



Living to Connect

Cohousing communities are reinventing the way some Americans live and boosting their health and happiness in the process.

by Shelley Levitt illustrations by Rebecca Jones

On a warm summer evening, some two dozen people are gathered for a potluck dinner in the garden of the two-block Los Angeles Eco-Village, which sits on the edge of the city's Koreatown district. Enjoying salads, grilled veggies and pasta, along with wine and homemade fruit punch, they perch on folding chairs in a clearing between a fig bush and a magnolia tree, not far from the outdoor solar oven, chicken coop and trellises that are heavy with tomatoes. From the range of ages—3 to 79—and the ease of the chatter, this has the feeling of a family get-together. But the mix of ethnicities and accents make

it clear that the ties that bind this eclectic group aren't all familial. Instead, the members of this lively party all belong to a new kind of neighborhood. The Los Angeles Eco-Village is a cohousing community and home to 55 people. According to the Cohousing Association of the United States, it's one of 162 so far with another 126 in the planning stages. A form of collaborative living, cohousing offers a nurturing alternative to suburban isolation or urban anonymity. The residents run the community collectively, sharing responsibilities and chores and making



decisions by consensus. “The human species is tribal in nature, but through generations of culture change, we’ve lost that tribal instinct,” says Lois Arkin, who founded the neighborhood more than 20 years ago. “Cohousing communities restore the human connections that we all crave.”

These custom neighborhoods are far from communes. Each household has its own private home, complete with kitchen. But residents also share a large common house, which is the heart of the community. It typically includes a big kitchen and dining room, guest rooms, a children’s playroom, and areas for workshops and meetings.

Opportunities for engagement abound, from working in the garden to cooking community meals or taking part in resident-led workshops in sewing, woodworking, yoga or even how to home-brew small batches of craft beer. Most of all, there’s a feeling that your neighbors have your back and are there when you need them.

Jessica Ruvalcaba, an early-education schoolteacher, lives here with her husband and their 5-month-old son, Eli. “When Eli was born, people brought me home-cooked meals for two weeks,” she says, “and my neighbor Carol did my laundry. I love that Eli has an extended community of siblings, and I have a group of parents I can lean on.”



Durham, North Carolina



Los Angeles



Cohousing communities can be urban, like the Los Angeles Eco-Village or Takamo Village Cohousing in Washington, D.C., where 90 people—from newborn to 90 years old—live in 43 townhouses and apartments that are clustered around a central piazza. Many are in suburbs or small towns, such as Delaware Street Commons in Lawrence, Kansas. Here 45 homes are linked by pedestrian walkways and each home has a front porch that faces the common area. A few cohousing communities are in rural areas. The 29-home community of Nubanusit Neighborhood & Farm in Peterborough, New Hampshire, sits on 113 acres of farmland, fields and woodlands with trails, a pond and nearly a mile of riverfront.

Using Less to Live More

Living sustainably is a core value of cohousing communities. They’re typically built with energy-efficient materials and devote much of their acreage to green space. Cars are banished to the periphery of the property and alternative forms of

getting around—biking, walking or public transportation—are encouraged.

Lowering reliance on cars is key to keeping the members of these microneighborhoods connected. Alice Alexander is the director of the nonprofit Cohousing Association of the United States. She and her husband are members of the Durham Central Park Cohousing Community, a four-story building in downtown Durham, North Carolina, where 39 residents live in 24 condominiums. “I spent most of my life living in Northern Virginia suburbs where I didn’t know my neighbors,” Alice says. “You drove into your carport, went into your house and you never saw anyone.” The hallways at Alice’s building are wide and airy, with benches and libraries tucked into nooks and crannies. It’s a design that encourages people to linger and chat.

Relationships aren’t forged only through chance encounters. Like other communities, Durham Central Park maintains a digital bulletin board where people can post anything from an invitation to take a stroll to the Saturday farmers market to a request for a heating pad after a bicycle spill or a lift to the airport. “I’m always amazed that when I



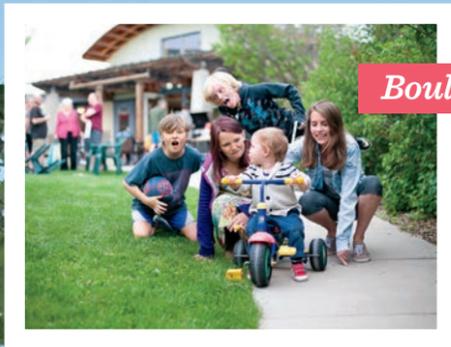
Nevada City, California

have a 6 a.m. flight, there’s someone who wants to take me to the airport,” Alice says. “But this is a caring and sharing community. We can count on each other.” There are weekly movie nights and group dinners, and every evening at least a half-dozen residents gather for happy hour on the roof.

Residents seem to flourish amid all this support and sociability. In a survey conducted by the Cohousing Research Network, 96 percent of 528 respondents across 80 cohousing communities said their lives had improved since becoming cohousing residents and three out of four felt their physical health was better than others their age. None of this would surprise community psychologist William Berkowitz, Ph.D., professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, who believes that close-knit neighborhoods fulfill a vital human function. “The need for connection with other people and for community is wired into our biology,” he says. “We evolved from animals that lived and



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Boulder, Colorado



“These communities reminded me of the neighborhoods where I grew up in Denver, where kids were always outside playing, everybody knew each other and there was a real social life in the streets.” —Kathryn McCamant

roamed in clans, sought food together and protected each other. There’s a lot of evidence to suggest that when people have strong social networks their sense of well-being and their physical health improves; cross-cultural research even shows that people live longer.”

Cohousing’s Danish Roots

In the early 1980s, Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett—Katie and Chuck to their friends—were young married architects beginning to think about starting a family. Already they found themselves coming home from busy workdays exhausted. Their relatives lived across the country and their friends across town. Just getting together with a friend for coffee was a challenge. How would they be able to raise kids?

They remembered a type of development called a *bofællesskab* (living community) that they had visited when they were studying architecture in Copenhagen, Denmark. Since the 1960s, a mix of young families and empty nesters, singles and single parents had been forming these self-reliant neighborhoods that allowed people to support each other through the challenges of every stage of life, from childcare to eldercare.

“What we saw in Denmark made so much sense,” Katie says. “These communities reminded me of the neighborhoods where I grew up in

Denver, where kids were always outside playing, everybody knew each other and there was a real social life in the streets.” Katie and Chuck returned to Copenhagen in 1984 and spent a year studying *bofællesskab*. In 1988, they published their first book, *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*. While they were writing the volume, they were also designing Muir Commons in Davis, California. In 1991, it was the first built-from-the-ground-up cohousing community in the U.S.

Muir Commons is still going strong today, with 45 adults and 35 children living in 26 homes that sit on just under three acres. The homes, with private kitchens and private yards, range in size from 808 to 1,381 square feet. That size is pretty typical of cohousing communities and goes against the trend of homes in the U.S. getting significantly larger each decade. According to Census Bureau figures, the average size of homes being built in America rose from 1,725 square feet in 1983 to 2,095 in 1993 and, a decade later, to 2,330 square feet. In 2013, the most recent year of data collection, homes averaged just under 2,600 square feet.

House size isn’t linked to happiness, according to Elizabeth Dunn, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia and co-author of *Happy Money: The Science of Happier Spending*. What really matters, she says, is the extent to which our houses facilitate positive social interactions.

Living in a place where you naturally bump into your neighbors

provides a happiness boost. Also heightening well-being, as stacks of studies found, is exposure to nature. A recent large Canadian study, for example, showed that having 10 or more trees on a block confers a health boost that’s the equivalent of being seven years younger.

And so the design of the typical cohousing community, where most of the acreage is devoted to shared green space while pathways and front porches encourage socializing, can be a blueprint for happiness.

Katie and Chuck, who have a now 25-year-old daughter, live in Nevada City Cohousing, which is an hour north of California’s capital city of Sacramento. It’s one of more than 50 cohousing communities, or “intentional neighborhoods,” as Katie likes to say, that the couple have designed or consulted on. Nevada City has 34 townhouses on 10 acres, six of which are devoted to open space. There’s an organic veggie garden and chickens, a swimming pool and hot tub. Footpaths lead to the nearby historic town. Residents have community dinners six nights a week. People are free to join or to skip, but everybody has a responsibility to cook a meal once every five weeks. Katie and Chuck usually take part in these group dinners three or four times a week.

“Cohousing is a really good life,” Katie says. “What it addresses is that while we’re living closer and closer together, we’ve become a very isolated society. There’s a sense of security and safety, emotionally and physically, that comes from being part of something

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF BRYAN BOWEN, CADDIS ARCHITECTURE; INSETS: ATOMJOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY.





larger than yourself. You're surrounded by people you can call on in a time of need. And, there's much more spontaneity in day-to-day life. You run into people and say, hey, do you want to go hiking on Sunday? It doesn't take 10 emails and texts."

Living Collaboratively in Boulder, Colorado

In 2000, Bryan Bowen was part of a team of architects working to design Wild Sage, a cohousing community of 34 townhouses in Boulder, Colorado. Developing a cohousing community takes several years and requires active and collaborative decision-making among its members. "Everybody has a voice and feels heard," Bryan says. "And, as they're accomplishing something really cool, the group develops very strong decision-making and conflict-resolution skills that they can use in creating a community once they move in."

By the time Wild Sage was completed 12 years ago, Bryan and his wife, Dale Deegan, then pregnant with their first son, Eli, were among the residents moving in. Eli's younger brother, Jesse, was actually born in the living room of their home, with the aid of a midwife who's a member of the community and has helped deliver a half dozen other Wild Sage babies. "I can't imagine leaving Wild Sage babies," Bryan says. "I can't imagine raising my kids any other way. It's hard enough as it is. Having the support of an interdependent community makes parenthood so much more interesting and rich."

And it makes for a secure childhood, too. Bryan remembers renting a home in Florida for a family beach vacation when Eli was 3 years old. After they pulled up to the house and unloaded the car, Eli ran outside, saying he was going to explore. He made a loop around the big grassy front yard, then came back inside. "He looks totally confused," Bryan recalls. "He says, 'Daddy, where are all

the friends?' That was a moment of epiphany for me. I realized that my kids were growing up with the expectation that wherever you go, there should be a whole bunch of fun, interesting people right outside the door. That's how the world is for them."

A Vertical Community in Seattle

Grace Kim and her husband, Mike Mariano, are founders and architects of Capitol Hill Urban Housing. It's a compact cohousing community in a dense Seattle neighborhood; there are nine homes and a 1,600-square foot rooftop farm in a newly built five-story building. Grace and Mike, along with their 8-year-old daughter Ella are among the 28 residents—17 adults and 11 kids—who moved in just a few months ago.

Like Katie and Chuck, Grace and Mike spent time in Copenhagen studying cohousing communities, thanks to a fellowship Kim received in 2004 from the University of Washington. For Kim, who is Korean-American, the intergenerational *bofelllesskab* was familiar and comforting. "In Korean culture," she says, "it's common to have grandparents living with you. They're an important part of the family. That's very different from Western culture where kids don't have a lot of elders in their lives."

In the cohousing communities that Grace and Mike visited in both Copenhagen and later in the United States, she saw a vibrant alternative. "A 5-year-old would be happy to crawl up into anyone's lap, whatever their age," she says. "And there were meaningful relationships among unrelated people across generations. Teenagers were often lingering after dinner, wanting to



engage in conversation with us. That's so unheard of in American society. It really struck me as a healthier way to live through all stages of life. From raising your kids to growing old, the community takes care of a lot of needs without having to turn to outside interventions."

In these first months at Capitol Hill, there have been some conflicts, like the prolonged dispute over what should be served at the thrice-weekly community meals. Residents took positions from demanding meals be vegan to diehard carnivores who wanted to slaughter their own game. In the end, after many sessions that were guided by a consensus-building facilitator, Grace says, "we all recognize that the meals are a big part of building community and we are committed to making meals for each other that are nutritious and delicious." In practical terms that means meat can be offered as an additive to a meal but not as the main ingredient.

A great deal of energy has been devoted to making these types of group decisions. "Someone once said that cohousing is the most expensive self-help workshop you'll ever take," Grace says with a laugh. Still, Capitol Hill's mix of residents—physicists and computer scientists, a magazine executive, a librarian, husband-and-wife retired teachers who love going for long-distance rides on their tandem bicycle—"have all remarked how living here is better than we could have imagined," Grace says. "The ease and joy with which gatherings take place is remarkable. I never want to live anywhere else." 



Seattle

4 Ways to Strengthen Ties in Your Neighborhood

Not ready to move to a cohousing community? You can still create a deeper sense of connection with your neighbors. Psychologist William Berkowitz, Ph.D., professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, offers four tips.

- 1. GET TO KNOW THE NEIGHBORS ON YOUR STREET.** "It's a simple thing, but I make a point of greeting my neighbors whenever I see them," says William, who lives in a suburb outside Boston. "And every year at holiday time I bake cookies for my neighbors and bring them over."
- 2. JOIN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD SOCIAL NETWORK.** Nextdoor.com serves more than 100,000 neighborhoods across the country. People can post about anything from garage sales to safety alerts.
- 3. CREATE A FREE LIBRARY ON YOUR BLOCK.** All it takes is a box or a crate and a sign that says, "Take a book, leave a book." You can find out more about how to start these free book exchanges at the website for the nonprofit littlefreelibrary.org.
- 4. LAUNCH A NEIGHBORHOOD BLOCK PARTY.** "In my neighborhood, people move furniture into the middle of a side street, everybody brings food and there are games like human chess and checkers," William says. Porchfest is a new kind of block party, where local bands and musicians perform on neighborhood front porches and people walk or bike from one porch to another.



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