

Home sweet homes

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by Lora Shinn

Cohousing is a contemporary take on an age-old idea—and families are flocking to it

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As Sara Gottlieb works daffodil bulbs into the soil, she thinks about how different her life is today than a year ago. Then, she was living in what she describes as a “typical Atlanta neighborhood,” where neighbors barely nodded a hello as they drove from work to home to ballet lessons for the kids.

Gottlieb wanted something different, more like her own upbringing in a Pittsburgh cul-de-sac of homes where children ran in and out of one another’s houses, and small talk was part of everyday life. After going through a divorce, Gottlieb found such a place. She was taking a friend on a tour of Atlanta neighborhoods, when she pointed to a small development and said, “If I could live anywhere, it would be there.” A short while later that same friend texted Gottlieb a photo of a “For Sale” sign outside that development, called

Lake Claire Cohousing. The community consists of 12 townhouses (about 30 people) clustered around a garden, green space, performance area, and common house where twice-weekly meals are prepped and served by fellow cohousers.

Each family has a home to call their own; in this case, Gottlieb could purchase a two-bedroom townhouse. Her husband had never been interested in downsizing—which is what a move to cohousing would have meant for the family—but now that Gottlieb was a single mother, she wanted to reorganize her priorities. She brought her daughter, Sadie, to one of Lake Claire Cohousing's dinners and talked to her potential neighbors. Lake Claire wasn't far from her daughter's current school, and seemed to be the perfect housing pick. "It didn't take long to convince me that this was the right thing," Gottlieb says. She loved the sense of community, which she felt would be vital to her new life as a single parent.

Two months later, Lake Claire Cohousing announced, "Welcome home, Sara and Sadie," on the community chalkboard and held a dinner in their honor. Today, Gottlieb's 10-year-old daughter has plenty of new friends and is often seen riding her bike through the neighborhood. Typically a little slow to make friends, she settled in faster than usual, due—her mother believes—to the small, nurturing community. And the community helped Gottlieb adjust to her new life, too—after just a month, she was on a first-name basis with her neighbors. She feels comfortable and accepted, and knows she can count on fellow cohousers for support and in dire circumstances. "I wake up every day grateful for my home and community," Gottlieb says. Next spring, Gottlieb's daffodils will bloom in the neighborhood garden plot.

Cohousing 101

Cohousing began in the U.S. in 1991 with Muir Commons in Davis, California. Modeled on Denmark's popular cohousing communities, Muir Commons has 26 townhouse-style units centered around a common area, with each household holding a place on the 26-member board of directors. Community responsibilities and chores are shared. The goal of cohousing? To create a supportive living environment, a bridge between traditional village living and individual ownership.

Today, more than 100 cohousing communities dot the U.S., and additional developments are forming, in part due to their family appeal. Families of all sorts and flavors (traditional, single parents, gay, blended) make up a large part of cohousing communities, but there are plenty of singles, couples, and retirees as well. Most communities hold between 20 to 35 households, a just-right size for making friends. Cohousing homes tend to cluster in suburban areas—where land is more plentiful and less expensive—though some large cities like Seattle, Oakland, and Cambridge offer urban options. They're more likely found in Western and Northeastern states, but more cohousing communities in the Midwest and South are in the planning phases—or open already.

"It's a great way to raise kids," says Kathryn McCamant, co-author of *Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities*. "It goes back to, 'It takes a village to raise a child,'" she says. "Why would anybody raise a family without the support of the larger community?"

"Some people think I live in a dorm, or that I live in a house and share everything," Gottlieb says. But most of her neighbors are fairly mainstream: two kids and a 9-to-5 job. A cohousing community is not a commune (where everything is shared, including food and housing); it doesn't require members to conform to a single set of political or religious beliefs. It's a happy medium between family isolation and too-close-quarters, a challenge to tear down the white picket fence in exchange for a greater sense of belonging.

Making your home

The physical landscape of many cohousing communities is designed to encourage all-ages engagement—

parking lots reside on the perimeter, so common spaces remain pedestrian-only. It becomes a safe place to play hide-and-seek, to picnic, and to just hang out. “It changes the whole dynamic of the neighborhood, to get cars out of the way,” McCamant says. One of the most popular places in cohousing communities? The pathways, McCamant says. Here, children play hopscotch, bounce balls, ride bikes, and create sidewalk murals. In the common house, teens hang out with friends and do homework (there’s a healthy mix of homeschooled and traditionally–schooled kids in cohousing communities). Ages at which families choose cohousing vary—and turnover rates are extremely low, according to McCamant.

“It feels just like an old-fashioned neighborhood,” says Julia Shores, 31, who lives with her husband Rusty, 41, and two children (Dagan, 5, and Meadow, 2) in FrogSong Cohousing, a two-acre collection of 30 households in Cotati, California, about an hour north of San Francisco. FrogSong’s units range from two-bedroom, 834-square-foot condos to 1,390-square-foot, four-bedroom townhouses, each connected by a pedestrian-only walkway and patios made for relaxation. Dagan attends a Waldorf-inspired charter school, while other children attend a variety of nearby charter, public, or homeschool options.

The solar-paneled, brick-red 3,500-square-foot common house is a place for meals, sing-alongs, and parties. Here, people visit with friends in the fireplace-warmed lounge, or let their children dress-up in the playroom. Outdoors, there’s a play structure, sandbox, and veggie garden. “The design is such that people have to interact with one another,” Shores says. Her neighbor—with no children of her own—has become an honorary “auntie,” taking Dagan to the community garden, where they work the dirt together.

Cohousing’s small, vertically-oriented building footprint and larger green space is also environmentally sensitive, says Gottlieb, who works for The Nature Conservancy, one of the world’s largest environmental organizations. “We can fit twelve houses in a space that might traditionally fit just two or three,” she says, while still giving people the freedom to control how close they want to feel to neighbors. That interaction could be just a handshake, a comment about the weather, or a full-fledged conversation about politics.

And about that village

“Is my child over there?” is a common question at Sharingwood, says Matt Parsons; Parsons, 38, has lived with his wife Kirsten Harris, 38, in the rural Washington cohousing establishment for over 10 years. Sharingwood is made up of 26 individual, stand-alone homes. It’s laid out almost like a suburban subdivision, but surrounded by a 23-acre forested greenbelt teeming with trails and streams. Five years ago, they welcomed their first daughter, Tuija, who was born with Down syndrome. When Parsons and Harris brought Tuija home from the hospital, Tuija’s needs and challenges concerned the whole community, not just the couple. “After we shared the news that Tuija had Down syndrome with our immediate families, the very next group that we shared the news with was our community,” Parsons says. “We felt very fortunate. It helped us deal with it emotionally, with everybody being so supportive.”

When Tuija took her first steps at 2½, Sharingwood neighbors congratulated her and told Parsons and Harris how proud they were of Tuija. And the community’s children understand Tuija’s unique needs: When a neighbor boy was playing basketball, he found a way to include Tuija. “He was very patient with her and adapted his style of playing to be mindful of her limitations,” Parsons says, by taking a break from shooting baskets, and spending time just rolling the ball back and forth with her.

“I really doubt this would occur in a different community,” says Parsons. “When I try to imagine living in a typical neighborhood and trying to communicate with 30-odd neighbors about Tuija’s situation, expecting those neighbors to be open and willing to work with us regarding her physical and intellectual development—it just does not seem possible.” For stay-at-home or work-at-home parents, there are other at-home parents, retirees, and artists around to offer social interaction. Laura Anderton, a stay-at-home mom and part-time graphic designer, didn’t know anything about cohousing until she heard about a unit opening at

Arboretum Cohousing in downtown Madison, Wisconsin, and came for a tour with her husband Garry. “I was so excited by the idea, I actually teared-up at the meeting,” she says.

At Arboretum, Anderton spends at least two hours a day with her young son, Spencer, in the community’s well-stocked playroom or outside on the slide. While she still attends outside playgroups, “it’s so much nicer to be in your home and have these spontaneous social interactions, as opposed to just an hour or so of scheduled meet-up time at a coffee shop somewhere,” she says. You just head out the door when you’re ready to hang out. And, she adds, there’s the multi-age benefit: “This morning during the Monday 10 a.m. coffee hour, all the retired women cooed over Spencer, whereas yesterday, Spencer played with the older kids.” Thanks to cohousing, Anderton’s family is able to get by with just one car. And the social aspect is a huge plus: “There is almost always someone to talk to,” she says. “I can’t imagine having a young child and not living in cohousing—I’d imagine it would be a very lonely experience.”

Utopia? Not quite

One of cohousing’s most challenging aspects is the consensus-building process. Rules are established as a group. At Lake Claire Cohousing, current agreements include: a pet-free common house, no smoking outside, vegetarian food at common meals, a “quiet time” at night, and no realistic-looking toy guns in common areas. But when 80 people are involved, even putting up a birdhouse can be contentious, Anderton says. And getting things accomplished can be frustrating. “You are not the king (or queen) of your castle. And Americans are raised to believe they have the freedom to do whatever they like, and that way of thinking needs to change drastically in cohousing,” she says. “It’s definitely a learning process.”

At Sharingwood, the idea of buying a shared Wii became a circular discussion about where it would be kept, how to ensure it didn’t get broken, who would maintain it, and how to track its whereabouts if checkouts were allowed, Parsons says. Ultimately, they didn’t buy the Wii. Communities also expect that residents will participate in a variety of management and maintenance responsibilities, from committee participation to helping out on “workdays” (cleaning gutters, landscaping upkeep), McCamant says. For example, at Sharingwood, Harris organizes children’s activities for the community; past activities have included a Halloween party with pumpkin carving, art activities, and field trips to the zoo or ropes course.

And of course, there’s the proximity. There are tensions to work out regarding public space, front yards, and yes, even parenting. Parenting styles can conflict, such as when a helicopter dad meets a free-range mom. “A community takes work, and you have to put the time in to get the benefits.” says McCamant. And in cohousing communities, he believes, people put in that time.

Would you ever try cohousing?

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