

The closeness of strangers

[Print](#)

By Ted Smalley Bowen

Published: November 10 2006 17:56 | Last updated: November 10 2006 17:56

The kiddie barrier at the top of the stairs leading to the Amherst, Massachusetts offices of Kraus Fitch Architects is there to keep Paco, a beagle-dachshund mix of a certain age, from popping out unaccompanied. Not that he looks ready to bolt. Curled up on a padded wooden chair, he's the picture of a contented office dog. Only he doesn't belong to anyone in the firm. He's there, more or less, as a result of cohousing.

Cohousing, an American term for a Scandinavian model of residential living dating from the 1960s, refers to "intentional communities" of condominiums or co-operatives, occasionally rentals, with shared ownership of extensive common areas. Planned and designed with significant resident input, they are also managed and maintained by residents through non-hierarchical decision-making. This might sound like a commune but there are key differences. Although neighbours tend to be very involved in each other's lives (hence the Kraus Fitch architects' willingness to watch Paco during the working day), they don't share "ownership" of the dog, nor is dog-sitting mandatory.

"Cohousing communities are places where people get healthy doses of social connection but they have their own living units, kitchens and backyards," says Timothy Beatley, a professor of architecture at the University of Virginia, who last May led a study tour of sustainable communities in Denmark and Sweden. "They're a very nice balance of public and private."

Cohousing is not the product of a single ethos or social movement, although individual groups might share a desire for a more cohesive multi-family design and ample common space, for example, or an appreciation of deep ecology and community activism. Instead it grew out of a desire on the part of working families, single professionals and senior citizens for a greater sense of community, as more people moved away from traditional neighbourhoods and towns and from single-family households.

According to estimates from the Cohousing Association of the United States, there are now more than 300 such developments around the world, most notably in Scandinavia but also elsewhere in Europe and in Australia, Japan and the US. Some are ex-urban and rural, though an increasing number are urban infill projects on as little as an acre. Developments range from a handful to dozens of units and are mostly new construction, including a fair number of adaptive reuse scenarios. Whatever the location, the US cohousing association reports that residents tend to use their cars about half as much as people in conventional housing, given the social, dining and childcare options offered. There are significant overlaps with the "green", "smart growth" and New Urbanist movements, which respectively promote eco-friendliness, intelligent urban and suburban expansion, and planning that makes cities more livable.

"Cohousing revitalises the idea of neighbourhood in communities where people are feeling isolated," says Dolores Hayden, a professor at Yale University and the author of books on residential architecture and sprawl. "We're in an environment where households have gotten smaller and houses larger over the past 50 years. We're a society of more young singles living alone and older people living alone. It's no longer a majority of married-couple households."

"If you're a single mother or of the age that people you know in the region have left or died, there are many life circumstances for which cohousing makes sense," adds David Dixon, principal with Goody Clancy architects of Boston and chair of the American Institute of Architects' regional and urban design committee.

The cost of cohousing units varies, depending on location and build quality but, according to the US cohousing association, most are at least market rate, if not a bit above, since owners are buying a share of some common property. But with government subsidies planners and designers also see cohousing as a way to provide much-needed affordable housing.

The model bypasses conventional developers almost by definition as groups of like-minded individuals hash out community goals and work with business advisers and designers over typical two- to five-year project cycles. Design essentials (many of which are now filtering into mainstream real estate) include common areas, typically in stand-alone buildings that get heavy use with regular group dinners, performances, speakers, classes and childcare; media rooms; wireless networks; and exercise rooms. Although, says Kathryn McCamant of the Berkeley, California-based architectural practice Cohousing Company, "I don't know of a European cohousing community with a workout room. In fact, in the older developments, they still smoke in the common house."

McCamant and her husband and business partner, Charles Durrett, are the authors of several books on cohousing and credited with

bringing the concept to the US. They aren't aware of any completed, occupied community that has failed. In fact, adds Beatley, many have proven remarkably durable, even with a wide variety of operating models. Trudslund, outside Copenhagen, for example, is 25 years old and "works very well as a small neighbourhood", he says. "People know each other at a level of 10 to 12 families. They know each other's names, can call on each other if they need help." He also cites Hilversum in the Netherlands, which opened in 1977 and organises a larger development around units of four or five families. "It's a nested approach that provides appropriate levels of intimacy at higher scales."

The price for fellowship, safety, back-up childcare or dog-sitting and a sense of place is a willingness to work at co-operative living. While community rules are generally not legally binding, residents find it hard to remain seriously at odds with their neighbours for long. Successful cohousing groups invest time and resources from the outset on teamwork and conflict resolution.

"People can learn to co-operate like they can learn to knit but it's probably just as imposing," says Durrett. "I've seen people who at the first meeting didn't have a clue how to operate in a non-hierarchical situation. We advise groups to invest in non-violent conflict resolution classes as part of the project budget and to hire conflict resolution facilitators," he says.

Boston's year-old Jamaica Plain Cohousing development has set up a conflict prevention and resolution (CPR) committee, according to Jeanne Goodman, a computer training and support specialist who lives in the 30-unit complex with her husband and children. "We came up with a 'non-negotiable negativity clause' that says if you want to be a member of this community, you are not allowed to say 'I don't care if you have a conflict with me'," adds neighbour Patricia Lautner, a high-tech project manager. But residents can choose to address conflict in a variety of ways, whether over drinks, in writing, through a trained mediator or an intermediary.

This community is seen as something of a bellwether, in that it represents a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds and 10 per cent of its units are subsidised by the local government. (The group also privately subsidised some purchases.)

City housing lotteries – a system for allotting affordable homes – are a departure for cohousing, which has been largely a market-rate, no-strings-attached phenomenon, but Jamaica Plain followed the example of cohorts in Cambridge and negotiated a role in the Boston lottery. Participants were required to attend a one-day cohousing retreat to ensure that winners were at least familiar with the community's goals.

Both Goodman and Lautner say the hybrid model has worked well, although dealing with the practical aspects of the wealth gaps has been tricky. The complex's common house, for example, is furnished with donations, which raises the question of influence. "People wondered why the high-income person should be allowed to make a decision about what goes into the common space," Lautner says. "If somebody wants to donate a \$10,000 grandfather clock, somebody else might say: 'For that money, we could redo the windows. Why not just donate it?'" The group relies on a donations committee to set priorities.

The levelling impulse also extends to private dwellings. "We also have a programme that if I make an upgrade to my unit, I should voluntarily also make a donation, on an anonymous basis, to the community," Lautner says. "Fifty per cent of that goes to the affordability fund and 50 per cent goes to the common fund. How much I donate is based on my personal income."

At Pioneer Valley in Amherst, which was designed by Kraus Fitch and includes the building in which their offices are now located, the community is mostly affluent and well educated. Laura Fitch, a company principal who lives in one of the 30 hillside townhouses, describes it as close-knit and as a safe and supportive place to raise children. In fact, since the development opened in 1994, she and her neighbours have hosted more than a dozen foster children.

"I put out an e-mail [saying] I was thinking about taking some kids in but in order for me to say 'yes' I needed to know that I could have an adult babysitter once a week for three months so I could continue taking my dance class [and] someone who could watch the foster kids get off the bus Monday afternoons so I could take my kids to piano lessons," Fitch says. "I just listed a bunch of things. Not only was every single one of them met but someone wrote and said 'I'd be glad to cook for your family once a week for as long as you have the [foster] kids'."

That's not to say life in Pioneer Valley is perfect. "Now that we've been living in the community for 12 years, hardly anyone shows up at the meetings. A lot of business is done by e-mail, by subcommittee, [and] I do think that dilutes the sense of community," Fitch says.

Changing lifestyles are also a concern. Now that the original crop of children is growing up, families are drifting apart, she explains. The past year has brought a spate of injuries and several cancer scares. And the steep approach to the development is becoming problematic. "We're ageing in a place that doesn't really support us as well as it could," Fitch says. "I think the cohousing model is flexible enough [but] I don't think our physical environment is."

Still, with zoning permission for another two buildings, residents should be able to erect them on a more accessible, level plot of land.

And enthusiasm for cohousing ideals is still very much alive in Pioneer Valley. Just look at Paco. "When the dog's home alone during

the day, he cries," Fitch says. So "we just told the owner: 'He can be in our office'."

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2006

"FT" and "Financial Times" are trademarks of the Financial Times. [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms](#)
© Copyright [The Financial Times](#) Ltd 2006.