

Cohousing for Us

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by Dyan Wiley

Why us, why now? Picture this: a small-scale neighborhood of clustered, energy efficient homes surrounded by open space, gardens, and paths for enjoying nature. Living here are residents aged 55 and older who made an intentional choice to live together in a vibrant community they have created, where they know and care about one another.

It's a cohousing neighborhood where residents are pioneering an alternative way of living that allows them to remain vital and in control of their own aging process. Cohousing communities are old-fashioned neighborhoods in which residents actively participate in its design and operation. It blends private homes with sustainable design, common facilities, and resource sharing. At the center is a common house with a large dining room for shared meals and activities, kitchen, meeting spaces and workshop, guest rooms, caretaker suite, and other desired spaces. Open spaces, gardens, and other outdoor features are shared by neighbors. Private dwellings are clustered to create greater social interaction and minimize the footprint of the built environment. Car sharing is also popular in these neighborhoods. Decision making is cooperatively done by the residents, not by an outside management company.

Clearly, this is not your parent's retirement home.

Why us? We are a group that's not quite ready to call ourselves "seniors," yet we are a force to be reckoned with by our sheer numbers, which some have called the "silver tsunami" as 10,000 of us turn 59 daily. Influenced by seismic social and cultural changes we lived through, we're seeking choices different from our parents. We're living longer, desire a higher quality of life, and to live more sustainably. Perhaps we have unfinished business from our early years as change agents and find ourselves a social force whose time has come again.

Why now? Since the concept was imported from Denmark in the mid-1980s, there are more than 120 cohousing neighborhoods in North America, including 16 in Massachusetts, and dozens more in development. While most are multi-generational, a new trend of senior-focused neighborhoods is taking root. Six have been created for people over 55 and more are in development including in the Pioneer Valley. These senior-focused communities represent the cutting edge of new housing alternatives. This interest is further fueled by changes in our culture's social structure and traditions that in the past would have taken care of elders but cannot do so any longer. Distance and lack of time make it very difficult to get help from our adult children; we prize our independence and desire not to be a burden on them.

Our overburdened medical system is less and less able to meet the needs of our expanding cohort. that institutional options are cost prohibitive and scarce. Cohousing supports residents to actively participate in a system of their own design called "co-care." Neighbors look out for each other, offer rides to doctors, bring soup when you're sick or recuperating and take care of each other through illness, just like in the old days.

In addition, the concept of "aging in place" is a myth. This option creates isolation as the challenge to maintain a social network in retirement can be overwhelming. The social network in cohousing is fundamental and dynamic.

Cohousing is not for sissies. Creating a cohousing community is a journey that should not to be entered into lightly. It's a process that is both fascinating and challenging. With cohousing you are not only buying a house, you are buying a community.

Fortunately there are time-tested and proven tools that make the process creative and dynamic. Communication skills training, systems for managing differences and innovative models for guiding the community through decision-making help neighbors live in harmony with each other.

Forming a cohousing community involves finding shared values and priorities that become the lifestyle of the community. Members of cohousing are dedicated to placing their own preferences second to what's best for the community. In cohousing, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

"This is a really good way to age," said Dene Peterson, the 81-year-old spark plug of ElderSpirit in Virginia, which opened in 2006. ElderSpirit's 42 residents, aged 60 to 86, include homeowners and renters who share the common house, with its library, guest rooms, community gardens, laundry, dining room and kitchen, where rotating cooking teams serve dinner for 30 or so twice a week.

"People have formed some really strong relationships," Ms. Peterson said. With friends ready to help with meals, rides and visits, "people don't go to rehab after the hospital," she added. "They come home."

Annie Russell, one of the original residents of Silver Sage, in Boulder Colorado, had a similar experience when she recuperated from knee surgery. "I had to sit with my leg elevated, but my neighbors were just great," she said. "I was lucky to be here."

Caveats abound, naturally. Not everyone is suited to consensus decision-making, potluck dinners or the responsibilities of community life. In Boulder, one founding couple moved out after a year, despite Silver Sage's efforts to screen for compatibility. "They discovered it wasn't their cup of tea," Ms. Russell said.

While living in cohousing involves a significant commitment of time and energy it also offers the opportunity to live with neighbors who share your vision for a life enhancing experience as you age. Cohousing epitomizes a caring community.

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