

COHOUSING COMMUNITIES: ENHANCING AND SELLING THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY

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Bios

Jim Leach is President of Wonderland Hill Development Company, the leading cohousing developer which has built 5 cohousing communities and has several others under development. Leach will share a developer's perspective of why and how to build these communities.

Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant, architects and founders of The CoHousing Company, are authors of the book *Cohousing* that introduced the concept in North America. They have designed and consulted on more than 35 cohousing communities.



Cohousing addresses many issues at the heart of new urbanism - less dependence on automobiles, pedestrian-oriented environments, increasing the sense of community, diverse households - but on a smaller, more intense scale. These communities range in size from 11 to 42 units and include urban infill projects as well as suburban and rural developments.

Infill cohousing projects have attracted community-minded, market rate buyers into neighborhoods that they would not otherwise consider. These communities incorporate a range of income levels through a variety of unit sizes and creative financing. They address environmental preservation in both their land use which seeks to optimize usable open space by clustering units and minimizing automobile access, and by incorporating sustainable building practices that make them the most energy efficient, sustainably-built, market-rate residential projects built in recent years. Post occupancy studies have shown 25% fewer car trips than adjacent developments even when the project is not well located for mass transit use.

Cohousing communities seek to incorporate the best aspects of privacy and community, blending individual homes with substantial community facilities such as kitchen and dining room, lounge, workshop, children's play room, and laundry to create intergenerational cooperative neighborhoods. Residents are involved in the design and development process from the start so that the projects respond directly to their needs.

With more than 50 projects to be completed by the end of this year, and another 150 communities

in the planning stages, cohousing continues to attract more and more interest from both housing professionals and the market place. Articles in Urban Land, The New York Times and Wall Street Journal among others have helped to fuel this interest. Six cohousing communities were among 63 winners of HUD's "Building Innovation for Home Ownership" award last year.

A panel discussion of the country's most experienced cohousing designers and developer will discuss the projects that most successfully contribute to the surrounding neighborhoods - Southside Park in Sacramento, Berkeley Cohousing in Berkeley, Doyle Street Cohousing in Emeryville, and Nomad Cohousing in Boulder - as well as some of the less successful relationships. The presentation will be to show a sampling of built projects, how the communities relate with their surrounding neighborhoods, lessons learned, and why they can be excellent components of new urbanist development..

COHOUSING AND NEW URBANISM

By Jim Leach

New Urbanism planning, design, and development concepts seek to create not only more attractive communities, but also communities that function better for the people who live, work, shop, and entertain within them. Although the commitment to a higher level of design quality is important in New Urbanism developments, their real value has to be measured by the lifestyle or quality of life they offer to their residents.

Much of the lifestyle advantage comes from the ability to create a higher level of community within the New Urbanism neighborhood. A higher level of community will promote more social interaction among the residents and a safer and more attractive neighborhood. Since the New Urbanism neighborhood generally costs significantly more to build, it is imperative that residents of the neighborhood (those paying for it) receive some significant lifestyle value for their extra investment. Better aesthetics alone are probably not enough.

COHOUSING

Cohousing can offer several advantages to the New Urbanism neighborhood. Cohousing seeks many of the same community lifestyle values that New Urbanism does. In addition, however, cohousing offers a deliberate community-based process. While the physical community is being designed and built, future community residents participate together in building their social community and work together to creatively define, understand and implement a better lifestyle for themselves. The real consumers of the development product, then, create many of the values that enhance the overall value of the product. Community member consumers create a more valuable product and better understand its value and therefore are willing to invest more in it.

Another advantage of the community-based cohousing process is the ability to tap into direct input from the consumer regarding the relative value of innovative and higher quality design and development concepts inherent in New Urbanism. Community-based developments like cohousing will sort out the ideas that have real value to people from those that have marginal or no value. A higher level of support for innovation often results, as community members reinforce each other in their commitments to support more responsible design and development that has real value to them.

From the standpoint of a New Urbanism designer or developer, the downside of community-based development like cohousing is the complicated and often time consuming communication issues that must be addressed in order to mobilize a community effectively through the design and development process. Reducing these obstacles and increasing the value of community-based development is what we at Wonderland together with our Associates -- McCamant & Durrett, Cohousing Resources and others -- have been working on over the past few years. We have developed streamlined processes and systems to enable communities to participate efficiently in the creation of their neighborhoods and make it easier for New Urbanism developers and designers

to incorporate cohousing within their developments.

From the standpoint of a New Urbanism developer, cohousing can offer several advantages. It is presold; it provides direct consumer input regarding the extra values and extra cost associated with a more progressive New Urbanism type development. It provides a group of customers committed to supporting and enhancing a higher level of community within the New Urbanism neighborhood. This level of commitment can help guarantee the success of the New Urbanism development, a matter of importance to local government officials and others interested in seeing communities succeed socially and economically as well as aesthetically.

Cohousing may offer the greatest challenges to New Urbanism designers in that the community's input and commitment will impact the design. Community member priorities may differ from those of the designers. The designer is challenged to create an aesthetic that enhances community commitment and priorities (including financial priorities). The designer will likely need to support extra expenditures for aesthetics in light of the values to which the community has committed.

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