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# Why Boomers Are Designing Their Own Retirement Communities




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*By Lisa Wirthman*

For a growing number of baby boomers who are looking for an alternative to traditional retirement housing, senior “co-housing” offers a refreshing blend of community and independence. Co-housing communities consist of independent individuals who typically share a property yet live in their own housing units. Residents share common spaces as well as resources, ranging from lawn mowers to guest rooms.

“Too many boomers have seen their parents subside in unflattering ways,” said Charles Durrett, an author and architect who designs senior co-housing spaces. “They are in an institution or living alone at home, both of which can be extremely lonely or disrespectful.”





Durrett, who is credited with bringing co-housing to the United States from Denmark in the 1980s, recalls a time when his own mother was nearly ejected from a retirement home for having a bottle of Tylenol in her room. “I don’t know anybody who thinks the way their parents aged is the way to go,” he said. “Most of the people I know want to become more self-determined in how they live in the world.”

## **Aging In Place**

Some 87 percent of adults ages 65 and older want to stay in their current homes and communities, [according to AARP\\*](#). Senior co-housing is designed to make aging in place easier, said Durrett, who wrote [The Senior Cohousing Handbook](#). Housing is usually one-story and compliant with the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990. With many seniors driving less, garages are often at the back of the complex with front-entry areas designed for pedestrian use.

Seniors organize their own activities, whether it’s a shared dinner, making repairs or caring for a resident who needs help. The communities offer social connections, environmental benefits, self-governance, and greater independence and dignity for residents who can have as much privacy or community as they desire.

At the 16-home [Silver Sage Village](#) in Boulder, Colorado, each house provides a common dining area for hosting parties and has guest rooms that can be reserved for visitors, said John Huyler, 71, an eight-year resident.

An outdoor gathering area includes bike racks, a community garden and a woodworking shop. “Every time you walk in, you may see someone that you want to sit down with or invite to a movie, so that’s a major functional difference,” Huyler said.

Silver Sage Village opened in 2007 as one of the country’s first senior co-housing communities in the country, with six units that are designated “permanently affordable” by the [Boulder Housing Partners](#). The property is walking distance from restaurants, doctors, hiking trails and public transportation.

Residents serve on teams such as “Finance and Legal” and “Garden and Grounds” to manage different aspects of the community. As the residents collectively age — the average is about 70 — Huyler says he sees the need for more age diversity and a larger group of residents to share responsibilities.

## **Retaining Independence**

Senior co-housing is not assisted living, although the accommodations and shared support typically allow residents to age in place longer. Some communities employ a shared caregiver, who is paid for by the residents who need the service but selected by the entire community to increase accountability, said Durrett.

At Silver Sage Village, no residents are currently in need of a caregiver, but a committee is exploring options for a time when needs may change, said Huyler: “It’s all about communication and planning and thinking ahead.”

When one older resident fell and broke her hip, residents took turns walking her dog and helping out in other ways. When the same resident later died, she had spent only a few months in assisted living. “I do not doubt that she was living in a house longer than she would have been if she hadn’t had the community around,” Huyler said.

Another resident, who has advanced Parkinson’s disease, is often found outside where he contributes his handyman skills to the community. It’s a more dignified way to live than sitting inside all day in front of the TV, as he might in a traditional retirement community, Huyler said.

“It helps him continue with a meaningful life,” he added.

## **Evolving Interest**

So far, interest in senior co-housing is evolving slowly, said Durrett. He thinks it will expand more quickly when the construction industry fully realizes and embraces the trend, and demand from boomers grows. “You can only drift about the country in your Winnebago for so long,” he said. “You need something based on proximity.”

“Most people move into senior co-housing because it makes life more convenient, more practical, more economical, more healthy, more interesting and more fun,” he added. “It’s just an infinitely different way to grow older.”

*Lisa Wirthman is a journalist who writes about business, public policy and women’s issues.*

*\*Source: AARP. “Livable Communities Baby Boomer Facts and Figures.” April 2014*

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