

Elder Cohousing—An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

By Neshama Abraham & Kate deLaGrange

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In 1996 Dene Peterson and a group of friends had a great idea: Why not apply the basic principles of cohousing's intentional neighborhood to a community for people 55 years old and older? The group, several of whom are former nuns, wanted a home where they could share later-life spirituality, meditate, do service work, and enjoy their aging process together. Later, Peterson would meet Chuck Durrett who along with wife, Katie McCamant, are the authors of *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* (Ten Speed Press, 2000) and founders of the cohousing movement in the United States.

Durrett had just returned from doing research on senior/elder cohousing in Denmark where 20 out of the last 25 cohousing communities had been targeted for elders and where, he claims, "I haven't seen people have as much fun as they do in senior cohousing since the college dorms." Durrett went on to author a second cohousing book, *Senior Cohousing: A Community Approach to Independent Living* (Ten Speed Press, 2005).

Encouraged and further excited, Peterson and her group, FOCIS Futures, formed their own nonprofit, Trailview Development Company, and secured \$1.5 million in funds for affordable homes, both equity and rental. They built the 29-household ElderSpirit Community on 3.7 acres in Abingdon, Virginia, and, although construction is not yet finished on their common house and prayer room, they moved in in late January, 2006.

Peterson calls it "a hard job made light by all the excitement." Cindy Poppen, President of ElderSpirit's Resident Association, says the ElderSpirit members meet for informal dinners and small group meetings in each others' homes, and also meet regularly to share "what heightened or diminished spirit in my life this week," and simply to listen to one another.

This past January 2006 also saw the opening of Glacier Circle Retirement Community, an eight-household neighborhood on a .83 acre site in Davis, California. Their first meeting was in founding member Ellen Coppock's home in March 2002 and was attended by about two dozen individuals and couples, many of whom, including Dorie Datel, 80, knew each other for 40 years as fellow congregation members of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis. That first meeting produced seven out of the eight founding households of their elder cohousing community.

Says Datel, "The nicest part of living in this community is that it reminds me of the small town where I grew up. Everyone knows one another, it is intimate, and I feel like I belong." The community has arranged for a young man in chef school to cook for them two to three times a week. He gets to practice his cooking skill and, in return for being food critics, the Glacier Circle group gets a great meal.

The residents pay the chef by the hour to cook and shop. The community members do the set up and clean up. Dattel's daughter and son-in-law, currently professors at UC Davis, hope that they will also be able to retire in the community when they are ready.

Both ElderSpirit and Glacier Circle are fully occupied, and ElderSpirit has so many people on its waiting list that Peterson is looking at creating a second neighborhood in Abingdon. A third cohousing community for pro-active adults, Silver Sage Village in Boulder, Colorado, with Wonderland Hill Development Company in Boulder as its project partner, had its ground breaking on August 10, 2006. This 16-household community has members in their 60s and 70s, including Wonderland Hill Development Company founder and president, Jim Leach, and his wife Brownie. Wonderland Hill has also completed 18 other cohousing neighborhoods in Colorado, California, Arizona, and Washington. Leach is an early pioneer in sustainable building and has consistently created neighborhoods with energy-efficient buildings and designated spaces for community interaction.

At least 25 more elder/senior cohousing communities are in the planning stages in the U.S. The Elder Cohousing Network, founded by my husband Zev Paiss and I in Boulder, Colorado, maintains a national database of people interested in this lifestyle. We have received over 7,000 inquiries nationwide from people 55+ expressing a hunger for this interdependent elder village lifestyle. What is the draw to this age-targeted model of cohousing?

In addition to the six common characteristics of cohousing—participatory process, designed for community, shared common facilities, resident management, collaborative decision-making, and no shared community economy (meaning they're not income-sharing)—elder/senior cohousing has four additional principles: shared vision and values, designed for aging in place, "spiritual eldering," and environmental consciousness.

Shared vision and values are crafted by the group of future residents. These operating agreements guide community members through the development process and become the foundation for living together. It is common for these values to include living a healthy lifestyle and having respect for the environment. Groups may also be drawn together by a common interest in the arts, later-life spirituality, lifelong learning and personal growth, or through their place of worship. (For example, we are working with the North Texas Association of Unitarian Universalist Societies on creating UU-sponsored cohousing communities in the Dallas/Ft Worth area.) Each cohousing community is unique, and is based on the individual site, resident group, and professional development team.

Designed for aging in place means the private homes and shared common facilities are wheelchair-accessible and can allow a resident to stay in his home should motor skills become compromised. Being close to medical facilities and/or sharing the cost of healthcare attendants and an on-site health-care provider can make health care more accessible and affordable. Healthcare treatment rooms are now being included in the design of the shared common house. Some communities are looking at including a suite in

their common house for an older resident to live in if more intensive care was needed, with an adjacent bedroom for a family member or caregiver to stay during the time the resident may need such intensive care, or when he or she may be in the dying process.

“*Spiritual eldering*” is a term which means the process of conscious aging fostered by elders living in close proximity to one another in a self-managed and empowering environment. This setting is conducive for contemplation and deep inner work, civic participation, social activism, mentoring children and adults, and pursuing one’s personal spiritual path enhanced and supported by the company of others. The ElderSpirit Community was influenced by two books for its spiritual philosophy: from *Age-Ing to Sage-Ing: A Profound New Vision for Growing Older* (Warner Books, 1995) by Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, and *Spiritual Passages: Embracing Life’s Sacred Journey* by Drew Leder, M.D. PhD (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1997).

Environmental consciousness often goes hand-in-hand with the increased social sustainability of living in cohousing. Cohousing is a return to a sustainable model of living where neighbors typically participate together in recycling, composting, sharing and consuming less resources, growing and eating organic produce at community meals, living in smaller-than-normal clustered energy-efficient homes, obtaining passes for and using public transportation, consuming less water and electricity, exercising together and enjoying the benefit of group wellness practices such as yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong, and so on in the common house.

Why the Popularity of Elder/Senior Cohousing?

A quiet grassroots impulse to reject the common options for housing for older people—retirement homes, nursing homes, and so on, has been growing over the last decade. Baby Boomers who began turning 60 in 2006 do not want to retire or grow older in the same kind of aging institutions in which they placed their own parents. In fact, it seems from the Elder Cohousing Network’s response from people aged 60 through 90, the Boomers’ older siblings and parents are not excited about managed-care facilities either. Instead, people are drawn to the idea of an old-fashioned, egalitarian neighborhood where neighbors help one another through the minor challenges of everyday life, and support one another through the major ones. Older adults like the word “active lifestyle” better when it refers to living in a way that connects to the wider community where these elders still have roots and history. Contrary to some people’s impressions that age-targeted cohousing is a “senior ghetto,” these elders believe living in close proximity with others in the same age range and with similar values is a life-enhancing choice, and one which facilitates social activism and deep inner personal and spiritual growth work. They like the idea of continuing to grow as human beings through later life, embracing spirituality that elevates their experience, and having a physical space to do inner work in the companies of others so inclined.

The press hasn't missed this sentiment, either. As early as November, 2004, the *AARP Bulletin* featured an article by Ben Brown titled, rather tongue-in-cheek, "Communes for Grownups," which was picked up by the syndicated press and ran in hundreds of local papers. Since then, articles on elder/senior cohousing have appeared in *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the nationally-syndicated "Savvy Senior" column, and in a segment of the national PBS-TV series, "Boomers Redefining Life After 50" special that aired in late winter of 2006. In addition, *Time Magazine* and *ABC World News Tonight* have produced reports about elder/senior cohousing.

What Do Seniors Want?

The majority of people responding to elder cohousing are not long-time multi-generational cohousing residents, although there is discussion among residents of some cohousing who are looking to buy a site adjacent to their community for a group home or an age-targeted cohousing neighborhood.

Many potential residents of elder/senior cohousing are long-time aficionados of the cohousing concept and, now that they are empty-nesters, can't imagine a better setting in which to "age in community." The remainder are folks 55+ for whom creating a community geared directly to their needs and desires just makes sense. In fact, in a poll conducted by MetLife Mature Market Institute and AARP in the Spring of 2004, 22 percent of the 500 respondents aged 50 to 65 said they would be "... interested in building a new home to share with friends that included private space and communal living areas."

Their interests reflect a desire for friendship, doing art and music projects with others, and having others in the community with whom they could exercise, socialize, meditate, do yoga, and discuss the spiritual facets of later life. There is also a desire for old-fashioned neighborly caretaking, knowing that someone will notice if you don't bring your paper in or haven't opened your curtains by 10 am and that there will be someone to water the flowers and care for a pet if you are away or unable to for a period of time. And consistently people who have contacted the Elder Cohousing Network are excited about not having to cook or eat alone, preferring instead frequent shared meals in the common house. There is also interest in combining resident-prepared meals with dinners made by an outside chef, the model which the Glacier Circle community has adopted.

There are several models of elder Cohousing on the horizon, driven by future residents' needs and far-sighted cohousing developers. Although many neighborhoods will be single age-targeted projects like ElderSpirit and Glacier Circle, the model of an elder cohousing community adjacent to a multi-generational cohousing community has been initiated by Wonderland Hill Development Company of Boulder, Colorado and Cohousing Partners of Nevada City, California.

Senior Cohousing Adjacent to a Multi-Generational Cohousing Community

Wonderland's Silver Sage Cohousing project in Boulder combines an age-targeted cohousing neighborhood for members 55+ across the street from a multi-generational cohousing neighborhood, Wild

Sage Cohousing, a 34-household community completed two years ago. Developer Jim Leach says that the most successful cohousing neighborhoods in Denmark have this combination of a multi and elder cohousing projects next to one another for easy interaction among the generations.

“In Denmark there is a natural, complementary relationship between the two communities where the younger people help the seniors with their more demanding tasks and, in turn, the elders serve as babysitters and mentors for younger adults and their children,” observes *Senior Cohousing* author and architect Chuck Durrett who did the design work for Silver Sage. “The children grow up viewing aging as a rich, active, and functional part of life. It is interesting, however, that there is less frequency of contact than was expected. Working adults lead busy lives, but even more common is the increased activity the seniors create for themselves in community life. There is far less dependency from the older community members than people may imagine.”

Another example of an elder/senior cohousing neighborhood being built adjacent to multi-generational cohousing is in Grass Valley, California being developed by CoHousing Partners, a new development company focusing on cohousing projects in California led by Katie McCamant and Leach. The 30-household Cohousing Lofts senior/elder cohousing community will have its own common house in a three-story building with elevator, underground parking, and shared community space, and will be across a private drive from Wolf Creek Cohousing, a 32-household multi-generational cohousing community, to allow for an easy flow between the two neighborhoods.

We know of at least three other projects with adjacent senior and multi-generational cohousing communities are in the works – one in Austin, Texas and two in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Like Silver Sage, which is being built in a New Urbanist neighborhood in Boulder, both Santa Fe projects (called “cohousing villages”) one at Oshara Village and another in Galisteo Basin will be located in a larger planned New Urbanist neighborhood where a healthcare clinic is planned. (“New Urbanism” is a term for urban neighborhoods which, like downtowns and small towns of earlier decades, combine homes and workplaces within walking-distance, in a pedestrian-friendly area.)

Leach supports the trend of cohousing within New Urbanist neighborhoods, and describes a cohousing project as the “starter dough for community.” This trend was covered as a feature cover story by Philip Langdon in the June 2005 issue of *New Urban News*, entitled “Cohousing Bolsters New Urban Neighborhoods.”

Innovative New Models

The Green House. A third model, the “Green House,” was developed by Dr. William Thomas, a gerontologist, author of *What are Old People For? How Elders Will Save the World* (see review, pg.)_.), and originator of the Eden Alternative Nursing Home concept, adopted by over 450 nursing homes in the U.S. and internationally. A Green House expands the “cohousing village” concept with an additional element—a group home for seniors providing healthcare services for people with dementia or a

chronic illness. It is a small intentional community for eight to ten seniors, with a private living space and bathroom for each resident, centered around a shared kitchen, dining, and living room area. Dr. Thomas sums up the philosophy of the Green House as *warm*, created by the floor plan, décor, furnishings, and the people who live and work there; *smart*, using cost-effective, smart technologies such as computers, wireless pagers, electronic ceiling lifts, and adaptive devices; and *green*, incorporating sunlight, plants, and access to outdoor spaces.

The advantage to including a Green House in a cohousing village is having on-site healthcare which can then be made available to cohousing residents if they should one-day need it themselves. In addition, the Green House can be the home for a person with Alzheimer's whose partner lives next door in the cohousing community. A disadvantage is the increased regulatory environment of operating a licensed nursing home within the village.

Dr. Thomas says the first round of Green Houses have been around 5,000 sq. ft. but "could be smaller" – perhaps even 3,000 sq. ft is adequate. He has even considered the advantages of having the two staff members of the Green House live in affordable rental units owned by the Green House developer and where staff join the community in the development phase prior to move-in.

Collegeville Development Group. Another new development among intentional elder communities is to provide senior housing connected to college campuses for university alumni and others interested in attending classes and exploring opportunities for lifelong learning. Collegeville Development Group, run by Colleen and Jon Peters in St. Cloud, Minnesota, are creating "retirement learning in the vibrancy of a college town." They have three projects underway in Minnesota with central spaces for socializing. Colleen Peters says they are now started to utilize the cohousing principle of having future residents get to know one another before moving in.

Eldershire Communities. Another model of elder community is the Eldershire model, also being inspired by Dr. Thomas. Several Eldershire-inspired projects are in the planning stages in the Asheville, NC area being initiated by Alex Mawhinney, founder of Carolina Renaissance Communities in Asheville, North Carolina. Eldershire communities are based a set of principles, says Mawhinney. They include:

- Creating a network of communities to encouraging intra-community visiting and "cross-pollination" by all residents and participants, for new ideas, solutions, and technologies.
- Sustainable development and lifestyles respectful of the Earth.
- Fostering well-being as a principle right of each resident/participant
- Embracing the concepts of creating "social capital," co-caring, and reciprocity as a basis for enriching the quality of life for the residents, the local community, and society in general
- Spreading the vision of "aging in community," to encourage a paradigm shift in our culture.

Today's over-55 population is a creative bunch known for eschewing traditional forms and coming up with inventive and effective new ways of doing things. We can expect to several innovative

versions of cohousing for elders, with one constant: Intentional elder communities that respect and reflect the creative interdependence of sovereign seniors and our interconnectedness in the web of life.

Neshama Abraham is a speaker, writer, and educator about the cohousing lifestyle. She and her husband Zev Paiss are principles of Abraham Paiss & Associates, which works with cohousing groups from the early stages of development to after move-in. Their next “Getting Started” Elder Cohousing Workshop will be held in Boulder, Colorado, September 14-17. (See ad, pg. __.) Neshama and Zev live in Nomad Cohousing in Boulder.

Kate deLaGrange is a writer and teacher of sustainable living practices and inter-personal communication skills. She is a senior associate at Abraham Paiss & Associates, where she facilitates community-building activities for forming elder/senior cohousing communities.

Elder Community Resources:

Wonderland Hill Development Company: www.whdc.com

ElderCohousing Network: www.ElderCohousing.org

Green House projects: www.thegreenhouseproject.com

Collegeville Development Group: www.collegevillecommunities.com

Eldershire communities, Sherburne, New York: www.eldershire.com

Chuck Durrett, architect, Senior Cohousing Study Groups: www.cohousingco.com

Elder Cohousing Communities

• **ElderSpirit Community, Abingdon, Virginia.** A 29-household spiritually oriented elder cohousing neighborhood on a rural 3.7 rural acre site. Waiting list for new members. www.elderspirit.net.

• **Glacier Circle Senior Community, Davis, California.** An eight-household project which is part of a larger residential neighborhood. The core group met through their local Unitarian Universalist Church and has known each other for 40 years. www.eldercohousing.org. “Elder Communities.” “Glacier Circle Senior Community.”

• **Silver Sage Village, Boulder, Colorado.** A 16-household mixed-income elder cohousing neighborhood on a 1-acre site in the award-winning New Urbanist Holiday neighborhood in Boulder. www.silversagevillage.com.

• **Elder Family in the Smoky Mountains, Whittier, North Carolina.** Group homes with private and shared spaces on 8 acres within a larger 80-acre intentional community, including 7 acres of common land and group facilities, near the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. abrahampaiss.com/resources/ElderFamilyProfile.

• **Elder Cohousing at Prospect, Longmont, Colorado.** A 25-30 household elder cohousing community in Prospect New Town, a New Urbanist neighborhood in Longmont. www.prospectelders.com.

• **Arvada Generations, Arvada, Colorado.** A 25-30-unit elder cohousing community using renewable energy sources on a 1 ½ acre site, located next to a 30-34-household inter-generational cohousing community on a 2 ½ acre site in Arvada, a suburb of Denver. www.whdc.com/arvada_colorado_cohousing.

• **Oshara Village Commons, Santa Fe, New Mexico.** A 20-household elder cohousing adjacent to a multi-generational cohousing community on approx 12 acres, with 50 percent preserved as open space, next to Santa Fe Community College. www.osharavillage.com.

• **Catholic Elder Community, St. Petersburg, Florida.** A planned residential, participatory membership communities of mutual support and later-life spirituality for seniors in the Catholic faith, based on the ElderSpirit Community model, who meet monthly for prayer and community building programs. admin@catholicelders.org.

• **Cohousing Lofts, Grass Valley, California.** A 27-household elder cohousing community on a wooded site 1 door to a multi-generational cohousing neighborhood in the Sierra foothills, within walking distance to shops, grocerie restaurants. www.cohousingpartners.com/grassvalley-lofts.

• **St. Anthony Park Cohousing, St. Paul, Minneapolis.** Forming environmentally sustainable elder cohousing community with mission: “to be a community for people who want to live simply among friends rather than extravagant among strangers.” robrankin3@aol.com.

• **ElderGrace, Santa Fe, New Mexico.** A Jubilados-inspired conscious-aging elder cohousing community on a 1 acre site, dedicated to spiritual growth, mutual support, respect for the environment, and service to others. www.eldergrace.org.

• **Galisteo Basin Preserve, Galisteo, New Mexico.** A 15-25 unit elder cohousing neighborhood, possibly near multi-generational cohousing neighborhood in a larger housing development. www.galisteobasinpreserve.com/village.

• **Carolina Renaissance Communities, Asheville, North Carolina.** Several age-targeted projects are in the planning stages in the Asheville area following the principles of ElderShire Communities. jaml11@charter.

• **Georgetown Elder Cohousing, Georgetown, Texas.** A developer-driven elder cohousing project adjacent to a multigenerational cohousing community, located 40 minutes from downtown Austin. mblack@mblackarchitect.com.

Starting Elder Cohousing Communities

Elder Cohousing Network. Through our Elder Cohousing Network, my husband Zev Paiss and I offer “Getting Started” workshops for professionals, landowners, and individuals, which highlight the cohousing development process from site selection and the professional/resident relationship to community building, marketing, and the design process, and focus on the importance of having skilled, professional cohousing designers and developers lead community design and planning to save the residents time and to avoid mistakes. In the past 10 years this “streamlined development process” has gotten cohousing communities built in two to three years while incorporating resident feedback on common facility and grounds use and design. The benefit of this model is also to make the focus of the future resident group on community building and group formation.

—Neshama Abraham