

Urban Moshav
Information Sheet
Jewish Intentional Communities Conference
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URBAN מוֹשָׁב MOSHAV
Live in Community

What is Urban Moshav?

Urban Moshav develops Jewish cohousing.

What is cohousing?

Cohousing is a type of collaborative housing, with private residences and extensive common facilities, in which residents consciously commit to living together as a community and to participating actively in neighborhood life. Cohousing was developed about 40 years ago in Denmark, and there are currently well over 100 cohousing communities in the United States.

The attached article from the November 2013 issue of *The Monthly*, a regional magazine in the San Francisco Bay Area, offers a good overview of cohousing.

Why develop cohousing in a Jewish context?

Cohousing has a lot to offer Judaism. Judaism originated and flourished in community, and community has sustained Jewish life and identity since ancient times. But as large and relatively impersonal societies have evolved, communal connections have withered, and this in turn has eroded Jewish life. Yet even in the modern world, immersive and tight-knit Jewish communities (such as summer camps, day schools, and Israel) are environments in which Jewish life and identity are likely to flourish. Cohousing will not only create such an environment, but it can do so in a way that is permanent, part of daily life, and accessible to Jews of all observance levels and walks and stages of life. Cohousing is a natural model for nurturing Jewish life and community.

Judaism also has something to offer cohousing. Cohousing is difficult to create – only about ten percent of groups that form to create cohousing are successful. One reason is that, typically, the one thing potential cohousers really have in common is a desire for intentional community. A Jewish context, however, adds to this both the foundation of a common Jewish connection and the experience of relating in community through synagogues and other aspects of Jewish life. Furthermore, Jewish community organizations can help catalyze the development of Jewish cohousing communities by providing support, resources, and expertise.

What is Urban Moshav currently working on?

Urban Moshav is operating as a non-profit and is in the beginning stages of its pilot project, Berkeley Moshav, which will be a Jewish cohousing community of 18-24 households. (Berkeley Moshav will be privately owned by its residents. Urban Moshav is the non-profit developer.) About 12 interested households and a half-acre site have been identified. The project, which will involve all new construction, is expected to take three to four years to complete.

How can I contact Urban Moshav?

To reach us, please contact Roger Studley, executive director of Urban Moshav, at 510-516-6740 or urban.moshav@gmail.com. (We are located near Berkeley, CA.)

Feature

Come Together / Cohousing and the art of neighborhood. | *By Kate Madden Yee*

It may be a cold July night in Oakland, but our fire pit throws off generous heat, illuminating our faces in that creepy-cool campfire way. About eight of us from our cohousing community have gathered in the courtyard for a s'mores session. The grown-ups feed the flames with bits of kindling as they chat, while the kids stuff melted marshmallows into their mouths as quickly as they can. And just like that, we're transported from urban grit to summer camp.

The urge to be part of some kind of clan is an ancient one, wired into our DNA. For me and my husband, cohousing—folks deliberately choosing to live together in a neighborhood they've created—scratches that itch. In the late 1990s, when some members of our church invited us to join a cohousing project they were developing in North Oakland, we jumped at the chance. It seemed a great opportunity to care for the planet through sharing resources like cars and tools, to offer each other support as we raised children, and to contribute positively to the wider neighborhood.

So we bought some land, hired architects and contractors, and spent many, many hours contributing sweat equity in the form of work days and meetings, until finally in 2000 the place was built and we all moved in. And lived happily ever after, right?

Well, sort of. Thirteen years later, our group is thriving. But life together hasn't been a Cinderella story. Turns out building a village not only takes financial risk, long hours of physical labor, high-stakes meetings with city authorities, and savvy wrangling with contractors, but also a certain kind of interpersonal mojo. It's not easy, hanging in there with one's fellow cohousers, despite disagreements, disappointments, and disillusionment. Yet therein lies the reward: In our time together, my neighbors and I have learned a thing or two about how to not only create, but negotiate our common life with more ease and compassion. We've grown up together.

What exactly is cohousing? A modern take on a 1960s commune? A post-millennial version of a co-op? A frat house for adults? Actually, it's none of the above. Most cohousing in the United States is made up of specially designed condominium developments; members buy their homes at market rate. Some cohousers find and buy adjacent homes, rather than buying land and building from the ground up—this style is called retrofit



Group effort: Members of Temescal Commons Cohousing in Oakland pose after a recent work day; cohousing communities offer a way for people to live and work together, share resources, and still hang onto their privacy. Randy and Isaac Yee, (back row, second from right, in black shirts) are the author's husband and son. Photo by Pat Mazerra.

cohousing, and it's a great option in urban areas, where land is scarce. And unlike my group, which organized around a common faith, cohousing isn't necessarily based on a cause, a tradition, or a political view, although of course, members may find that they share various convictions.

"Cohousing attracts people who are longing for a tribe," says Neil Planchon, founding member of Swan's Market Cohousing in downtown Oakland. "But it's also a courageous, daring act to choose it, because it demands a lot of commitment to working things out with your neighbors."

Established in 2000, the Swan's Market community includes 20 units in the circa 1917 historic landmark, with 10 on each side of a welcoming walkway dotted with plants and picnic tables. Residents gather in its airy common room for dinner three times each week; the community also boasts a garage, a workshop, a workout space, a guest room, and a children's play area. Planchon says his mother's eclectic child-rearing style primed him for a future in cohousing.

"When I was growing up, my mom involved us kids in the work of the household," he says. "And there was always someone staying with us—musicians, massage therapists—we even had a dowser for a while. My sisters and I grew up participating in adult community, and when I encountered the cohousing model it felt familiar."

Knowing your neighbors improves one's quality of life, says fellow Swan's Market founding member Joani Blank. Blank is a cohousing veteran: She was an original member of Doyle Street Cohousing in Emeryville before she joined the downtown Oakland venture.

"I had no idea what a difference it would make to know my neighbors well," she says. "Just knowing who's home, knowing people's daily routines. The 'life between the houses' creates a sense of ease, as well as safety."

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Cohousers agree that the real work does not begin until the place is built. In fact, living in cohousing takes ongoing effort, not only in the form of neighbor-to-neighbor relationships, but also in regular board meetings, work parties to maintain the property, and turns in the cooking rotation.

When our group was coming together, we spent many a Friday evening hashing out details ranging from how many homes we would build and how many trees we would plant to how often we wanted to share meals and hold work days. That's how it often goes: Prospective residents come together and design the community, with the physical layout of the condo units oriented around a central space to encourage neighborly interaction.

Most communities cook and share meals together a few times a week, so the common house (which typically includes a kitchen, dining/sitting area, bathroom and laundry room) is a key part of daily living. Its size depends on how many people are in the group and the amount of space available. Our cohousing has nine units, and our common house is about 800 square feet; Swan's Market has 20 units, and its common house is more than 3,500 square feet. And just to be clear: The common house is in addition to the private homes—everyone still has his or her own kitchen. Living spaces range in size from studios to multibedroom units; some



Kindred spirits: Raines Cohen and Betsy Morris, who live in Berkeley Cohousing, founded East Bay Cohousing in 2003, information central for anyone exploring the idea. Photo by Pat Mazerra.

communities have only one or two floor plans, while others have many to choose from.

Members manage and maintain the grounds themselves and have independent finances; many cohousing groups are legally organized as condominium associations and thus require monthly dues. Decision-making tends to be by consensus. And how does cohousing get paid for? If a group is developing land, it applies for a loan for the property and the construction. Later, owners' individual mortgages pay off this initial outlay.

Living in cohousing doesn't necessarily mean the cost of one's home will be lower than the surrounding market rate, although it can be. Where folks find savings is in shared resources like laundry machines, tools, cars, or even child care. In my community, a generous loan in the beginning from a few members bought solar panels that allow us to bank energy units with the electric company during peak seasons—making our individual bills about a quarter of what the typical single-family dwelling's would be.

Of course, buying adjacent homes and creating cohousing can be much cheaper than building from the ground up. Oakland's Temescal Creek Cohousing is an example of this model. In 1999, the community's original cohousers bought three duplexes on some property near Oakland Technical High School and moved in. At first they didn't have a common house, but enjoyed meals in each other's homes until they built the shared space in 2001. Since its inception, Temescal Creek has added two more adjacent duplexes and expanded its green area to include a chicken coop, a children's play space, and a Ping-Pong table.

"We've learned that it's important to be clear about our expectations of each other," says founding member Karen Hester. "How often do we want to eat together, and what's the structure? How do we want to spend social time together? What's our vision for our community, and are we willing to work for it?"

Raines Cohen and Betsy Morris started East Bay Cohousing in 2003, a virtual bulletin board that connects people looking to create cohousing together. They also run a coaching business and have a special interest in senior communities. They live at Berkeley Cohousing, which was completed in 1997 on the site of a family farm dating back to the turn of the century. The space is a mix of 15 retrofit and built homes arranged around a central green area.

"We love the creativity of the cohousing movement, and helping people meet each other and get educated," Cohen says.

There are more than 35 forming or established cohousing communities in California, and two dozen of them are in the greater Bay Area, according to Cohen—in fact, Oakland boasts the most cohousing communities in the country. And it's no wonder: As a lifestyle, cohousing appeals to all different kinds of people, at various stages of life.

For families, it offers the proverbial village it takes to raise a child, Cohen says.

"Nothing beats coming home to a fresh-cooked meal a few times a week and having access to space and toys and playmates and backup parents/grandparents/sitters," he says. "At the very least,



Getting along: The article's author, Kate Madden Yee, a founding member of Temescal Commons Cohousing in Oakland, says working alongside her fellow residents has led to a unique closeness. Photo by Pat Mazerra.



Fruits of their labor: Louise Dunlap, Nicole Callis, Nathan Cooper, and Brian Jones (left to right), residents of Temescal Commons Cohousing in Oakland, tend to their shared garden. Photo by Pat Mazerra.

the physical design of cohousing communities can make it easier for one adult to supervise a group of kids, sharing the load.”

Single people like having supportive neighbors to talk to and to share resources, like tools and cars. And for those looking to the decades ahead, cohousing offers more than just a way to “age in place”—it’s aging in community.

“Singles can use each other as sounding boards and get access to much more space than they might find on their own—and certainly a better quality of life per dollar spent through living in smaller private spaces and enjoying larger common areas,” Cohen says. “And aging people can maintain their independence through interdependence.”

Just keep in mind that learning about cohousing, finding neighbors, and bringing the community to fruition takes time, says Cohen. It can be a long process to cooperatively create a multimillion dollar housing development. In any case, cohousing presents opportunities for personal growth.

“Betsy and I like to say that in cohousing you have a better quality of problem—you’re investing your time in relationships rather than roofs,” he says. “Living here I have a support network, but I also have the chance to work things out. If my neighbor yells at me, I know what’s going on in her life, and can have some compassion and empathy—and can ask myself, ‘Okay, do I have a part in this situation?’”

The reigning king and queen of cohousing are Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant, partners in work and life who brought the cohousing concept to the United States from Denmark, where the movement had begun in the 1960s. In 1992, they helped establish (and lived in) Doyle Street Cohousing in Emeryville; they now live in another community they developed in Nevada City, Calif., and run their business, the Cohousing Company, there.

“Chuck and I met each other and found cohousing one fateful winter in Copenhagen, in 1980,” McCamant says. “We were both there studying architecture, and if you study architecture in Denmark, you study housing. We’d been intrigued with the idea of neighborhood and housing, and on a personal level, we wondered how we could balance two careers and a family in a way that would be more fun than the typical suburban model.”

The two were “just young and naïve enough,” McCamant says, to write a book about the model. Since at the time collaborative housing was not a popular concept, they couldn’t find a publisher, so in 1988 they self-published *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, and it was passed around by word of mouth.

“People started calling us,” McCamant says. “The book put a name and a definition on an idea millions of people had been thinking about, maybe as they sat around after a barbecue with friends. There was a sense that this model could be put into practice.”

Cohousing has the potential to positively influence the world by making the personal the political, according to McCamant.

“If we’re going to affect the world, particularly in managing resources well, one of the most important things we can affect is middle-class American consumption,” she says. “It’s middle-class

Path to Cohousing

Planning cohousing “can be a long process, involving lots of time and effort to cooperatively create a multimillion dollar housing development,” says East Bay Cohousing’s Raines Cohen. “The great part is that you’re not alone on the journey.”

WEBSITES

Cohousing Association of the United States; cohousing.org.

Cohousing Coaches, Raines Cohen and Betsy Morris; cohousingcoaches.com.

The Cohousing Company: McCamant & Durrett Architects; cohousingco.com.

East Bay Cohousing, Raines Cohen and Betsy Morris; ebcoho.org.

BOOKS

Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves, Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant

The Cohousing Handbook: Building a Place for Community, Chris Hanson

Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities, Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant

Reinventing Community: Stories from the Walkways of Cohousing, David Wann

Senior Cohousing: A Community Approach to Independent Living, Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant

Americans who use huge amounts of the world's resources. So how can we live more sustainably? Rather than just saying, 'We should all make do with less,' cohousing offers an attractive alternative. You get more bang for your buck."

Keep in mind that there's a lot of wisdom out there about how to establish a cohousing community—and how to actually live in it, McCamant says.

"When we started Doyle Street Cohousing, we were making it up as we went along," she says. "But I'd say now to folks interested in starting their own cohousing: 'You do not have to reinvent the wheel. There's a lot of experience out there, and no reason not to tap into it.'"

This past year in my community, we've been working hard. We repainted the whole property. We built new vegetable boxes and finally fixed that rotted place on one of the handrails. We laid down a stone path where before there were only crazy rampant weeds. We planted a magnolia tree, trimmed back the berry bushes, and harvested apples for homemade sauce. We've had some disagreements (what is the best way to get rid of the rats in the barn?), spiffed up our common house, marked a bunch of birthdays (often with the aid of one member's special chocolate cake), welcomed two new babies (two more are on the way) and buried a beloved dog. There's hardly ever a dull moment.

This common bond over the day-to-day of cohousing life makes for interesting—and lasting—relationships, McCamant says.

"I really like the comfort of walking into a neighborhood where I know people," she says. "I can let down my guard. I feel like I know my cohousing neighbors almost better than I do some of my close friends—because we've worked together."

Kate Madden Yee is a founding member of Temescal Commons Cohousing in Oakland.