

# THE OAKBOOK

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## REAL ESTATE

### Temescal: Coho Capital of North America



In north Oakland's Temescal district, two co-housing communities thrive, roughly a half-mile apart. Soon, a third "coho" will arrive, now slated for a site roughly a half-mile away. The three will form a nearly-perfect equilateral triangle.

The threesome will make Temescal the "epicenter of cohousing in North America," as Joan Lichterman likes to point out. Lichterman is a founding member of North Oakland Co-housing, a mix of singles, couples, and families with plans to live cooperatively in a proposed 27-33 unit building, designed to replace the Kingfish Pub and its neighbors on Claremont Avenue.

Often, cohos are built from the ground up, accommodating an assortment of strangers who want to be neighbors. Other cohos emerge when friends retrofit existing structures in a cluster. Whatever the scenario, the goal remains the same: to live in private residences while sharing open areas, a common room, and a determined amount of work and mealtimes together.

And all of this gets accomplished with no formal leader—cohos rule by consensus.

This concept of cohousing did not originate in Temescal, or even in its progressive neighbor to the north, Berkeley. It comes from Denmark. But it was, in fact, Berkeley architects Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant who introduced cohousing to the United States after studying in Copenhagen. In the 1980's, the

couple set up a cohousing consulting company and wrote the definitive book, [Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves](#). They obviously were onto something. They're still consulting and designing for communities around the country.

California leads the nation with 43 cohos, and the Bay Area claims several in Emeryville, Berkeley, Oakland, Pleasant Hill and beyond. Durrett says it makes sense that the East Bay has the highest concentration of cohos in the country, due to its “critical mass” of “critical thinkers.” Not to mention a “critical mass” of soaring housing costs.

### **Zoom in to the Temescal trio:**

Temescal Commons Cohousing formed more than ten years ago, when members of Rockridge United Methodist Church began discussing the idea of living together as a community. Their desire to stay near the church led them to Temescal. “We intentionally moved into a transitional neighborhood,” says Cheryl Garlick, one of the founding members.

The group purchased an 11,300 square foot lot, and set about designing a nine-unit complex for the site, incorporating one existing farmhouse -- and plenty of critical thinking.

While cohousing tends to conserve resources through its philosophy of sharing, Temescal Commons went a step further, building an environment “to be good stewards of creation.” That mission is reflected in the construction of the building. The insulation inside the walls comes from cellulose. Solar-electric panels are integrated into the metal roofing. For their efforts—and their substantial initial investment—their units use a seventh of the electricity and less than half the gas of the average home in the area.

Garlick says that this is a good selling point, but also says the neighborhood is not. She wonders about the safety of Temescal, and the quality of the schools. She is tired of the never-ending urban trash on the street, and tired of the petty vandalism. She dislikes that her kids’ bikes get stolen, and that her car gets broken into. On the other hand, a fellow cohouser comes to the rescue, lending a car and sweeping up glass. She says, “The cohousing community helps soften the blows.”

Still, she believes that Temescal is moving in the right direction, with “all kinds of cool things” happening in the neighborhood.

Across town, Temescal Creek Cohousing began when a group of friends entered the Bay Area housing market in 1999 with the intention of living communally. When they located three adjacent duplexes in Temescal, they consulted architect McCamant. “She looked at the property and advised us to make an offer as soon as possible,” wrote founding member [Karen Hester](#).

With the coho established, the group kept alert for opportunities on the block, and added to its community as property became available. Today, Temescal Creek consists of nine households. Due to its growth spurts, it exists on paper as three different condo associations. But it operates as just one, says newcomer Suzanne L’Heureux, who, along with her husband, purchased a duplex “with a complete stranger.”

L’Heureux used to live in San Francisco. With a new baby, she felt isolated and lonely. She was tired of the effort it took to schedule even a casual meeting with friends. She craved connection. When she heard about cohousing from a friend, she was hooked. Not finding anything in San Francisco, she found Temescal

Creek. “I didn’t choose Temescal,” she says, “I chose cohousing.”

Yet, she is thrilled with Temescal—its artists, its activists, its young families, the Temescal farmers market, the swimming pool.... She can’t wait for Studio One Arts Center to reopen. An artist herself, she envisions a community mural on the exterior of a nearby building, and is negotiating to make it happen. “I can’t get over my excitement about this neighborhood,” she says. “So much is happening here.”

Meanwhile, not much is happening at the third point of the coho triangle, in the heart of Temescal. That is, nothing visible. To the passerby, the five-story, Craftsman-style future home of North Oakland Cohousing looks pretty much like the rundown pub that it still is. But the project is humming. It’s now undergoing a traffic study, likely followed by a design review, after which the plan heads to the city’s Planning Commission. Lichterman expects an appeal by those opposed, which means the plan might end up at City Council. It could be months before anything is final.

Some people gripe about the height of the proposed building, as well as its potential impact on traffic. This has spurned meetings on top of meetings. But Lichterman, a cohousing devotee, doesn’t complain about meetings. “It’s a meeting lifestyle,” she says.

Lichterman has lived for 30 years as a tenant in Temescal—depending on “how broadly” the boundaries are drawn. She’s not giving it up. Temescal is the ideal location. Lichterman can walk to downtown Oakland or to downtown Berkeley, where she works. Public bus routes crisscross the neighborhood, and North Oakland’s coho will be centered between the MacArthur and Rockridge BART stations.

Lichterman led the quest for the property. She established a relationship with the developer, who was unfamiliar with cohousing at the time. So, she explained it. She enjoys turning people onto the concept. “Ask me about cohousing,” suggests a green button pinned to her shirt.

It’s really about community-minded people putting the community first. In today’s society, she says, people are afraid of “the other.” Isolation is a huge problem. “But cohousing changes that whole paradigm,” Lichterman says. “It’s the wave of the future.”

You can catch the swell in Temescal.

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