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COHOUSING

DESCRIPTION:

The primary goal of a cohousing complex is to provide the social and practical benefits experienced in a close-knit community—to design a neighborhood where residents all know each other and interact frequently, where children can freely and safely run and play among the houses, and where older people who become frail and residents who incur an impairment can rely on the informal, mutual support of their cohousing neighbors to care and help out. The physical plan is deliberately designed to encourage a strong sense of community and increased potential for social contact.

Cohousing is an "intentional community"—a small (average of 26 units) planned unit development (PUD—see PUD section in the *Resource Manual*) in which single family homes, townhouses, or rental units are clustered around various community facilities such as a community kitchen and dining room, common areas for sitting, recreational activities, teen and children's areas, workshops, craft and meeting rooms, guest facilities, laundry facilities, child care facilities, and, possibly, adult day service facilities. Residents manage the community, sharing tasks, activities, and decision-making.

Cohousing communities are designed through consensus-planning by the individuals and families who will live there. While all residents share in the cost and upkeep of common land areas, there is no overall shared community economy; individual ownership units are bought and sold at market rate by the individual household owners. Residents participate fully in a Home Owners Association (HOA) and in the decision-making that affects the community as a whole.

The philosophical underpinnings of the cohousing concept include:

- Intergenerational resident composition;
- The privacy of full, self-sufficient private residences;
- A strong sense of community that is promoted through shared common facilities, voluntary participation in community dining and social interactions, and mutual assistance;
- A pedestrian-orientation (walkable design), with parking at the periphery of the community, which frees up the residential area for walking, playing, and flower-growing;
- Major decisions affecting the welfare of the entire community made through community-wide discussion and consensus; and

- Environmental sensitivity, particularly for those that follow the principles of "eco-villages," which stress energy-efficiency, environmental sustainability, green building, and a minimum carbon footprint.

Communities may include a large communal garden, an orchard, a pond, or off-grid power. Features present in each community reflect the unique skills, talents, and desires of the residents.

Cohousing originated in Northern Europe in the 1980s. Development first started in the United States in 1989, and has steadily increased in response to families' growing concern about environmental issues and the impact of raising children in the isolating environment of many of today's communities. The aim of cohousing residents is to purposefully recreate the traditional neighborhood atmosphere and strong sense of place found in small villages and seemingly lost as families have scattered and a commuter-culture has dominated, as well as to have much greater input into how safe, green, and healthy their immediate living environment will be.

Senior Cohousing:

Until very recently, all cohousing developments were age-integrated, with a design emphasis on families with children. Two factors have led to the development of new age-segregated senior cohousing communities, to the incorporation of senior "neighborhoods" into existing developments, and to a rethinking of the design of new age-integrated cohousing developments to accommodate the aging of existing residents and the needs of new residents who are already older or already frail:

(1) Existing cohousing residents are aging and finding that the physical design of their homes, common facilities, and general community layout do not accommodate mobility impairments or other aging-related frailties, and

(2) The cohousing model responds to several major housing-related preferences of older adults:

- A desire to have their own home and to live independently for as long as possible;
- A desire for privacy, coupled with ample opportunity for social interaction and to be part of an identified community;
- A desire for the perceived safety of a neighborhood where everyone knows each other; and
- The preference to live in, or as part of, an intergenerational living environment.

Benefits:

For older adults and people with disabilities:

- A homeownership option, which is a strong preference of these populations;

- Combines the privacy of one's own living unit with the mutual help and strong socialization and active life style opportunities of a close-knit neighborhood among friends;
- An age-integrated living environment;
- Cohousing homes and communities that incorporate universal design and walkability features promote successful aging in place.
- Strong sense of safety, security, and neighborliness.
- Continued decision-making control over how and when supportive and health services are delivered.

For the community:

- Can be successfully developed in urban, suburban, and rural areas.
- Emphasis on energy-efficiency, green building, and environmental preservation.
- Most cohousing complexes are private-pay communities, which contributes to the wider community's tax base.
- Very positive interactions exist between co-housing communities and the wider community.

For the developer:

- Close, very early collaboration between the future residents (buyers) and the private developer creates a co-developer relationship— with shared responsibility, shared liability for investment and profits, greatly diminished homeowner lawsuits, and buyer-support in public hearings and in getting the various approvals developers must negotiate during the planning process.
- The pre-sold feature of cohousing developments is instrumental in raising the comfort level of bankers and other financiers who may be reluctant to fund development because of the unconventional design of cohousing communities (for example, no attached garages, peripheral parking, community garden, etc.).
- While the open, deliberative, up-front design process is much longer, close-out time is very short because the homes are pre-sold.

Impediments or barriers to development or implementation:

- The initial planning and design process can be lengthy because of the consensus-building, deliberative decision-making process used that includes all future first-time residents. Technical assistance from developers experienced in developing this model, articles and how-to books by experts, and professional conferences, as well as practical guidance from proponents, have gone a long

way to streamlining the collaborative planning, site-identification, and decision-making design processes.

- Bankers who are unfamiliar with the cohousing concept may make conventional financing difficult to obtain because of the nontraditional design concepts incorporated into cohousing communities.
- Local zoning and land use laws on population density, building standards, environmental protections, open space, and parking can inhibit or delay the development process and increase the cost of a community. For example, high density development is often prohibited in rural areas.
- In some cohousing communities, a heavy emphasis on preserving the ecosystem and minimizing the carbon footprint can lead to a vertical house design, with two- and three-floor residences that require multiple sets of stairs and walkways. These features can prove difficult or unmanageable for individuals who use walkers or wheelchairs or have other mobility problems, and do not support successful aging in place.
- While a few cohousing communities include some subsidized units (using public financing), thus far, cohousing is primarily an option for middle-class individuals and families. Tenancy/rental laws and funding regulations governing publicly funded housing may require modifying to successfully integrate lower-income tenants into a cohousing community.

Resource—examples:

- Eco Village at Ithaca, Ithaca, New York. A cohousing community, begun in 1992 and expanded over time, the community complex now includes two 30-home neighborhoods, with a third neighborhood in the planning stages. Built on 174 acres of land, the community also includes six subsidized units, a barn, and a ten-acre organic farm. One of a very few cohousing communities in the United States that is also an "eco village"—sustainable aspects and values are a priority, with a very strong emphasis on energy alternatives, green building features, land preservation, a minimal ecological footprint, maximized environmental sustainability, and hands-on education.
<http://ecovillageithaca.org/evi/>.
- Muir Commons, 26 units, built in 1991, and modeled after cohousing communities in Denmark. One of the two oldest cohousing communities in the United States. 2222 Muir Woods Place, Davis, California, 95616; (530) 758-5202; <http://www.muircommons.org>.
- N Street Cohousing, 19 homes, begun in 1986 and gradually expanding. One of the two oldest cohousing communities in the United States. Termed "retro-fit cohousing," this community has all the traditional features of a cohousing community; but it is unusual because it gradually evolved from an already-existing suburban development—fences were taken down between 17 houses and their backyards were integrated. By 2007, two additional houses from

across the street were added to the community, and more will be added as they become available. Davis, California. Contact: Kevin Wolf (530) 758-4211 or kjwolf@dcn.davis.ca.us; <http://www.nstreetcohousing.org>.

- Silver Sage Village, senior cohousing currently in development, 16 duplexes and attached homes built on one acre. Yellow Pine Avenue, between 16th & 17th Streets, Boulder, Colorado. Contact: Georgette, (303) 449-3232, ext. 203 or georgette@whdc.com; <http://www.silversagevillage.com>.
- Wonderland Hill Development Company, 4676 Broadway, Boulder, Colorado, 80304; (303) 449-3232—award-winning developers, including development of several co-housing communities. <http://www.whdc.com/>.

Resource—written and web:

- Charles Durrett (2009), *Senior Cohousing: A Community Approach to Independent Living. The Handbook*. Definition and benefits of cohousing, how senior cohousing differs from other types of senior housing, how to create a cohousing project; descriptions of successful cohousing communities in the United States and in foreign countries, and "frequently asked questions." Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Chris ScottHansen and Kelly ScottHansen (2004), *The Cohousing Handbook: Building a Place for Community*, second edition. Covers all elements of what goes into the creation of a cohousing project, including group processes, land acquisition, finance and budgets, construction, development professionals, design considerations, permits, approvals and membership. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Kathryn McCamant, Charles Durrett, and Ellen Hertzman (1993), *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*. Introduced the concept of cohousing in the United States. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
 - The third edition of this book will be published in 2011:
Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett (2011), *Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Press.
- Diana Leafe Christian (2003), *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities*. A guide to launching and sustaining successful new ecovillages and sustainable communities — and avoiding the typical mistakes in the process. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Liz Walker (2005), *Eco Village at Ithaca—Pioneering a Sustainable Culture*. Describes the development of an internationally recognized example of a vibrant, ecologically sustainable cohousing development. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers. (Walker is the director and co-founder of Eco Village at Ithaca).

- Diana Leaf Christian (2007), *Finding Community: How to Join an Ecovillage or Intentional Community*. A comprehensive overview of ecovillages and intentional communities and offers advice on how to research, visit, evaluate, and join an intentional community. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- *Communities Directory— A Comprehensive Guide to Intentional Communities and Cooperative Living*, fifth edition (2007). Descriptions of 900 intentional communities in North America and around the world, including maps, reference charts, and articles. Rutledge, MO: Fellowship for Intentional Community. Sixth edition due: Fall, 2009. Also available online: <http://directory.ic.org/>.
- *Communities: Journal of Cooperative Living*. A journal published quarterly by the Fellowship for Intentional Community. Available from *Communities*, 138 Twin Oaks Road, Louisa, VA, 23093. www.ic.org.
- Cohousing Association of the United States: Coho/US, #1445, 22833 Bothell-Everett Highway, #110, Bothell, WA, 98021; 1-866-758-3942 or (314) 754-5828; <http://www.cohousing.org>.

Resource (free or fee-based)—technical assistance contact names:

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