process agendas; and then discusses how cohousing addresses these agendas. The third section looks at trends in cohousing’s evolution and at strategies for facilitating its continued growth. Three aspects of its evolution are explored: the site plan, target populations, and the planning process. This section also suggests how current planning practices can be adapted to facilitate the growth of cohousing.

Defining Cohousing

Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett coined the English word “cohousing” in their 1988 book Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves. They offer a definition based on four characteristics common to cohousing developments:

• “Participatory Process: Residents organize and participate in the planning and design process for the housing development, and are responsible as a group for all final decisions.

• Intentional Neighborhood Design: The physical design encourages a strong sense of community.

• Extensive Common Facilities: An integral part of the community, common areas are designed for daily use, to supplement private living areas.

• Complete Resident Management: Residents manage the development, making decisions of common concern at community meetings.”

The participatory design process allows future residents to play a prominent and vital role in designing the layout and format of the community. Residents become fully invested in the entire development process. Major decisions are made by consensus. This process results in the future residents having a significant impact on the final design. The physical design encourages a sense of community by increasing the areas of social interaction. Placing parking on the periphery gives the neighborhood a pedestrian orientation and is one of the prime design attributes of cohousing.

Another important design feature is the interface between the public courtyards and pedestrian streets formed by the homes’ location and the homes themselves. Frequently, the more public rooms in each house (e.g., the kitchen or family room) front onto
these public areas. Similar to the way in which Frank Lloyd Wright's residential designs intertwine the indoors and outdoors, cohousing homes intertwine public and private spaces. It is this articulation of semi-public, semi-private patterns that encourages spontaneous interactions among neighbors.

The extensive common facilities of cohousing communities complement the self-sufficient private homes. The common house is the most prominent shared feature of a cohousing community. It usually includes a kitchen and dining area for regularly scheduled community meals and one or more specialty rooms, such as a laundry, children's room, guest room, workshop, and/or art studio. Common outdoor spaces may include sports fields, gardens, a children's playground, a pond, and/or a gazebo. Shared access to such amenities further stimulates the comradery of cohousing communities.

Complete resident management also encourages social cohesion. Through collective responsibility for activities including landscaping, maintenance, children's activities, common meals, consensus building, and dispute resolution, community residents develop interpersonal and management skills critical to the health of their community.

**Origin of Cohousing**

In 1964, a young Danish architect, Jan Gudmand-Hoyer, gathered together a group of friends to explore housing options. They sought an alternative to the single-family suburban house and to the multi-story apartment building. Row houses seemed less isolating but they lacked a sense of community. By the end of the year, the group had purchased property on the outskirts of Copenhagen where they planned to build a new community of twelve homes and a common house. Opposition from local residents prevented this project from being completed. Yet, within a few years, the social climate was more accepting of what would become cohousing.

In 1967, author Bodil Graae published an article entitled “Children Should Have One Hundred Parents”, which called for more humane residential neighborhoods. She concluded the article by asking that those interested in forming a housing “collective” which was children-friendly to contact her. Over fifty people responded. The next year, Gudmand-Hoyer’s article “The Missing Link Between Utopia and the Dated One-Family House” was published in a national newspaper. He received over one hundred responses from persons interested in living in a place like he described. Later that year, Gudmand-Hoyer, Graae, and some families from the earlier failed endeavor began to plan a cohousing community. This time they were successful. The first two cohousing communities came out of this effort. In the fall of 1972, 27 families moved into the first community, Saettedammen, and the next year, 33 families moved into Skraplanet. By 1980, there were 12 owner-occupied cohousing communities in Denmark. Two years later, there were 22 and at the end of the decade more than 120 of these communities had been built. Clearly, cohousing had struck a chord with many families.

In Europe there are now several hundred cohousing communities, primarily in Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands. With over twenty years experience of cohousing in Europe, the various communities exhibit many variations of the basic model. Tenure patterns now include both renter and mixed-tenure, in addition to the original tenure pattern of ownership. Where the original communities were privately financed initiatives, there are now also cohousing communities that are government-financed and public-private ventures. In contrast to the limited demographic diversity of the original communities, recent communities have greater age and socioeconomic diversity. In addition, the cohousing model has been adapted to meet the special needs of elderly populations.

The Danish term for cohousing, “bofoelleskaber,” translates as “living communities.” Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett are California trained architects who, during a thirteen-month period spanning 1984 and 1985, conducted a field study of 46 cohousing communities in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Their book, *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, was published for the purpose of inspiring “people to take a more active role in creating the home and neighborhood they want to live in.” Since its publication, McCamant and Durrett have been the chief proponents of cohousing in the United States. They have conducted hundreds of workshops and consulted with scores of emerging cohousing communities. It is safe to say that virtually all of the groups undertaking cohousing initiatives in America began when one or more individuals in the group either attended a McCamant and Durrett workshop or read their book.

**Current Status of Cohousing in the United States**

According to the national magazine, *CoHousing: Contemporary Approaches to Housing Ourselves*, there are nine cohousing communities in America that are currently occupied. All of these are west of the Mississippi. Three communities are in California, including the oldest one and the newest one. Two others are in Washington. There is one cohousing community
each in the states of Colorado, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Oregon. These communities include approximately two hundred homes, housing over four hundred people. At least six other communities are in various stages of construction and will be completed within the next twelve months, three of which are located in the eastern United States: Lake Claire in Atlanta, GA, Pioneer Valley in Pelham, MA, and Arcadia in Carrboro, NC. CoHousing also lists over 150 core groups in the U.S. and Canada that are currently in the process of planning a cohousing community.

Cohousing is clearly experiencing growth in North America. This growth is also evidenced by the variety of resources available to persons interested in cohousing and by the extent of networking underway. Umbrella groups are forming regionally to facilitate the efforts of core groups. CoHousing and Northeast Cohousing Quarterly, both extensive newsletter/magazines, have been published since 1988. There have been regional, national, and international conferences on cohousing and related issues in the past few years. Advice on a variety of cohousing issues is available from experienced cohousing consulting professionals. Scholars are publishing books and journal articles on cohousing and it is the focus of several graduate school master theses. Finally, extensive national media attention is being devoted to cohousing.

What can the phenomenal growth of cohousing in America be attributed to? A primary cause is that cohousing offers a practical solution to the mismatch between conventional housing options and today’s households. Simply put, many of today’s households view the traditional single-family detached home in a residential subdivision not as an ideal but rather as isolating, both geographically and socially. Such homes are not only anachronistic, they are also dysfunctional for many families. In addition, traditional American subdivisions have not only been criticized in terms of isolation, but also as being unsustainable, i.e., they require high inputs of non-renewable resources and have adverse environmental impacts. Landscape architect Clare Cooper-Marcus sums it up this way:

“The conditions from which cohousing arises is widespread: declining household size, social isolation, the demise of the extended family, changing gender roles, and problems of social justice and resource consumption. None of these conditions is just a passing phase and, while the ideology of the detached single-family house will persist, cohousing is a high quality and highly sustainable alternative.”

It is the relationship between cohousing and sustainability that I now turn my focus to.

Cohousing’s Relationship to Sustainability

Sustainability has become a buzzword. Around the world, it has captured the attention of politicians and policy makers, academics, business persons, and just plain folks. Sustainability attempts to address the conflict between economic growth and environmental degradation. Sustainable development patterns are those which ensure that the needs of the present population are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.\(^6\) Proposals for adapting virtually all aspects of modern life have been made in the name of sustainability.

Prominent among the concerns raised by discussions of sustainability is the per capita level of consumption of both material goods and non-renewable energy resources in the United States. The current rates of consumption bode ill for the future because they are unsustainable. Furthermore, because the U.S. is the envy of many developing nations, their development aspirations implicitly assume similar rates of consumption. Another issue of paramount concern is the search for more sustainable settlement patterns. Making American settlement patterns more sustainable would not only establish a sustainable settlement patterns. Making American settlement patterns more sustainable would not only be highly conducive to achieving sustainability.

Sustainability is a multi-faceted concept. Broadly speaking, though, I believe there are three agendas under the rubric of sustainability. These classifications are labeled agendas because I view them not simply as definitions, but as calls for action, i.e., agendas for change. These are the environmental, the equity, and the process agendas. Descriptions of these agendas are as follows:

- **Environmental Agenda**: To reduce and/or eliminate the adverse environmental impacts of humanity’s economic and productive processes.

- **Equity Agenda**: To address issues of poverty, livelihoods, equity, and social justice.

- **Process Agenda**: A harmonious resolution of the environmental and equity agendas will be facilitated by an inclusive planning process that actively seeks input from a diverse group of participants, particularly those individuals and communities who are usually at the socioeconomic margin. At the local level, informal, decentralized, and small-scale approaches are highly conducive to achieving sustainability.

The environmental and equity agendas define what is to be achieved with sustainability. Aspects of the environmental agenda that are relevant to settlement
patterns include resource use and conservation, recycling, and pollution; those from the equity agenda include housing affordability, childcare, and job creation. In contrast to the goal-oriented nature of the environmental and equity agendas, the process agenda states preferences for methods of seeking sustainability. Informal, decentralized, and small-scale technologies that are sustainable include passive solar heating and community-supported agriculture. This section concludes by identifying those elements of the sustainability agendas that cohousing is best suited to address and how it addresses those issues.

**Cohousing and the Environmental Agenda**

Cohousing’s most obvious thrust towards a sustainable future is in the environmental arena. Its land use and resource utilization patterns go a long ways towards achieving sustainability.

**Land Use**

Existing cohousing developments in the U.S. exhibit three patterns of land use: progressive suburban, infill and adaptive re-use, and mixed use. The first category is similar to the best land use patterns adapted in mainstream residential development. Approximately one-half of the cohousing communities display this configuration. The main environmental goals of the progressive suburban pattern are the conservation of open space and minimal on-site environmental disturbance.

In both Europe and the United States, the first cohousing communities were built on previously undeveloped land. Yet, achieving sustainable settlement patterns will require increased utilization of infill and adaptive re-use strategies. The cohousing model is flexible enough to employ these strategies. Three California communities demonstrate this. In Emeryville, located in the East Bay area of San Francisco, an abandoned warehouse in an industrial neighborhood has been converted into a twelve-unit cohousing community. The Southside park community in downtown Sacramento will have 25 homes on its 1.3 acre site. It is the first inner-city residential development in Sacramento in many years. In Davis, residents of the N Street community have converted a residential, grid-style block into a cohousing community through a process of purchasing homes for sale over several years.

To a varying degree, all cohousing communities have elements of the mixed-use pattern. At a minimum, there is usually on-site childcare and some food production from gardens. The full potential of mixed-use cohousing communities has not yet been explored, however. One day we may see more emphasis on providing non-residential services to the immediate community. This is especially probable in urban settings. Such uses might include office space, space for cottage industries, day care, and food and laundry services. In rural settings, it is likely that large portions of the community’s food needs will be produced within the community.

**Resource Utilization**

Regardless of the site’s characteristics, virtually all cohousing communities incorporate sustainable resource utilization patterns into their design program. Conservation, the limited use of toxic chemicals, and the increased use of renewable energy sources are typical areas of concern. Resource conservation can apply to energy, water, and materials conservation. On the energy front, it is typical for cohousing communities to call for high standards of insulation and weatherization, to consider cogeneration technologies, and to take into consideration the amount of embodied energy in building materials when making materials selection. Indirectly, of course, it is desired that residents reduce their use of private automobiles. This may be feasible because of on-site childcare, cooperative shopping trips, and on-site entertainment, thus reducing nighttime and weekend travel.

Water conservation can be enhanced through the use of water conserving plumbing fixtures, landscape design and plant selection, greywater systems and rainwater collection methods. Material consumption can be reduced both during construction and after. For instance, wood products derived from sustainable forestry practices would be preferred over those that are not. Durable-goods consumption can be reduced at the household level; vacuum cleaners and lawnmowers are likely prospects for shared use.

Non-toxic environments are another area of concern in cohousing communities. Planning for non-toxic environments includes relying substantially, or absolutely, on organic and biological methods for lawn and garden use. The other primary concern in this arena is building material selection. Residents of cohousing communities typically select non-toxic building materials. Utilization of renewable energy sources, primarily via passive solar technology and photovoltaics, is also high on the list of cohousing residents’ goals.

**Cohousing and the Equity Agenda**

The cohousing model advances the equity agenda primarily by making housing more affordable. Cohousing can lower housing expenses two ways. First, the initial cost of the home can be reduced
through higher density, which allows the “sunk” costs to be distributed over a greater number of units. Other means for lowering the purchase price include reduction of development fees, profit margins, and marketing costs. Economies of scale in materials purchases can also be achieved. In several instances, local governments are participating in cohousing ventures to promote affordability. Alternative forms of ownership that American cohousing communities are experimenting with can also reduce the cost of housing, particularly future sales prices. These include limited equity co-ops and land trusts.

Second, cohousing also has the potential to reduce the home’s operating expenses. These lifecycle costs savings are primarily a function of reduced energy consumption. Cohousing residents may also experience increased disposable income. This would result from the budget savings associated with reduced expenses for food (from common meals and on-site food production) and child care.

**Cohousing and the Process Agenda**

By definition and practice, cohousing is a decentralized, small-scale, and informal approach to developing residential housing. For those directly involved in creating a cohousing community, the process is highly inclusive. And, in America, most cohousing communities consider diversity an important goal. With respect to household size and residents’ ages, American cohousing succeeds in achieving diversity. Socioeconomic diversity is achieved in two ways. First, local governments have participated in several cohousing projects with the express aim of making some of the housing units affordable. Second, by not practicing exclusionary zoning, i.e., requiring minimum lot and/or house sizes, cohousing communities can accommodate a wide range of home sizes. This, in turn, makes it possible for less financially-able households to join the community.

**Cohousing: Trends and Support Strategies**

As in Europe, cohousing in America is gaining popularity as a model for residential development. It also shows great promise as a model for sustainable, affordable, and psychologically satisfying communities. Advocates of both sustainability and affordable housing will be looking to this model as an alternative form of development that addresses their areas of concern. It is instructive for those interested in promoting cohousing to familiarize themselves with evolutionary trends in cohousing and in strategies for making the development climate more conducive to cohousing.

**Evolution of the Cohousing Model**

**Cohousing Site and House Plans**

The cohousing movement is beginning its third decade. Over this twenty-plus year history, the physical plans for cohousing sites and houses have demonstrated significant changes. With regards to private homes, the most important change is that houses in more recently developed communities are smaller than their predecessors. Community residents are adjusting their lifestyles so that they require less private space.

Site plans have also undergone an evolution. In his examination of Danish cohousing plans, Coldham identifies three stages of plan types. The courtyard model is based on traditional village settlement patterns. As cohousing became accepted, this plan evolved into the pedestrian street model. This plan better implements cohousing’s goals of cooperation and social interaction. The third version involves narrowing the street and spanning it with a glazed roof. This galleria model allows the common spaces to be used year-round in Denmark’s harsh winter climate. Nearly twenty Danish cohousing communities have utilized this feature.

Both changes noted above are based on the European experience with cohousing. In America, the movement is too new to indicate such patterns. The small number of existing communities in the U.S., built over such a short time period, do not yield a sufficient basis for comparison. However, similar trends may reveal themselves. In any event, those designing cohousing communities can make use of this historical record to guide their planning. In addition, architects and other professionals can explore the tradeoffs made by cohousing consumers regarding private and public space.

**Model Diversity**

Variation in European communities is evident in terms of demographics, financing, and tenure. American cohousing developments are just beginning to show similar diversity. With regards to demographics, American communities are demonstrating significant intergenerational diversity. American communities are not yet serving special populations, such as the elderly, as is the case in Denmark. Two initiatives in California, though, are of interest. In San Luis Obispo, a core group is working with the county Housing Authority to develop a mixed-tenure community. Half of the units are planned to be rented to low-income elderly residents. In Morgan Hill, several non-profit housing agencies are working with Catholic Charities to develop a twelve-unit cohousing community for low-income single parent families. Catholic Charities will provide support services to the residents.
Local governments in the U.S. are demonstrating willingness to participate in cohousing ventures. This is generally done in exchange for commitments by the community to make some of the units available as affordable housing units. This, however, coincides with the goals of the typical cohousing community. Government participation is usually through the donation or sale of the site, housing subsidies, or both. Local officials are attracted to these communities because the strong sense of community is seen as an asset. Seattle city councilman Jim Street, who has become a supporter of cohousing by working with an inner city core group, believes that cohousing residents “bring a strong commitment to reach out to their neighbors and build community spirit.”

Planning Process

The one area where the cohousing model may be under the most stress in America is the time it takes to complete a development. Cohousing developments can take three or more years to complete. False starts, such as elapsed site purchase options, test the patience of the core group. Such a lengthy timeframe discriminates against those who can not afford to make financial commitments several years in advance of occupancy. Such delays may also result in increased housing costs. For this reason, a market for experienced cohousing consultants is thriving. Core groups are also seeking the services of developers, some of whom are in turn attempting to develop cohousing communities.

This pressure on developing cohousing communities more quickly may lessen the commitment to the participatory planning process. This would threaten one of the foundations of a healthy cohousing community: its sense of community. It may in turn lessen the use of the common facilities and the emphasis on self-management communities. Without this interaction, the social cohesion of the group may be stunted and the skills necessary to maintain a healthy cooperative lifestyle may not be developed. To circumvent this, long-term opportunities to bond as a community should be sought to replace the process of designing a community together. There may be other vehicles for establishing the crucial sense of community. As core groups delegate more technical responsibility to professionals, they need to seek such alternatives.

Planning for Cohousing

Cohousing is a grassroots response to the need for a more humane and functional housing form. In Europe and America, the chief proponents for cohousing have been architects. To a remarkable degree, though, these ventures have been established with limited professional guidance. Yet, at one time or another all cohousing groups have interacted with planners and other local officials. The suggestions cohousing advocates offer for facilitating the growth of cohousing are similar to those of affordable housing advocates. One fundamental suggestion is that core groups should contact early and often local planners, public officials, and their future neighbors. Such a proactive stance achieves several purposes. First, it informs key persons, in a timely fashion, of an unconventional development proposal. Second, potential problems and adversities can be identified and resolutions sought. This leads to the third reason to engage in such a dialogue. The core group can identify key persons to lobby, if necessary.

Cohousing published a list of eight regulatory and land use techniques that local governments can use to encourage cohousing. The suggested techniques are to streamline permit processing, ease development standards, zone for higher density, establish inclusionary zoning programs, offer growth control exemptions, encourage infill development, encourage adaptive reuse of older structures, and provide subsidies in the form of land donations or writedowns, fee waivers, or low interest loans. Actions such as those described in this section will make the climate more amenable for cohousing.

Conclusion

Cohousing is proving itself to be a versatile and popular model for residential development in Europe and America. It also appears to have the potential for creating sustainable communities. In particular, cohousing communities aim to be environmentally sensitive and conservative consumers of material resources.

Equally important is the scale of cohousing. As a model for sustainable communities, its attainability is not constrained by the actions of elite decision makers as is much of the sustainability agenda. Instead, cohousing takes place on a grassroots level and can be accomplished essentially through collective determination. Although cohousing clearly exhibits attention to the environmental and equity agendas of sustainability, its greatest strength lies in its procedural orientation.

Cohousing creates communities that are not only environmentally sustainable, they are also psychologically sustainable. By providing a nurturing climate for individuals and families, perhaps cohousing residents can find and sustain the strength necessary to achieve sustainability on a larger scale.
References

CoHousing. Fall 1992, Volume 5, Number 3.
CoHousing. Fall 1993, Volume 6, Number 3.
CoHousing. Spring 1992, Volume 5, Number 1.
CoHousing. Spring 1993, Volume 6, Number 1.
CoHousing. Summer 1993, Volume 6, Number 2.


Notes


2 Ibid.

3 CoHousing 6 #3 (Fall 1993).

4 McCamant and Durrett, 4.

5 CoHousing 6 #3, 18-19.

6 Ibid.

7 CoHousing 6 #2 (Summer 1993), 3.


10 Bruce Coldham, “Site Plan Evaluation in Danish Cohousing,” Northeast Cohousing Quarterly 2 #1 (Spring 1991), 4-5.

11 CoHousing 5 #3 (Fall 1992), 13.

12 CoHousing 6 #1 (Spring 1993), 6.

13 CoHousing 5 #1 (Spring 1992), 9.