

Cohousing looks at practical questions

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By DANIEL STURM

When Kerrin O'Brien first heard of "cohousing," she instantly felt intrigued. She knew she would like this kind of "lifestyle."

As a student at MSU, she'd lived in the Bower House Co-op, where residents share food preparation and cleaning duties ("A better option to the fraternity system"). The 35-year-old professional environmentalist and her family look forward to leaving their house on a busy street and moving to a greener space called Meadowood Cohousing Community. The construction starts this fall for a cluster of 80 condominium townhouses near Aurelius and Cavanaugh roads in southeast Lansing. They'll serve as an alternative to the suburban sprawl of single-family house developments - to the anonymity and self-sufficiency so many of us have grown used to.

"Literally not knowing one's neighbor, literally being alone, literally having to make an appointment with my best friend three weeks ahead of time struck me as absurd," said Nick Meima, a partner in the Cohousing Development Co.

In cohousing communities - of which there are about 50 in the United States - residents collaborate to plan a pedestrian-friendly, neighborly community. If you need to borrow a cup of milk you won't ever get turned down, as might happen in condo developments. One of the great inspirations of the cohousing idea was the Austrian architect Hundertwasser, who integrated flowers and trees into the architecture of his buildings (roof top gardens, vine-decked walls, green courtyards). Developers of cohousing use environmentally friendly material. Water pipes are not in the basement, but rather running through the ceiling, making homes prepared for the day when solar panels become standardized.

Meadowood will be Cohousing Development's second community in Michigan. Meima, 50, helped found Sunward in Ann Arbor four years ago. The neo-colonial Sunward townhouses, covered in clapboard-like siding in yellow, pale gray or blue with white trim, are clustered along sidewalk paths, which lead to common areas. Each house has a small front yard and porch that promotes easy visiting. "Native prairie" flowers have been planted, allowing residents to avoid the strange ritual of daily mowing. The little gardens attract butterflies and birds. In the evening raccoons, opossums and skunks explore the habitat.

The idea of cohousing residential communities were first brought to the United States by Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, a Californian couple who studied innovative condo buildings in Denmark. They worked to find an architectural answer to the dramatically growing number of single-household apartments. "To expect that households should be self-sufficient and without community support is not only unrealistic, but absurd," McCamant and Durrett, the authors of "Cohousing," emphasize.

Although the name and concept might remind readers of the "commune," which was popular in the 1960s and '70s, cohousing doesn't share much in common with experimental communities from the hippie era. "In a commune," says Meima who went to college in the '70s, "you're sharing income, ownership and belief system, and often times there's an industry. Cohousing is much more like a close-knit neighborhood village. Everybody owns their own house, has their own job and their own values."

While in the 1970s entire communes disintegrated during heated arguments about individualism and collective responsibility about Marx, Lenin, and Cesar Chavez, cohousing focuses more on the practical questions of life, Meima believes. Residents' questions can be as trivial as "I need a fondue pot, who has one?" Living in a close-knit neighborhood apparently has some advantages. "If somebody wants to get a ride to the airport, if somebody would like to learn bridge, or if somebody wants to support a certain politician for election, no problem.

While the residents may not be hippies, they are typically more liberal. "They probably wouldn't listen to Rush Limbaugh," says Meima. Most residents are environmentally aware and love good food, nature and kids. They are people who don't care much for programs like Neighborhood Watch when they think about better living conditions and friendlier communities. Neighborhood Watch is premised on the idea that observing your neighbor is the most effective deterrent to residential crime. In cohousing the emphasis is not on control or suspicion; enjoying the company of your neighbors is an act in and of itself, which has the side effect of creating a safe environment.

When parents get stuck in traffic on their way back home from work, their kids can call anyone in the community to visit for a snack or dinner. "It reduces anxiety when parents know they can rely on their neighbors," says O'Brien. About four times a week roughly 45 of Sunward's 93 residents meet in the community building for dinner. Inside, members pick up their mail and newspapers and can watch television, eat dinner, do laundry and use exercise machines or woodworking tools. There's also a guest bedroom for occasional visitors. The association requires adult members to work about four hours a month on projects that benefit the whole, such as shoveling snow, doing yard work, serving on committees, cooking the group meals or cleaning up afterward. One group of residents organize children's activities to give parents free time.

Lisa Wickman is a mother of two, teacher of technology, and lover of nature. She has been interested in cohousing for seven years and couldn't wait to join when she found out about Meadowood. She looks forward to community meals and having more social opportunities where kids are welcome. "Jace (12) and Gage (6) are anxious to have the run of a 10-acre homestead," she said. Meadowood Cohousing offers 22

acres in total, but will be split into two different projects. Cynthia Donovan, an agricultural economics professor at MSU who used to work in Africa, expects cohousing to be a refuge. She enjoys cooking for a crowd, "sitting around a big table and working on the world's problems, and dropping in on friends for a cup of tea."

The one-, two- and three-bedroom units are 750 to 1,600 square feet and sell for \$150,000 to nearly \$300,000. Hence living in a cohousing community is not entirely inexpensive. To counter this, Cohousing's "think tank" has developed a resolution for families who have trouble buying in immediately. "There are residents who have accumulated some assets and who've put some of this into a pool," says Meima. Families can borrow the missing money from the pool in the form of a second mortgage. "Community members are supporting each other."

The Lansing Meadowood project is located near Crego Park, Potter Park and the River Trail. Cars are not allowed beyond the parking lot near the entrance, and residents use pushcarts to carry groceries to their homes, which is about the equivalent of half a city block.

In some respects cohousing seems like the reinvention of turn-of-the-century rural living.

Farmhands and their families often lived in houses clustered around the main farmhouse.

These large households provided both children and adults a diverse intergenerational network of relationships. Meima remembers reading Hillary Clinton's book "It Takes a Village," whose title was based on an African proverb about raising children. Whereas he thought Clinton didn't know enough about this lifestyle ("because she hasn't experienced it"), in cohousing "the adults actually do know the children, and the kids know the adults."

What happens if people in this happy community get into an argument? Or as potential Meadowood resident, Douglas Black, who is an energy efficiency consultant, put it: "What if I end up in this big happy family and the great guy Joe next door is transferred to Tucumcari, and his unit gets sold to ... the neighbor from hell."

To prevent such experiences, cohousing communities have created specific rules, beginning with the premise that one doesn't "operate from a position of non-negotiable negativity," explains Meima. "That means that you're not going to take the position of saying 'I'm not going to talk about it.'" If things really get tough, the option of a mediation committee also exists. Such an extreme situation almost never occurs, he said. With less than a 5 percent turnover rate per year (according to Meima most condominium developments have a turnover of 25 percent), cohousing seems to produce fairly stable neighborhood relationships.

And if human relations turn out to get a bit touchy, then one can always escape into the wildlife behind the scene. Only up to 25 percent of the cohousing property will be used for housing, parking or roadways. The rest will be maintained - without herbicides or pesticides - as fields, yards and community gardens. Both in Sunward (Ann Arbor) and Meadowood (Lansing) deer were spotted who seemed to take the idea of cohousing for granted.

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