

# Watt's Happening? #269

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## Cohousing: *housing with heart*



*Cohousing is a contemporary solution to the loneliness epidemic and the housing crisis, all in one. It mixes total privacy in your own home with a caring community of friends and neighbours who are there at your doorstep when you need them.*

One of the biggest missing pieces of environmental sustainability is community.

Imagine living in a vibrant community where you have your own home but also easy access to extensive shared amenities and a strong network of neighbours.

But not just any neighbours who happen to be living nearby. You have known these neighbours for years, and you have worked with them to actually design and organize the intentional community you are living in together.

It's called cohousing: a remarkable blend of independence and shared living. Cohousing neighbourhoods tend to feature environmentally sensitive design with a pedestrian orientation. They include on average about 15 to 30 households.

The extensive common, shared spaces make it not only possible to live in a smaller home, but they also act as the heart of the community and offer many opportunities for social interaction. Although each

home has its own kitchen, regular shared meals are one of the many regular events that foster relationships among neighbours.

### **DESIGNED FOR PRIVACY + INTERACTION**

As well, the overall architectural design and layout of the community makes it easy to interact with your neighbours. It is interesting to note that most cohousing residents are introverts: folks who need their privacy but don't want to be lonely.

And you share values with your neighbours too. You believe in sharing and caring for each other, helping each other, and living sustainably. You own your own home, but you share amenities in what is called the "common house": a big kitchen and dining room, a workshop, laundry facilities, kids' play rooms, guest rooms, and outside: shared gardens and green space.

The cost of units in a cohousing community is usually about market value, but on-going costs are noticeably lower than regular condo fees due to the extensive shared amenities and spaces. But if it's community with like-minded people you are after, your investment is priceless!

## **THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC**

Why bother with cohousing? Why not just live in suburbia, like most everybody else?

Thanks to our very successful consumer society, each family or individual these days has pretty well everything they need. In fact, we are the first members of our species that have no practical need of our neighbours for much of anything. Or so we think.

Most North Americans say they are not as happy, on average, as they were 50 years ago, and the reason they give is the loss of community and the loss of connection with others.

Our communities have been ripped apart and thrown away, replaced with endless rows of cookie cutter houses, filled with people who don't know or care about their neighbours.

The price we pay for this social isolation is high: climbing suicide rates and real health problems, from alcohol and drug abuse to increased risks of dementia, heart disease and stroke, sleep problems, depression and anxiety, to name just a few. We are social animals by our very nature. Take that away and we are unhappy and sick.

We can do better. Cohousing is one of the very best ways yet devised of bringing back community. It is not really a commune or co-op, but a more contemporary model that includes personal home ownership with extensive shared facilities and an architectural design that intentionally fosters social interaction.

## **HISTORY OF COHOUSING**

The first cohousing community was built in 1972 outside Copenhagen, Denmark by 27 families who wanted a greater sense of community and sustainability than that offered by suburban subdivisions or apartments.

They redesigned the concept of neighbourhood by combining the autonomy of private dwellings with the advantages of community living. Their custom neighbourhood was people and elder-friendly, and its design created opportunities for daily household interaction for things like meals and childcare. And they kept the automobiles away from the living spaces,

making the community truly people and child friendly.

It worked. There are now roughly 1000 cohousing communities in Denmark, 20 to 30 new ones every year, and thousands more across Scandinavia.

There are about 300 in the U.S., and the Canadian Cohousing Network lists 32 either completed or in process across Canada. Canada's oldest, Windsong, was built in Langley, BC in 1995.

## **HOW DOES COHOUSING HAPPEN?**

One or two burning souls get together and begin to spread the word, gathering like minded folks together using everything from brochures to public info sessions, often under the direction of a cohousing consultant.

Once a critical mass of about 10 to 12 households have committed, the search for property begins, a cohousing architect is contracted, and they start to design their very own custom community. Some are for seniors only, many are multi-generational, but each is unique, tailored to the wants and needs of the members of the cohousing group.

Meanwhile they have learned how to work together effectively (check out Sociocracyforall.org), smooth out the rough spots, and build trust among the members.

Each family buys (or rents in some circumstances) their own unit, but also owns part of the shared common house and other facilities. If you want out or must leave, you can always sell what you own, but most folks stay for life. Some cohousing communities are third generation!

## **FIDDLEHEAD COMMONS**

Personally I have been sold on the cohousing model for over a decade, and am presently involved with a new cohousing group near Ottawa, Ontario called Fiddlehead Commons.

We are growing our membership with a goal to design and build (with the help of a contractor) our very own multi-generational dream community next year. Check us out at [ottawacohousing.ca/fiddlehead-commons](http://ottawacohousing.ca/fiddlehead-commons).

For a look at other Canadian cohousing communities, go to Canadian Cohousing Network at [cohousing.ca/communities/](http://cohousing.ca/communities/)

Let's care for each other and learn how to share and cooperate again. Let's bring back community. Let's build housing with heart.

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