

Shared Vision

Cohousing concept gains ground

by Lisa Oram

Before Beth Lev began visiting friends who lived in a cohousing community in Amherst, Massachusetts, she was skeptical about the Danish collaborative living concept based on principals of cooperation and interaction. First introduced in North America less than 20 years ago, these intentional communities are designed, developed and managed by their residents, who maintain individual homes but share common facilities. Although Lev had considered buying a duplex with friends, she imagined cohousing would be intrusive and would limit her autonomy.

Today, 10 years after joining the Pathways Cohousing community in Amherst, Lev says cohousing provides “just the right blend of independence and interdependence.” She says the support and richness that her neighbors add to her life far outweigh the hard work of being in multiple, complex relationships or any loss of freedom she might feel.

Lev and her family are making a housing and lifestyle choice that is increasingly appealing to people who value a sense of community not so readily found in contemporary cities and suburbs. The Cohousing Association of the United States reports that there are more than 100 cohousing communities completed or in development across the U.S. and Canada.

Amherst architect Laura Fitch calls Massachusetts a “hotbed” of cohousing activity—Western Massachusetts boasts two communities in Amherst and two in nearby Northampton. Fitch and her business partner, Mary Kraus, know a lot about cohousing—they are founding residents of Pioneer Valley Cohousing in Amherst, and principals of Kraus Fitch Architects, Inc., one of several architectural firms in the U.S. that specialize in cohousing. The duo has worked with nearly 20 groups across the country, offering participatory design workshops, consultation and project management.

Laying the Foundation

Cohousing communities exist in urban, suburban and rural areas and are generally comprised of 20 to 30 individually owned homes and shared facilities, such as a common house, a playground, a parking area, and a garden or farm. Some communities share guest rooms, craft space or a home office building. Cohousing neighborhoods distinguish themselves from other intentional communities by having no shared economy and no assumed religious or ideological basis.

The participatory process of crafting a group’s mission and determining its priorities, usually done by consensus, can take years and an experienced consultant can be invaluable.

“Why should groups reinvent the wheel?” asks Fitch. “There are things that groups know about themselves that we couldn’t possibly know or invent for them—the priority of their goals, their aesthetic. But we can help them articulate what they already know and come to consensus about the collective vision. And we can share what we know as architects and people who live in cohousing.”

Lev says that the involved planning process—which typically begins long before land or blueprints have materialized—discourages or dissuades some people, and notes that people came and went during the five years that Pathways was building its foundation, metaphorically, if not physically.

“There can be a lot of ideological diversity within groups and between groups,” says Kraus. And yet, there are certain elements that are part of most, if not all, cohousing neighborhoods. For example, housing is typically clustered around a pedestrian walkway. While many communities offer single-family houses, there are often duplexes or triplexes with shared porches or decks. Kraus and her neighbor share a toaster and a microwave—accessed by going from kitchen to kitchen under the cover of their shared porch. “People may choose to share many things in cohousing, though many don’t traipse in and out of each others kitchens as often as we do,” Kraus says.

However, cohousing communities are designed to encourage and facilitate human interaction. Above Kraus’ desk is a chart that shows at what distance a person’s facial expression is visible, at what distance a face is recognizable, and at what distance two people could no longer hear each other. Fitch borrows the term “random connections by design” from a landscape architect to describe the way a site plan can achieve this goal. Convenient meeting places are designed in, for example, by locating personal mailboxes in the common house and having shared parking on the periphery of the site rather than next to each individual home. Fitch describes the camaraderie of clearing snow off the cars on winter mornings, or when the weather warms, of sitting on wide steps or a low brick wall outside the common house and reading mail.

That's what attracted Tanya van Breevoort of Great Barrington, Mass., to a Berkshire Cohousing group that met for several years in the mid-'90s. "As a single mother, I was drawn to the idea of people living in a community, where the intent was to combine social functions which would naturally lend itself to community.

"I mean real small town community," she adds, "where people happen upon each other and there's a natural evolution of people watching each other's children." To Van Breevoort's mind, this is far more appealing than the formal play dates many parents schedule for their children. She also saw cohousing as a way for neighbors to support one another, "so single mothers wouldn't have to do it all alone," she says. They could share childcare, meals and support each other's ways.

There is still a need to balance privacy with community, says Fitch, noting that in many cohousing communities, each household has its own backyard. But Kraus recalls a community she visited several years ago in which the houses, built with huge south windows, were placed very densely to conserve land. "People rarely drew the curtains," she notes. "Privacy is experienced differently in a cohousing neighborhood when you live among people whom you know quite well."

Broader Goals

Smaller homes, shared resources, open land—these values in cohousing go hand-in-hand with more sustainable and ecological living. Some communities, often called EcoVillages, put sustainability at the top of their priorities. Cobb Hill Cohousing in Vermont and the EcoVillage of Ithaca both use cohousing as a model for their residences, but expand the concept to include organic farming, an educational arm that promotes sustainability and earth-sensitive businesses. A group interested in building a Hudson Valley EcoVillage has a core of 10 people who have been meeting for about nine months with 30 or 40 interested participants on the periphery, according to co-founder, Wilton Duckworth. The group maintains a listserv and has several working groups exploring topics such as collective ownership of land trust, community supported agriculture, a cooperative college and the use of technology within the community.

"An EcoVillage can be harder to build than cohousing," Duckworth says, "because it's more costly to build at that level of sustainability. We need to find people who are willing to have a more hands-on approach to offset the greater costs."

Lev points out that at Pathways, many of the earliest building decisions they made had to be weighed against their desire to be financially accessible. Fortunately, many of the design elements that promote the social aspect of living in cohousing are inherently sustainable. Attaching and clustering homes reduces the amount of material use and infrastructure. "Shared walls reduce heat loss. Shorter sewer lines, less wood, less paint... it all makes a difference," Fitch says.

While working with groups on prioritizing goals for a site or building plan, Kraus explains that there is a range of environmentally friendly or "green" strategies available. Some, she says, "save money, some cost little or nothing beyond conscious design, and some require an investment. Some sustainability is about how you live now, and some is about how you prepare for the future."

Because decisions are made by consensus, someone is always compromising, Fitch explains. Some people, she says, are willing to invest more for sustainable design, and they don't care about the monetary payback. Others are not. "But," says Kraus, "on the whole, we are a greener community than average."

Beth Lev says it's exactly that compromise that is cohousing's greatest value. "I've learned that every issue is major to someone," she says. "Cohousing forces people with different opinions and values to live together. There's nothing more basic to being human in the world."

Fitch echoes the sentiment. "Either one of us will take the lead on a remodeling or renovation job," she says, "but when it comes to cohousing, we work together."

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