

'Cohousing' Mixes '60s Ideals, '90s Realities

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LOUNGING IN THEIR STOCKING FEET on sofas and chairs, a dozen or so people take turns sharing news about their lives: the progress of an illness, stress at work, a recent divorce, anxiety over moving. Group therapy? A New Age encounter session? A "thirtysomething" rerun?

Try a meeting of residents of a suburban housing development. This isn't your typical subdivision. The residents of New View Neighborhood Development, an 18-acre complex overlooking a river and wooded conservation land in this tony suburb west of Boston, are part of a small but growing movement known as "cohousing," whose principles echo faintly of the 1960s but whose economics are 1990s.

In cohousing, future residents pool money to buy land, develop a cluster of homes and a common house, and engage in community-building activities such as regular group meals and yard work. Cars are shunted off to on-site parking lots, pedestrian trails connect the homes, environmental awareness is either mandated or encouraged.

But don't be deceived. Cohousing is no hippie throwback. Instead, it is an emerging housing option for disaffected suburbanites who are trading in big homes on large lots in bedrock neighborhoods for a way of living that emphasizes friendship, cooperation and belonging. The goal isn't to live as one but to create a fulfilling balance between privacy and community.

"We had a nice neighborhood," says Larry Israelite, a 43-year-old management consultant who with his wife and two children migrated to New View from a large house in neighboring Acton. "We wanted a community."

The social mix at New View is broad—from traditional two-parent families to single mothers to older singles to a lesbian couple. Children are developing fast friendships and their baby-boom parents a sense of security reminiscent of their own childhoods.

"I went out after school in the neighborhood and didn't come home until dinner," says 38-year-old Steve Lewin-Berlin, a computer-software company owner who lives in one of New View's larger houses with his wife and three children. "For the kids, it felt like this was going to be a safe place, an extended home."

Cohousing, conceived in Denmark in the 1970s, is new to this country. The first U.S. cohousing community, Muir Commons in Davis, Calif., opened in 1991. Today, there are about 20 occupied communities in North America, several under construction and about 150 in development, says Don Lindemann, editor in chief of the journal CoHousing in Berkeley, Calif.

The tenets of cohousing are simple: resident participation in development, extensive common facilities, a design reinforcing community and significant self-management by residents. Most, though not all, feature smaller, more affordable homes.

But as cohousing's appeal widens, a high end is evolving. More families want the social benefits of cohousing without sacrificing space. Nine of New View's 24 homes will boast a capacious 2,200 to 3,000 square feet and cost more than \$300,000, about market average for West Acton but double the median home price for the Boston area. The priciest New View house will go for \$420,000. (While the area is zoned for two-acre lots, New View was allowed to increase its density by promising 60% open space and including a \$90,000 affordable-housing unit.)

Other cohousing communities have upscale components as well. In Santa Fe, N.M., resale prices at the 25-unit Commons on the Alameda are exceeding \$300,000. The most expensive home in a 12-unit cohousing commu-

WEST ACTON, MASS.

ideology appeals to many cohousers who want both a big house and community. New View's New England modern-style homes are clustered in four "neighborhood centers" of four to seven units that will be landscaped with a pedestrian trail and benches to stimulate contact. Four-bedroom spreads sit close to two-bedroom duplexes.

"We don't have this strict, 'I'm going to live in an 800-square-foot apartment,'" says Franny Osman, a 35-year-old mother of two, former biostatistician and graduate education student at Harvard University. "We want our dream house as well as our dream neighborhood."

Not that New View's founders envisioned \$400,000 homes when they first gathered in 1989. Acting as developers, residents contributed to a fund for the land, which cost about \$900,000; fees for lawyers, architects and appraisers; and site preparation. The group amassed about \$1 million of a then-projected \$5 million in costs. New View's first house was completed last August, 11 households are in now and ground has been broken on all but one of the remaining homes.

Because residents were required to put up money long before move-in, New View depended on their means; the community includes a lawyer, a psychiatrist, nurses, a chiropractor, computer-industry professionals, consultants, teachers, social workers and environmental activists. "We were fortunate that we had the internal capacity to do it," says Steven Hecht, the chiropractor. "Most cohousing communities don't."

The base price of New View homes reflects estimated construction costs plus an even division of expenses for land, professional fees, and common property. Half of cost overruns—the project has ballooned to more than \$6 million—

are divided equally among residents and half according to each home's appraised value. (The community is a condo association; residents own their houses and undivided shares of all common property, and pay a monthly homeowners' association fee of \$180 to \$260. Homeowners can sell to whomever they choose, but buyers must agree to the community's rules.)

But homeowners say the ethos of cohousing overrides price differences. "You look in our parking lot and there's no Mercedes out there. I don't think there are even gny Saabs out there," Dr. Hecht says. "The vision we share is much more important than the prices of our houses."

New View's similarly egalitarian design reflects a "community-privacy continuum," beginning with the common house in the center and moving inward through walkway, neighborhood center, private front yard, porch, kitchen facing the common areas and, finally, private living space.

But one temporary casualty of increasing costs at New View is a staple of cohousing: the common house, which typically includes a large, open room, a kitchen, work space, a recreation room and guest beds. New View has had to shrink its common house, cutting the cost to under \$300,000, and delay construction until all homes are built. Some cohousing advocates say that step, along with the expensive homes, defies cohousing principles.

"If everybody builds a big home then they have a lot of space in their home and maybe they don't feel the need to share or interact," says Tom Lofft, an organizer of Liberty Village, a planned cohousing community in Libertytown, Md., that hopes to open in 1997.

But at New View, the criticism seems unfounded. Last Sunday, a group of mothers gathered to coordinate summer-camp plans for their children. Residents stopped to chat as they slogged through the muddy construction site to their cars. Children waved from windows as neighbors passed by.

In the group's latest newsletter, one resident recounted how her new neighbors helped move furniture and unpack boxes, offering everything from cashew dirty to garbage bags during her family's first week at New View. "Maybe this is what they mean by stuff that adds beauty and value to your life," she wrote.



Sara Schwartz

New Communities

Here are some cohousing communities around the country:

- **Nyland, Lafayette, Colo.** 42 two-story duplex, triplex and detached units plus 6,500 square feet of common facilities on 43 acres. On-site child care included.
- **Commons on the Alameda, Santa Fe, N.M.** 25 units of 1,200 to 2,800 square feet on five acres. Residents prepare one meal and work eight hours a month.
- **Doyle Street, Emeryville, Calif.** 12 units of 780 to 1,600 square feet plus 2,100 square feet common facilities in a converted warehouse.
- **Pioneer Valley, Amherst, Mass.** 32 detached, duplex and triplex houses from 600 to 1,400 square feet on 23 acres. Community includes 10 affordable-housing units.
- **Arcadia CoHousing, Carrboro, N.C.** 33 custom-designed homes from 800 to 2,200 square feet on 16.5 forested acres. Large common house, wood shop, orchard and playing field planned.

nity in a converted warehouse in Emeryville, Calif., is valued at \$275,000.

"Seventy-five percent of the people here could afford any house anywhere but decided like myself that it was more fun to live in a community than to live in a big house by yourself," says Don Altshuler, 56, a transplanted New York real-estate executive who served as developer and now lives in the Santa Fe community.

So much for cohousing as commune. "Cohousing attracts a very well-educated market," says Kathryn McCamant, a principal with The CoHousing Co., which has consulted on a dozen projects. "They have a lot of choices. They're very picky about what they get and they're reaching for more."

That refusal to sacrifice personal wants to a perceived