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Creating an 'urban village'

'Cohousing' comes to Lansing's Genesee neighborhood

By DANIEL STURM

When Michael Hamlin first heard of "cohousing," he didn't know what it meant. As a first reaction, the word made him think of a commune, and he knew what that meant. Hamlin was raised in a commune in Knoxville, Tenn., where his family lived together with four other families in an old mansion. Having grown up with seven other children in the same house, Hamlin said he was never really bored. "It was a very idyllic childhood."

Last Monday, the Michigan State University graduate student in physics happily recalled those childhood memories. He sat with others on the porch of 738 Bancroft Court in Lansing, throwing in his own ideas about how to best turn the cluster of five houses at the edge of a dead-end street in the Genesee neighborhood into a cohousing community. Of course, final decisions about planning would be made in a non-hierarchical manner. A smoked tofu salad rested on the table.

Hamlin said he looked forward to helping with the foundation of Lansing's first cohousing community. Together, 12 Lansing area residents (eight adults, four children) now make up the new cohousing network. After a several-month search for a perfect location for their "urban village," in March 2003 they located the cluster of houses in Genesee. In addition to the three houses the group (which is still discussing a name for itself) already owns, they plan to buy two more within the next few weeks. They plan to expand the Bancroft Court cohousing community to the intersection with Leitrham, and within five years' time to build the foundational framework for an "intentional community," as one member said.

Unlike this Lansing project, most cohousing communities are built from scratch. Cohousing is generally understood as an alternative to the suburban sprawl of single-family housing developments and to the anonymity and self-sufficiency so many of us have grown used to. 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 will never be brusquely turned down, as might happen in a condo development. Developers of cohousing often use environmentally friendly material and innovations, such as solar panels. In the case of Bancroft Court, cohousing members are currently discussing the adaptations they could make to their already existing properties.

Although each home is separate, members will have access to a common building, where optional communal meals, a community library, meeting rooms and rooms for child care are available.

Hamlin said what appeals to him the most was the idea of being neighbors in an old-fashioned way. "You can walk across the street to borrow sugar, or yell from porch to porch if someone wants to watch a movie." But unlike a commune, Hamlin said a cohousing community offered more private space.

He recalled that living in a commune as a child wasn't always easy. "I remember there was a great deal of common space, and I'm sure there were struggles that I'm not aware of." The four Knoxville families moved out when Hamlin was 13, when this landlord put the house up for sale.

Whenever he and his peers from the old commune days visit their parents in Knoxville, they wonder how their lives would have turned out if they'd continued to live in the commune. Now Hamlin and his wife Zhewei Dai, a graduate student in math originally from the Chinese city of Wuhan, will be among the first people to move into the Lansing cohousing settlement.

"There is a pioneer awareness in the group because everybody knows they're making something that didn't exist before," said Gene Townsend, another member of the group. Townsend, who is a builder of environmentally friendly homes and lived in an Ann Arbor housing co-op, said that the group began to get in touch with neighborhood associations a year ago to locate a suitable spot. They were guided by three questions: Are homes for sale? Is there an open space that can be turned into a green space? And finally, are the homes' porches facing each other? The neighborhood associations identified possible locations in Lansing's Renaissance Zone Neighborhood, Allen Neighborhood and in East Lansing.

Although the initial search process was helpful, Townsend said the outcome wasn't ideal. "Basically the neighborhoods wanted us to take over their blights," he said. Some of the homes were uninhabitable, and fixing them would have been too expensive. "Finally, we decided that this was too much of a burden."

Last fall they realized they did not want to wait any longer to make their dream of cohousing a reality, said Townsend's partner, Jessica Yorko. Yorko, who works at the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality in marketing and partnership building, said that they decided to ask a real estate agent to find an area that offered as many habitable homes as possible that were adjacent to each other. The Realtor discovered a group of houses at Bancroft Court and Leintram in the Genesee Neighborhood that were vacant, for rent and for sale.

Attempts to establish a cohousing community in Lansing started a year ago when several people discussed participating in a new development project of the Cohousing Development Co. The business planned to build a cluster of 80 condominium townhouses near Aurelius and Cavanaugh roads in southeast Lansing. But construction, due to begin in the fall of 2002, was delayed when the developer couldn't find 28 interested households. According to Nick Meima, a partner in the Ann Arbor-based company, some potential members were unwilling to transfer their children into the Lansing School District. Meima said they will now consider beginning to develop as a cohousing community for seniors. If this is successful, additional family units could be then added.

Cohousing from scratch would have been "too pricey" in the Lansing market, said Kerrin O'Brien, a 36-year-old professional environmentalist who participated in every step of the almost two-year-long planning process. O'Brien said she will not immediately join the Bancroft Court cohousing project, because she is pregnant with her second child. Long-term, however, O'Brien said she and her family are still very interested. "If a house comes up for sale in the Genesee area, we will definitely consider moving in," she said.

Although the first cohousing residents have already had their first barbecue party on Bancroft Court, the process of moving in will take place slowly. "It's a case by case thing," said Townsend, who's remodeling the future common house. He said establishing the new cohousing community could take as many as five years.

At the barbecue, the cohousing group says they were warmly received by at least 15 neighborhood residents. The high number of vacant properties in the Genesee Neighborhood has been a problem since white-collar workers from the government and Oldsmobile abandoned the neighborhood during the 1980s. But Townsend said they chose Genesee for cohousing especially because community members had worked so hard to turn things around.

Okemos resident Tamiko Rothhorn, who together with her husband bought the house across the street from the common house, said it will be important to remove the lead-based paint from the walls before they even think about moving in. The Rothhorns have a 14-month-old daughter, Katarina.

Rothhorn, an Ingham County Health Department family therapist, said she originally met most of the group's members at the East Lansing-based environmental educational center, Urban Options. When asked what cohousing meant to her, she said it was all about sharing resources. "We've talked about car-pooling. Since most of us go to the

East Lansing Food Co-Op, this would perfectly make sense,” she said.

Her husband, MC, a substitute teacher and community activist, added that cohousing was all about balancing the private and the public spheres. “Living in a cohousing community is not necessarily cheaper, but it balances my resources,” he said. It would be much easier to harmonize work and family life in a cohousing community. Rothhorn said they live in Okemos, where everything is “very shopping oriented. Also, everybody has a lawn mower. It’s not the kind of place where I feel comfortable.” Rothhorn said as a new cohousing member he will refuse to mow the lawn and instead plant trees, organize community events and start a wildflower and vegetable garden.

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