

Eccentric's Corner: The Modern Homemaker

Kathryn McCamant wants to bring community to a neighborhood near you.

By Katie Gilbert

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When, as a student studying architecture abroad in 1980, Kathryn McCamant first encountered Denmark's community-focused housing complexes—the ones she'd later stake her career on bringing to the U.S.—she didn't give them much thought. Designing dwellings with the aim of fostering interaction among neighbors struck her as a basic concept. Yet when she returned to the States, she was shocked to discover that virtually *nobody* had heard of it.

McCamant and her husband, architect Charles Durrett, have since changed that. While living in San Francisco in the early '80s, they became captivated by the idea of creating better neighborhoods by designing them from the ground up. Their first cohousing community was completed in California in 1991. Today there are over 125 such U.S. communities (primarily on the West Coast, as well as in Massachusetts and Colorado), more than 50 of which McCamant designed or helped develop.

What is the purpose of cohousing?

Contemporary households face social isolation in part because people live in housing that no longer suits them. Cohousing neighborhoods rebuild community with proximity.

What makes this housing unique?

In a cohousing community, you have an individual home. It's not shared housing, but it's a community-oriented atmosphere. The thing you'd notice first is that parking is at the periphery of the site. Communities are pedestrian oriented, which opens up the space between homes for playing and gardening. It's a people-friendly environment.

You also have an extensive common house, with a big dining room, a nice kitchen, a playroom, a lounge. In my community, mail is in the common house, and we have a room for music practice and yoga, a hot tub, and a pool. Legally, it's like a condominium clubhouse, but those are mostly locked and you rent them for a party. We see the common house as an extension of our own living room. Its location is critical—it needs to be an easy place to pass through as you're coming and going. I'm in and out of our common house daily. Last night the neighborhood kids were there, practicing dance moves. I have a relationship with all of them because I've watched them grow up.

What was the initial reaction to the concept of cohousing when you brought it to the U.S. 25 years ago?

It's clearly not for everybody. But I've heard many people say, "This is what I've always wanted." It's not a unique idea—it's a very old-fashioned one. I think thousands of people have sat around with friends and said, "Wouldn't it be great if we lived closer together? We could help each other out with the kids." That is such a common conversation. What we did was put a name on it. We made it accessible.

If it's such a basic idea, why don't most people live this way already?

Since World War II we've had a very strong national policy and incredible marketing toward the ideal of the single-family house. Most Americans bought into the American dream: a house, a mom, a dad, and two kids. We have this myth of the individual that was fueled by cheap gas, which made sprawl and subdivisions viable. But it's a total myth—the West was not settled by individuals. The West was settled by people working together, coming across the country in communities.

So what has changed?

Women started working in larger numbers. Families got smaller. There is no typical American family anymore.

When I was growing up in Denver, I was the oldest of four. Every house on the street had gangs of kids running in and out. Most moms were home. That helped create a sense of community. Today, on that same street, you have fewer children, and few parents home during the day.

Extended family changed too—100 years ago your uncle was around the corner, Grandma was down the block. Now people move farther from extended family and move more often. They don't have the lifetime connections they used to. We're also seeing an increasing number of single adults. So people are just looking for a stronger sense of community.

There's also a whole generation who grew up in the suburbs. They couldn't get anywhere without Mom or Dad driving them. A lot of these people don't want to raise their kids in that environment.

So are young adults the ones flocking to cohousing communities?

We get families, bachelors, and empty nesters. There's a range. We have engineers, attorneys, stay-at-home moms.

Is there a cohousing "type?"

They're proactive people who believe they can affect the world. You have to believe you'll get more by cooperating with others than on your own. That's the bottom-line value you've got to have.

People think we're all extraverts, but if you do a [Myers-Briggs](#) test on a group of cohousers, you tend to find a high percentage of introverts. The definition of the Myers-Briggs introvert is basically, "I don't like parties where I don't know anybody, but I like people, and I feel very comfortable when I walk into a common-house dinner where I know everybody."

But aren't most residents friends before they join a community?

That's a big misconception. Everybody starts with, "Oh, I talked about doing this with my friends." That's what gets people comfortable with the idea, but it's almost impossible to find a group of friends in which everyone is ready to do it at the same time and place.

But my own neighbors and I agree that, in some ways, we know each other better than our friends, because we work together. We manage a \$10 million project together.

How do those kinds of relationships shape you?

You know, it's not utopia. There are times people will drive you crazy and times when there's some hot issue in the community. So you've got to look at yourself a lot. You can't go through life just blaming everyone else for everything.

My daughter grew up in a cohousing community. Today she's wrapping up her degree in diplomacy and world affairs—she's interning at the United Nations. She's an incredible communicator—she can talk to anybody. If you ask her why, she'll say, "I grew up going to common-house dinner, and there was always a conversation at the table, and I'd just participate."