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The Good and the Bad of Cohousing

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Cohousing has become an increasingly popular option for home buyers seeking an alternative to what the National Cohousing Association of the United States has called the absence of a sense of community typically found in contemporary cities and suburbs.¹ While cohousing offers many benefits, there are numerous drawbacks to be considered before potential buyers make a commitment.

Cohousing, which is a form of intentional community, originated in Denmark in the 1960s and was introduced to the United States in the late 1980s.² Intended to recreate an “old-fashioned sense of neighborhood” through resident participation in the design and operation of their communities, this type of community model allows families and individuals to occupy private homes while at the same time contributing both time and money to common facilities that are owned and managed by the larger community.³ Community members pay monthly or yearly membership dues and often help with tasks such as cleaning and repairing shared resources. While residents contribute to the financial responsibilities of acquiring and maintaining common facilities and resources, each member maintains an independent economy and personal income.

The typical cohousing community has several defining characteristics. Normally, this type of neighborhood is composed of a small collection of between 15 to 35 clustered units that face each other around a courtyard or pedestrian area with traffic restrained to the periphery.⁴ It contains at least one community building, often called a “common house,” that features public facilities such as a kitchen, dining area, sitting area, children’s playroom and laundry. Some communities may support a pool, playground, tennis courts, workshop, library, exercise room, crafts room and guest rooms.

In addition to common facilities, cohousing communities often share activities such as dining and childcare. While individual homes have private kitchens and other facilities, residents often gather two or more times a week to prepare and eat group meals paid for through membership dues, although often these meals, and the associated expenses, are optional.⁵ Other shared activities include providing childcare, carpooling, exercising and engaging in other social endeavors.

Perhaps one of the most notable characteristics is the existence of a community participatory process that encourages and sometimes requires direct resident involvement in planning, operating, maintaining and governing the neighborhood. This may involve monthly dues, regular cooking, utilizing personal skills (e.g., teaching, carpentry, etc.) and upkeep duties and participation in neighborhood committees. Residents also are responsible for developing policies and conducting problem solving that effect the entire community.

Although cohousing units in most areas, either urban, suburban or rural, are competitive in pricing with other market-rate housing, some units can be more costly depending on the level of customization desired as well as the trend amongst many groups to use higher priced environmentally conscious building materials.⁶

One of the main benefits of cohousing is the economical advantages of sharing resources with other community members. Sharing tasks and chores like cooking, providing childcare, and driving, can offer savings in both time and money. Additionally, residents can share items ranging from appliances to toys as well as divide the cost of expensive facilities like swimming pools that they might not otherwise be able to afford. For communities developed primarily for elderly residents, individuals can divide the financial burden of installing special equipment such as ramps, access lighting and spare living spaces for caregivers.

Many people also enjoy the mental and emotional benefits of living in an interdependent community. Although most new members are not screened, current residents encourage, and often require, them to learn about the community and

related expectations through meetings and information sessions. This process helps to ensure the integration of like-minded people that will support community ideals and help foster social networks. Because of this, individuals, especially those planning for or in retirement, may look toward this option as a way to relieve isolation and build friendships. Chuck Durrett, credited with helping to bring cohousing into the United States, claims that the “relationships between people—older teaching younger generations, parents helping parents—it’s all extremely villagelike.”⁷ Residents also find comfort in the additional safety provided by living in a dynamic, interactive setting that promotes friendships and social ties among members.

Despite the many benefits of living in a cohousing environment, there are also many drawbacks that must be considered. Property cost, which can be higher than competitive housing as discussed above, combined with potentially steep membership dues, may make cohousing unaffordable. Additionally, owners may not have complete control over their property should they decide to sell since many communities have right to first buying refusal. Others may discover that they do not use the common facilities yet have no way to avoid paying the associated dues since they are part of the ownership contract. One of the major problems, however, is that new cohousing communities may take more time, money and energy to plan and develop than initially estimated.

Beyond monetary issues, there are other potential disadvantages that plague cohousing ownership. While most members enjoy the social benefits, cohousing can also be invasive and restrictive in regards to privacy and individualism. Because of the open nature of the communities where members are highly involved in each others’ lives, private news and gossip can become common knowledge. Also, without fences it is difficult to determine where one member’s property begins and ends, and property appearance, such as the color of paint on a house, must be agreed upon by the entire community in many cases. Clutter from children’s toys, tools and other items also proves to be troublesome because storage and garage space are often either minimal or non-existent.

Cohousing is an important and growing option to consider for families and individuals seeking relief from living in isolation. Essentially an intentional community environment, cohousing offers many advantages, both financial and emotionally, as well as opportunities for residents to be involved in their community’s creation, development and maintenance. Because there are pros and cons, cohousing warrants the buyer to engage in serious analysis of the prospective community and its members prior to purchase.

References

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