

In this housing development, community is the keystone

By R.A. Schuetz



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Photo: Brett Coomer, Houston Chronicle / Staff Photographer

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Photo: Melissa Phillip, Houston Chronicle / Staff Photographer



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Nazia Iftkhar, 35, imagines a life for her 3-year-old son in which all of his neighbors know his name. She pictures a community filled with people who take the time to chat with him and enrich his life, a place where a young Muslim man is part of the social fabric, instead of subject to suspicion.

Kathy Kokas, 63, is looking to retire around people of diverse ages and interests, where she can engage with the next generations who, one day, can help her in return as age takes its toll. “You know, these days, that you don’t rely that you’re going to move in with your children,” she said.

Iftexhar and Kokas hope to realize their different dreams at the same place — a housing development where community is the most important amenity. They are among the 35 people who are spearheading a project that would become the first cohousing development in Texas.

Cohousing is a collection of private homes grouped around shared spaces that usually include a communal kitchen and dining area, a guest house and a garden. While shared spaces are nothing new — condominiums and neighborhood associations typically offer rooftop decks or clubhouses — the intent of cohousing developments is much different. Shared spaces serve not as amenities, but as keystones to community.

In cohousing, common dining areas are home to regularly-scheduled communal meals that aim to bring neighbors closer together. As those bonds form, picking up something for a neighbor from the store or keeping an eye on the kids next door becomes only natural.

Candace Busker, 74, said she has children in their 40s, but they don’t live nearby and she doesn’t want to lean on them as she and her husband grow older. Instead, she wants to live with a group that has opted in to helping one another. For example, she can help watch Iftexhar’s 3-year-old like a de facto grandparent and receive help in return.

“It’s kind of reciprocal,” she said. “It’s re-creating what may have been a hundred years ago, when you did have that other generation that helped each other.”

100 parents

Cohousing began in Denmark in the 1960s, when the feminist movement was taking off and many women were grasping for a way to have both a career and a family. After a major Danish newspaper published a story titled “Children Need 100 Parents,” a group of families decided to form a community where adults could share responsibilities, from baby-sitting to helping with homework to playing soccer with the kids.

Two American architects, Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, visited cohousing communities in Denmark and brought the concept to the United States in the 1980s, where it first took root in Davis, Calif. Nearly 150 cohousing developments have spread across the country, according to the Cohousing Association, a national organization that maintains a directory of cohousing groups.

None, so far, is in Texas, despite past efforts to develop cohousing in Houston, Dallas and Austin. Hugh Resnick of Dallas Cohousing, which has yet to assemble a core group of people willing to invest in the vision, said cohousing may seem out of place with the individualism that can permeate life in Texas.

For example, many people prefer their own garage with their house. But cohousing communities generally share a parking area as a way to foster chance encounters as people walk to their homes. “It doesn’t translate to a lot of Texans,” Resnick said.

But CoHousing Houston has found a critical mass of people willing to put up money to move the dream forward. The roots of the project began 12 years ago when Tom King, Kokas’ husband, first heard about the concept from a member of his meditation group.

He was immediately drawn to the idea and cultivated a list of other people who were interested. The project stayed on the back burner for a decade as his work in oil refineries and love of travel took him and Kokas around the world. After retiring and moving back to Houston in 2016, King and Kokas were ready to form a community.

“We said, ‘We’re back in Houston; it’s time to start,’” King said.

He began hosting planning meetings in January 2017, posting flyers in bookstores and restaurants, inviting others to join. Nearly three dozen have so far.

New skill sets

No cohousing group in Texas has advanced as far as CoHousing Houston, according to King. The group has pooled together \$1 million for a down payment to buy at least an acre of land and is preparing to bid on lots within Loop 610. It has also hired a real estate broker to help negotiate prices.

CoHousing Houston has succeeded where others in Texas have failed in part because it hired the architects who brought cohousing to the United States as consultants. They helped teach people with backgrounds in psychology, health care, education and archaeology to plan and finance a development.

They also helped create an organization structure of committees in charge of everything from managing membership to vetting sites.

After buying land, King estimated, it will take two years to complete the development, planned as an apartment-type building with a common outbuilding for communal meals. The group believes prices will begin at \$250,000 for a one-bedroom unit and reach roughly \$700,000 for a three-bedroom unit, although the costs and design are far from finalized.

King acknowledged that the prices will be prohibitive for some. “That was one of the hard lessons,” he said. “We want to be diverse, we want to be inclusive, but you have to spend money. We haven’t found a way around that.”

But many believe it’s a vision worth investing in. Kathleen English, a 58-year-old architect, said she has long thought of re-creating the type of tight-knit community that she and many others experienced in college.

“Wouldn’t it be great to create that dynamic of the relationships you build in college?” she asked Kate Reese, 34, at a recent meeting of the cohousing group at Cezanne, a small jazz club off of Montrose Boulevard.

Reese said she would like to regain such a sense of community not only for herself, but also for her children. “They say it takes a village to raise a child,” she said, “ but you’re hard-pressed to find a village.”

Already a community

While the development is still two years out, the community the group has envisioned is already forming. Reese’s twin 4-year-old boys now play with Iftekhar’s 3-year-old son when their parents get together to catch up between meetings of the cohousing group.

And when Hurricane Harvey struck Houston six months after CoHousing Houston began meeting, future neighbors drew together. King and Kokas went to help Lynn and Kip Krouse with flooding by removing the damaged drywall with hammers and crowbars.

Debbie Ebner shared her home with a CoHousing Houston member for seven months, while Candace and Bart Busker brought them home-cooked meals.

“It made us value cohousing more because we saw how wonderful that was, to have those connections,” Ebner said. “We wanted more of that.”

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