

Pssst... "Have You Heard of Cohousing?"

Sabrina McKinney

The concept in this strange little word has caught like wildfire, sparking communities and talk across the country. Recently, "Good Morning America" featured cohousing as an increasingly common choice among Baby Boomers. There are many communities in California, including downtown Sacramento, Davis, and Nevada City. With more groups developing (including the one I joined) one begins to wonder, "Why is it so popular?" It's because cohousing offers the close-knit neighborhood that many people crave. It simply makes sense as an answer to our modern-day problems of isolation, sprawl, and environmental concerns.

Imported from Denmark in the 1990's, by Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett (authors of *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*), cohousing is collaboratively-planned housing, consisting of privately-owned, fully-equipped homes plus extensive

common areas. Designed and managed by residents, cohousing features a healthy blend of community and privacy. Residents often gather for community activities like dinners in the Common House, but enjoy separate homes and backyards. Land and resources are shared and used efficiently. After all, how many lawn mowers does one community need? Though residents often share similar values like sustainability, respect, community, and diversity, there are no shared finances or religion.

People today are looking for community and that old-fashioned sense of neighborhood. Households are getting smaller, busier, and more isolated. Our children are more exposed to television and smog than the outdoors. In contrast, cohousing offers a close social network within walking distance and easily streamlined fun activities. You can go to an event for 15 minutes, talk with friends, and walk home. Simple.

The Common House serves as a social hub and meeting place. It can even be used as a center for the greater neighborhood, as residents tend to be very civic-minded. In many communities, meetings for Girl Scouts, neighborhood watch, and even funeral gatherings have been hosted for the neighborhood. These cohousing villages contribute to and often enliven the surrounding community.

Children love cohousing because playmates, enriching activities, and play areas are within easy reach. Forget about scheduling and driving to play dates! Kids have regular healthy meals and a rich resource of mentors. Cohousing often functions like the village it takes to raise a child. Elders enjoy the support and energy of younger residents, while still remaining independent and valued.

Cohousing is an example of "Smart Growth" because it is a more sustainable use of land, often built as infill developments. Smart Growth intends to develop healthy communities, strong neighborhoods and make smart transportation choices available. Many cities are restructuring using Smart Growth principles, and cohousing fits right in. Homes are clustered to preserve more open space. Cars are placed on the perimeter, allowing for pedestrian walkways and a common green. Sites are positioned close to mass transit and within walking distance of shopping and schools. In fact, if more communities could cluster this way, a great deal more land could go unpaved and undeveloped.

The homes are ecologically-designed and energy-efficient, with many features like solar panels. Typical U.S. homes have been quoted as responsible for 20 metric tons of carbon dioxide a year each, which contributes substantially toward global warming. In Nevada City, their utility bills are often just a few dollars. Sustainability is a top priority for most cohousers, as they try to reduce their impact on the land. The homes are generally smaller with smart use of space and storage, and guest rooms close-by in the Common House. Why would I need an extra empty room to heat, cool, and clean all year when I could just reserve a guest room? Now that's hospitality!

I picture socializing being as easy as sitting on my porch with a cup of coffee or walking to the Common House for a dinner I didn't have to cook. And privacy is as easy as closing my door. I want to laugh with my neighbors, work together in the vegetable gardens, and watch my children play in the sun from my porch. I envision us organizing activities like cleanups on the American River. Events like morning yoga, music recitals, walking groups, movie nights, and spring festivals are often commonplace. In our group now, I already love that one member grows chili peppers, as I am a self-professed spice nut. I love that our potlucks are full of delicious, fresh, wholesome foods. Cohousers are often "foodies" I'm discovering. And I enjoy the diversity of ages, families, and backgrounds. Sounds idyllic to me. I'm sold. *

Sabrina McKinney is a member of a developing community on 3.5 acres in Orangevale. For more information, go to www.OrangevaleCohousing.org. Sycamore Village is welcoming new members. Please contact them with any questions or come to a monthly potluck. Sabrina is a Nationally Certified Massage Therapist with a private practice in Roseville. www.RosevilleWellness.com

