

# Beyond Contact-Intergenerational Living in Cohousing Communities

**A cohousing community combines private homes of different sizes and styles alongside shared facilities - gardens, playgrounds, workshops, gyms, and usually a common house enclosing a large kitchen and dining room that provide ample opportunity for intergenerational mingling.**



Figure 1: A cohousing community gathering before dinnertime.

There is still time before the dinner bell rings but as usual neighbors have started to gather in front of the Common House in anticipation. A few older kids, apparently practicing their "outdoor voices," are racing each other up and down the play structure off to the side of the porch. The younger ones have (wisely) opted out of this relay and are playing among the scattered toys and tricycles on the courtyard in front. Their parents and neighbors loiter and banter on the porch as others stroll by or stop by on their way home from work. One neighbor, as often happens, has his guitar out and is strumming and chatting in between songs. A few others seem to have arrived earlier and have settled comfortably into the lounging chairs happily bantering with each other. Everyone is warming up and catching up before the common meal starts. (Fieldnotes from a cohousing community, 2014)

Unlike most residential developments, cohousing communities are explicitly designed to support and encourage intergenerational *living*. A typical cohousing community combines private homes of different sizes and styles alongside shared facilities - gardens, playgrounds, workshops, gyms, and usually a common house enclosing a large kitchen and dining room - that provide ample opportunity for intergenerational mingling. Beyond the physical space, these communities often feature busy social rosters that include weekly (or more) community meals, retreats, movie nights, and other social gatherings. This is on top of the constant (and laborious) task of co-managing the community - Home Owners Association (HOA) meetings, committee meetings, "work parties," cleaning groups and so on - that further oblige interaction among residents.

Within these communities, busy young families live alongside older neighbors who become "surrogate grandparents" while their own grown children and other relatives live far away. Especially among the bigger communities (usually no more than 30 to 40 households), there tend to be a wide range of professions, backgrounds, and skills. Neighbors eagerly contribute their skills to the



**PennState Extension**

governing and upkeep of their communities and many delight in sharing their expertise and free time helping each other. One finds, in almost every community, generous physical, technological, and social infrastructure - gathering nodes, internal web servers, traditions and social routines - set up to support these neighborly interactions. Residents fondly liken their communities to a kind of "extended family" or "modern day village." There are differences and challenges of course, as in any living arrangement, and there are perhaps more responsibilities and higher expectations, but many, after years of sharing their lives, form deep attachments to their neighbors and to this intensely intergenerational way of life.



Figure 2: Porch around common house in one cohousing community.

## Cohousing as Design Concept

The idea behind cohousing comes from Denmark, where, in the 1960s, growing dissatisfaction with single-family housing inspired more collaborative experiments called *bofllesskah* (living-togetherness).<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s, a pair of American architects, Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, visited these housing cooperatives and returned to the U.S. to adapt the idea in their first book *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* (1988). The book came out two years before the term "McMansion" was coined. As American homes and American mortgages inflated across the country, a small number of people looking for something different found both inspiration and guidance in McCamant and Durrett's book. Cohousing communities started popping up across the country beginning with the first one, Muir Commons, in Davis, CA. Today, according to the Cohousing Association of America, there are more than 200 built communities in the US and more than 50 in some stage of construction. Cohousing is also found in other countries including Australia, England, Japan, and of course Denmark where it is estimated that nearly 10% of households live in such communities.

Depending on where it is located, one cohousing community can look very different from the next. There are thriving cohousing developments throughout every state, from urban condominium-like buildings to suburban clusters of townhouses or detached homes, to rural developments with generous open space. Some are retrofitted old buildings, some are simply single-family homes which have torn down their abutting backyard fences, while others are completely new developments designed and built upon previously undeveloped properties.

Whatever the form, most cohousing communities share a few general characteristics: participatory planning, community-oriented design, shared common facilities, resident self-management, nonhierarchical organization, and separate household incomes (McCamant & Durrett, 1994, p. 38). By design and in practice, cohousing communities also share a vigorous commitment to intergenerational living.<sup>2</sup> Many feature a variety of household structures - young couples with children, older as well as retired couples, single parent and even single person households. This diverse composition, according to many residents, is what makes possible well-functioning and well-managed cohousing communities. Residents with more free or flexible time contribute to the organizing of events and meetings; younger residents contribute labor; and everyone puts in whatever skills and expertise they have towards the community "brain trust." The mixture and mingling of such age-diverse neighbors - of young and old, working and retired, and those with needs and those with skills - generate vibrant and engaged communities.

It's easy to see the appeal of this housing option. But how does it feel to actually live in cohousing? How does daily life *look* and *feel* in such communities? As an anthropologist, I conducted fieldwork on cohousing for nearly three years and visited more than 20 communities on both coasts, including one community in MA that we came to call home. For over a year, my family, with two young children, lived and worked and played (and sometimes argued) alongside our fellow neighbors in our lively intergenerational community. Among the 32 households in our community, there were five of us with young children, many

professionals without kids, several single senior residents, and many "surrogate grandparent" households. Our lives in this setting were rich, and busy, and sometimes challenging. It was a little like stepping into a modern day village with its own distinct spatial, social, and cultural configurations.

## Cohousing as Intergenerational Contact Zones

---

Cohousing communities tend to be as diverse and varied as their inhabitants. While each community has its own norms and rules and routines, there is generally some set of spatial features, regular gatherings, and tools and resources that form the core infrastructure of all well-functioning, intergenerational communities. The following section offers some examples of these attributes.

### Spaces & Places

Cars are generally left in the parking area near the entrance of the community, next to the common house. Inside the common house, a brightly lit hallway lined with mailboxes and bulletin boards led past a laundry room and a children's art room (currently unoccupied but bore telling signs of recent activity). The hallway opens up to a bright, expansive kitchen and an even larger dining room (currently set up with chairs for an upcoming meeting). A grandmother and a toddler played nearby (and said hello). In one corner of the dining room was a piano and along one wall, a fireplace that looked as if it had just been used. Off to the side of the dining room was a cozy room with a television and bookshelves and inviting couches and chairs - the TV/small meeting room which is remarkably quiet, I'm told, when the glass doors are closed. The common house is large and features a second floor with guest rooms (occupied as usual), a rather sequestered "teen room" (momentarily empty), and the soon-to-be community office space by the balcony windows in the back. Outside the common house was a large brick patio that led to a sand box and the community pool (encircled in locked metal fence to protect young children and animals, I'm told). Elsewhere and dotted throughout the community were shared vegetable gardens, bike sheds, a tool shop (to which neighbors donated their own collections), a potters studio (where an elderly resident sat glazing tiles), and play areas with various play structures (some for younger and some for older kids). Each home had a front as well as more private (and sometimes fenced) backyard. Most homes are not large by design, one resident explained, but there is ample community space to socialize and "store their stuff." They also don't need as much stuff, many claim, as neighbors frequently borrow and share with each other. (Fieldnotes from a community tour, 2011)

I remember the first time I visited a cohousing community. On a warm Sunday afternoon, I arrived at my prescheduled tour of one community in a suburb of California and was immediately taken by the scene of cheerful houses and gardens with friendly neighbors and kids milling about. In the years since that first encounter, I've visited communities of many different sizes and designs but all featured a similar general layout and facilities. The common house in our MA community was generously sized and enclosed a mail room (a daily meeting place for neighbors), a kids playroom (separate but visible through a window from the dining room), a laundry room (plus space for indoor laundry racks), a pair of guestrooms (managed through an online signup sheet), a "library"/pool lounge, a basement with an exercise room and bike storage, and most importantly for a cohousing community, a large kitchen that opened onto several connected dining rooms and lounge areas. As in every other cohousing community, our common house was rarely unoccupied. Even outside formal meal times and events, neighbors used the space for social gatherings, held meetings in the various lounge areas, worked in the dining rooms or library, and popped in and out for one reason or another. On the weekends and at the end of workdays, neighbors converged and lingered around the mailroom and porch and, if the weather was nice, the brick-paved courtyard surrounding the porch. At these times, it was nearly impossible to have a quick visit to the common house and not get embroiled in whatever conversations or activities were taking place. Even outside of shared meals and activities, the common house was the central meeting place for the community.

Like many other cohousing communities, ours also featured gardens, a workshop, and various meeting nodes--a bench here and picnic table there--throughout the rest of the community. It is easy, and often nearly impossible not to, encounter and linger and chat with neighbors out and about. One can imagine how these spaces enliven and intensify the social atmosphere in the community.



## Routines and Rituals

On meal days, the community kitchen would be abuzz with activity - often frantic in the hour leading up to the meal. The head cook and two assistant cooks would chat and banter as dishes bubbled in the pots and vegetables roasted in the ovens. Depending on the menu - and the inclination and commitment of the cooks - preparation often started the day before with shopping and precooking. Around 6:00pm - delays and/or undercooked dishes were not uncommon - someone rings the meal bell outside the common house to announce the beginning of the meal. This is more performative than practical as the size of the community means the bell is rarely heard by most of the houses located at a distance from the common house, especially during cooler months when windows are shut. Nonetheless, the children would often jostle each other for a chance at this privilege and those who do hear the ring immediately scurry to the common house if they haven't already. Inside the common house dining room - the Great Room as it's called here--neighbors gather in a circle while the menu is described (although most diners already know this when signed up for the meal) and cooks and assistants are acknowledged. Hosts introduced any visiting family or friends, and other neighbors with important announcements take their turns. This is often the time when neighbors remind each other of upcoming events - both in the community and beyond, when birthdays, anniversaries or other significant family dates are announced, and when teenagers in the community unveil yet another school fundraiser - for track or band or the library--and promise to "come around the tables" later to collect donations. (Not surprisingly, the children of the community are champion fundraisers among their peers at school.) With this quick round of announcements over, everyone scatters to their tables, already set up with "family style" dishes and platters. Each table seats six to eight and there is always a rush to reserve seats at desired tables in the minutes preceding a meal. The dining room hums with chatter as the dishes and platters are passed around. Everyone quickly settles down to eat, and the food goes quickly. There are usually seconds available but popular tables - some accommodating an extra friend or family member - often run short and have to send out "scavengers" who circulate among others tables looking to appropriate leftovers. The whole affair lasts no more than 30 minutes before the kitchen is bustling again with cleanup activities. Diners clear their own plates and help wipe down their tables. Cleared plates and utensils are passed to the dish crew in the kitchen and the dining room is quickly swept and restored to order. (Fieldnotes from common meal, 2013)

Communities are often defined by the routines and rhythms of their social life. For cohousers, eating together - whether casual meals with one or few neighbors, regular potlucks, or more formal "common meals" - is the "glue" that holds the community together. So much more happened at these meals than the mere sharing of food. Many residents remarked that cohousing would not be possible without these routines and rituals around food.

In most cohousing communities there are also a myriad of other regular social gatherings such as retreats, festivals, group activities, holiday celebrations, "work parties," and, always, meetings of one kind or another. Our community in MA also held frequent music concerts that often drew not only community members but also neighbors from further afield together for lively Friday evenings. The occasions made interaction among neighbors easy, sometimes necessary, and almost habitual. After living in cohousing for a period of time, one gets accustomed to, and hopefully more skilled at, interacting and engaging with one's neighbors on a daily basis.



Figure 3: Spring Festival with puppets and music.

## Tools and Resources

It's easy to get cohousers to start talking about all the ways they share with neighbors - sharing resources, ideas, and time. A lot of the sharing appears to be arranged online or over email. Many communities have long-established internal list serves or online portals. Among my neighbors in MA, technology-facilitated sharing was commonplace. All residents had access to an internal database of information and resources as well as various list serves that dished out announcements, requests and general information. Our emails were perpetually abuzz with neighbors making requests for rides or seeking favors or offering (or requesting) news and advice. Many emails circulate daily asking if "someone out there" might have an extra something or another - a stick of butter, a particular kind of spice, a Philips wrench, a cardboard box of a certain dimension for shipping something. Almost always, a follow-up email with a quick "all set" and acknowledgement of the benefactor pops up within hours of the request. Alongside favors arranged online, similar exchanges take place offline just as often. Every resident expects and is expected to participate and partake of this circulation of support.

As expected, communities often feature varied talents and skills. This is something many cohousers like to point out about their community - the "deep pool" of expertise. Many are happy and eager to contribute what they can towards the betterment of their community and their neighbors, and they in turn benefit from whatever expertise their neighbors might have. These resources, facilitated by technology, naturally feed into the cycle of interaction and mutual support among neighbors.

## Lessons for Creating and Sustaining Residential Intergenerational Contact Zones

---

Living in cohousing offers a variety of benefits - material as well as social. Many of these come from its commitment to bringing together residents of different ages. As such, cohousing offers valuable lessons in building as well as sustaining intergenerational living zones.

### Participatory design:

The involvement of future residents in every stage of the design process is believed to lead to stronger, more cohesive communities. The experience of discussing, debating, negotiating and finally deciding together the features and layout of their future community not only makes for a better, more suitably customized design but also builds relationships and communications skills that will figure critically in community life after move-in.

### Communal spaces:

Generous shared spaces and facilities make possible frequent and easy socialization among neighbors. Importantly, these spaces are intentionally intergenerational. A "common house," for example, typically includes a multipurpose dining room, a TV room or lounge, a playroom or studio, and various other mixed-use and mixed-age spaces. These spaces both combine and, at times when necessary, serve separately the needs of different age groups (such as locating a playroom off the dining room). They also, by design and in practice, serve multiple purposes and evolve over time as community members themselves age and change.

Elsewhere in the community, especially in larger, less urban communities, gardens, gathering nodes, and playgrounds abound. The addition of benches and tables, plus their typically central locations, ensure that such play areas and gardens become meeting places for neighbors of all ages. Even the areas between houses - the pedestrian pathways - allow for, and indeed encourage, spontaneous gatherings.

### Privacy and choice:

Cohesive community life of course benefits from cozy neighborhood design and cozy neighborly relations. The quality of life in these communities also depends on maintaining privacy and choice (and choice in privacy). Cohousing design often emphasize access to shared spaces as much as to private and secluded spaces. For example, individual homes in larger cohousing communities often feature "private" backyard spaces (fenced or not) alongside more "public" front yards. Many common houses offer quiet or adult-only areas where residents can seek refuge from the bustle (and mess) of community life even outside their private homes. While homes tend to include such community-friendly features such as glassed entry doors (often leading directly into kitchens where, it is assumed, we spend most of our time), as well as patios and "lounge" areas in front of each house, the norm in many communities tend to be well-shaded doors (and windows) and patios that are landscaped or otherwise marked off as extensions of private homes. This (built-in) versatility makes community life much happier (and sometimes quieter) for residents of all ages.

## Rituals and routines:

Cohousing design certainly makes more likely and possible spontaneous neighborly engagements but it is the regular, routine social events that predictably strengthen and sustain community life. Almost all cohousing communities make efforts to regularly hold "common meals," potlucks, holiday celebrations, festivals and retreats. These frequent gatherings, often elaborately planned and meticulously managed, help nurture and reinforce the neighborly relationships that underlie all community life. They are also, always, opportunities for residents of all ages to mingle and mix.

## Technology and the social:

Cohousing communities, thanks to their demographic diversity, often feature enviable technological infrastructure and in-house IT support. Resources such as community-maintained servers and internal websites (for circulating news or signing up for common meals or guestrooms) effectively create *virtual* community spaces alongside the concrete *physical* ones. These realms offer additional (and even more convenient and inclusive) opportunities for neighbors to interact. They supplement and bolster real world interactions and even, sometimes, make possible and manageable elaborate systems of sharing and communication (such as reserving popular guestrooms or shared equipment, or signing up for meals and community jobs). For residents of all ages, these parallel environments make for a more expansive community *space* as well as *experience*.

## References

---

- Christensen, K. & Levinson, D. (Eds.). (2003). *Encyclopedia of community: From the village to the virtual world*. New York, NY: Sage.
- Durrett, C. (2009). *The senior cohousing handbook*. Gabriola Islands, BC: New Society Publishers.
- Gudmand-Hoyer, J. (1964). The missing link between utopia and the dated one-family house. *Information*, 26.
- McCamant, K. & Durrett, C. (1988). *Cohousing: A contemporary approach to housing ourselves*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

## Author

---

Lisia Zheng, PhD Candidate Department of Anthropology, UC Berkeley

and Visiting Scholar Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education, Penn State University

---

1 The idea was first introduced in Denmark by a young architect named Jan Gudmand-Hoyer who drew inspiration from his studies of American utopias while a student at Harvard. His article based on his studies, "The Missing Link Between Utopia and the Dated One-Family House" (1964), drew over 100 interested families eager to try out his proposed housing alternative. This was the beginning of cohousing in Denmark. Two decades later, McCamant and Durrett studied these Danish communities and brought the idea (back) to the U.S. (Christensen and Levinson eds., 2003. *Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World*.)

2 While most existing cohousing communities are still intergenerational, there has been increasing interest in adapting cohousing principles to building "senior cohousing." Durrett himself addresses this market demand in his recent book, *The Senior Cohousing Handbook* (2009).

---

## extension.psu.edu

Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences research and extension programs are funded in part by Pennsylvania counties, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Where trade names appear, no discrimination is intended, and no endorsement by Penn State Extension is implied.

**This publication is available in alternative media on request.**

Penn State is an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer, and is committed to providing employment opportunities to all qualified applicants without regard to race, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability or protected veteran status.

© The Pennsylvania State University 2019