

## Cohousing — A Growing Choice For Senior Living



Residents enjoy a meal on the common terrace at a cohousing community in Nevada City. —*Courtesy photo © McCamant and Durrett Architects*

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## Cohousing Comes to Northern California

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Staff Writer

Cohousing — a collaborative living arrangement first made popular in Europe — has quickly become a big hit for seniors, especially in California, seeking an active, vibrant community. Cohousing projects inundate California, and the idea is now coming to Orangevale.

Cohousing is a type of collaborative housing in which residents actively participate in the design and operation of their own neighborhoods. The idea originated in Denmark and was brought to the United States in the 1980s by architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett.

Many cohousing communities are multigenerational, but senior cohousing communities for active adults over the age of 55 are increasing in popularity. Senior cohousing communities use universal design to ensure that residents can gracefully age in place. In all other respects they share the same defining characteristics as multigenerational cohousing.

There are six defining characteristics of a cohousing community. All of the characteristics help to foster a sense of community so essential to cohousing. Forming a cohousing community is a participatory process. Future residents participate in the design of the community to meet their needs precisely.

In some cases, the initial steps are the most difficult. One local cohousing project in Orangevale is facing neighborhood opposition.

"Some of our neighbors are worried about our project," said Orangevale Cohousing member senior Marty Maskall. "But any negative impact is actually lower than that of a conventional housing community."

"Opposition usually reverses once neighbors see the project going in," said 52-year-old Charles Durrett. And Durrett should know. Not only did he coin the phrase "cohousing" when he brought the concept to the America, the firm he started with Kathryn McCamant — McCamant and Durrett — is an acknowledged leader in cohousing design.

Durrett became fascinated with cohousing while a student in Denmark.

"As I walked to the train station every day, I noticed a splendid sense of life that seemed present in the cohousing communities I passed," he explained.

Durrett's fascination with cohousing has grown into a crusade. The ardent advocate of cohousing is also the author of two books on the topic. The latest — "Senior Cohousing: A Community Approach to Living Independently" — deals with cohousing as another housing alternative for today's dynamic seniors.

Neighborhood design is the second defining characteristic of a cohousing community. Community appearance is not the controlling concept of neighborhood design. The intention is to facilitate the creation of a strong sense of community.

Many cohousing proponents are finding that sense of community to be a strong selling point. Thirty two-year-old Robert Grossklaus was introduced to cohousing by his wife.

"We like that cohousing is a network of people who can care for one another if need be," he explained. "We also like the idea of living in a community of shared resources."

The centerpiece of the cohousing community is also its third defining characteristic. Common facilities are designed for daily use as an integral supplement to the private residences in the community. Typically the common house includes a common kitchen, dining area, sitting area, children's playroom and laundry. It can also include a workshop, library, exercise room, crafts room and/or one or two guest rooms.

All cohousing developments are managed by residents. In most cases, they also perform much of the work required to maintain the property. They participate in the preparation of common meals and meet regularly to solve problems and develop policies for the community.

Cohousing communities have a unique non-hierarchical decision-making process. No one person or group has authority over others. Most cohousing groups make all of their decisions by consensus, and although many groups have a policy for voting if the group cannot reach consensus after a number of attempts, it is rarely or never necessary to resort to voting.

Local senior Martha Dickson is moving into a multigenerational cohousing community in Grass Valley. Dickson fell in love with the self-governing aspects of cohousing.

"I like the idea of using consensus to make decisions," she said.

The final characteristic of cohousing is a lack of a shared community economy. A cohousing community is not a source of income for its members. Work performed by members is considered that member's contribution to the shared responsibilities.

The old fashioned sense of neighborhood provided in cohousing communities has led to a virtual explosion worldwide, but the concept does require some getting used to.

"The biggest difficulty we have encountered is that, as human beings, our ability to live with our neighbors is a learned behavior," said Durrett. "It can take a while to get used to."

Based on his own experience Durrett knows that inexperience can be overcome in short order. "I learned that my quality-of-life was much better when I cooperated willingly with my neighbors."

Everyone is welcome to join a cohousing and consensus meeting at Arden Dimick Library, 891 Watt Ave., on January 25 at 7 p.m. Come and learn more about cohousing. For more information, call Al Jacobus at (916) 366-8540.