

COHOUSING AS A HOUSING ALTERNATIVE: LEARNING FROM TWO CASE STUDIES

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Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to discuss possible issues to apply American cohousing to the Korean community. This paper looked at the real and potential benefits of cohousing in respect of resource usage, management of community and the quality of social relationship within the residents.

What is cohousing?

Emerging from a growing awareness that traditional housing types were not meeting the housing needs of various households, the cohousing concept became popular as a new generation of thinking (Spreitzer, 1992). The term cohousing was introduced by two American architects, Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, who studied intentional communities in Denmark and then wrote a book, 'Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves', in 1988.

The concept of cohousing began in Denmark, 1964, when architect Jan Gudmand-Hayer organized a meeting among his friends to discuss housing alternatives (McCamant & Durrett, 1994). Since the first two cohousing communities had been completed in Denmark, 1973, hundreds of cohousing projects, 'bofoellesskaber-the Danish word', are a genuine housing option now. Over fifty cohousing communities have been established in the last decade in U. S. A. and more communities are coming out of the ground every month. There is a growing interest in cohousing worldwide now.

Cohousing is part of a larger communitarian movement that seeks to create relationships and cooperation between neighbors. Cohousing shares this with many intentional communities which facilitate community by intent without other aspiration such as a religious lifestyle or ideological goals (McCamant & Durrett, 1994). Cohousing Villages (or communities) are small-scale neighborhoods that utilize the social, economical and practical benefits of cooperative living while at the same time allowing for individual needs and privacy. Cohousing households reside in their own private apartments or houses entirely self sufficient with a complete kitchen and also enjoy convenient access to shared space including a common house with facilities such as large kitchen, dinning room, laundry, children's play room, guest room, library, sitting rooms, workshops, etc. Cohousing villages provide a new kind of balance between personal privacy and living among neighbors who know and care about each other. The sense of familiarity or community is enhanced through individual's active participants in development process as well as social relationships.

McCamant and Durrett (2000) identified six characteristics that cohousing included: participatory process, design facilitates community, private homes supplemented by extensive common facilities, complete resident management, nonhierachical structure and separate income sources.

- Participatory process: Residents organize and participate in the planning and design process for the housing development, and are responsible as a group for all the final decisions.
- Design facilitates community: The physical design encourages a

strong sense of community. Residents emphasize design aspects that increase the possibilities for social contacts.

- Private homes supplemented by extensive common facilities: An integral part of the community, common areas are designed for daily use to supplement private living areas. Evening meals in a dining hall are provided for those who want to participate 2-3 times a week.
- Complete resident management: Residents manage the development, making decisions of common concern at monthly community meetings.
- Nonhierarchical structure: While there are leadership roles, the responsibility for the decision is shared by the community's adults. Most major decisions are arrived at strong consensus decision-making process.
- Separate income sources: There is no shared community economy. It distinguishes cohousing from other intentional communities.

A few previous research on cohousing (Spreitzer, 1992; Meltzer, 1999; Rhee, 2000) has suggested that shared spaces and facilities for the joint use of all residents by intend help to generate and support relationships among residents as well as an amenity of services. Given the changes in family structure and life style, cohousing as a housing alternative may be beneficial to study in Korea, too.

Methods

The research methods used included a literature review of cohousing, interviews, observations and surveys. Durrett was contacted by e-mail to get information of cohousing community available for us to visit and carry a field study in California. The purpose of our visit was informed to the correspondents in each of the four cohousing communities suggested by Durrett and the time schedules to visit during June 23 to July 1st, 1999 were

arranged in advance.

This paper discussed two cohousing communities surveys as well as interviews and observation were completed:

- N Street cohousing designed using an existing suburban site, Davis, and
- South Side Park, a prototype cohousing community, Sacramento in California.

Although growing out of a similar need for establishing a sense of community, the approaches taken by the two communities differ. How they are structured varies greatly, however, they both enhance a sense of community.

N Street Cohousing: A case using an existing suburban site

Developing process and layout

N Street Cohousing is located in northeast of Davis, 11 miles west from Sacramento, California. It is atypical cohousing designed using an existing suburban site of 13 out of 16 houses built in 1955. The lots, 55~60 feet wide and 120 feet deep, were set up in a linear arrangement between N Street and Lessley Place (Figure 1).

Even the cohousing started with the first tearing down the fence between 716 and 724 N Street and integrating the backyard landscaping in 1986, the name of N Street Cohousing got after McCamant and Durrett Slide Show organized by an active resident leader, Linda Cloud, in 1988.

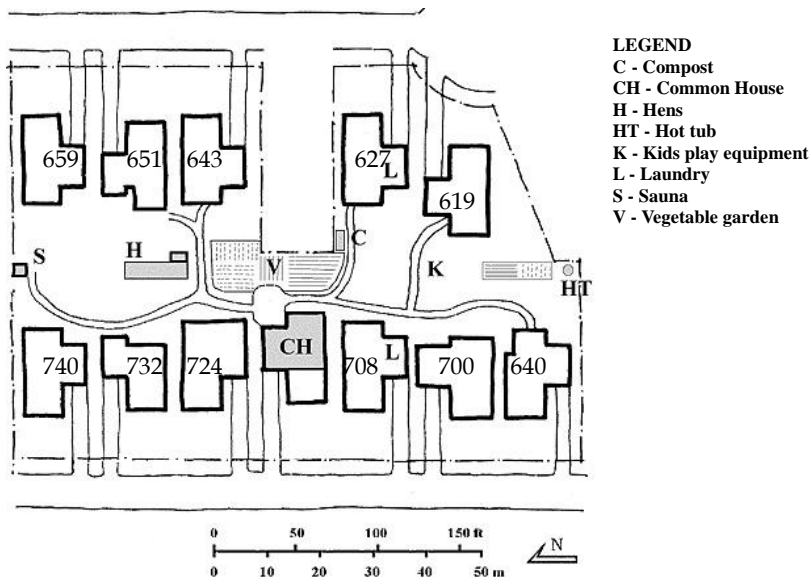
N Street residents have continually had to work within as already existing outline to mold their surroundings to meet their needs. Part of 716 house located in the center of the community become the common house, September 1991 and remodeled a large kitchen, living room and dinning area. There is a common space in backyard such as kids playground, hot tub, sauna,

vegetable garden, chickens, and food waste forming pot. N Street kitchens and living rooms face the back common space and the houses are connected by primitive walkways. Months fees required to service the commons are \$17 for an adult.

Visions and Goals

N Street Cohousing developed a mission statement that clearly spelled out community visions and 11 goals representing the group's intentions in 1991. The mission statement is that 'N Street Cohousing is a nurturing environment that offers a practical use of shared resources, cultivate personal relationships, and strives for diversity. While there is an individual level of responsibility to the community the community acknowledge personal choices and needs.'

Figure 1. N Street Cohousing site plan



Sauce: http://www.aiid.bee.qut.edu.au/~meltzer/siteplans/n_street.htm. Lessley Place

Characteristics of residents

There were 36 adults and 18 children under age of 18 years old in total 13 units. Table 1 shows the characteristics of ten households responded to the survey.

Table 1. Characteristics of residents in N Street Cohousing

Age of residents	N	Family type	N
Under 18 year old	6	Married couple w/ a kid	2
18 and over	20	Single parent w/ a kid	1
Education of adults	N	Single	4
Bachelors degree	7	Live together	4
Masters degree	7	Income	N
Doctoral degree	2	Under 20,000\$	1
Home ownership type	N	30,000~60,000\$	5
Owner	4	150,000\$ and more	1
Renter	6		

Age and education of adults reflect the fact that Davis has a young population with highly educated. Relatively low income play a role in why singles or families would share their houses with unrelated persons. Having housemates has become part of the N Street culture. The variety of family and tenure types reflect an openness to diversity of the community in age, gender, sexual preference, disabilities, ethnic/ cultural background and economic status.

Complete resident management

Formal and informal communication systems are crucial to maintain strong working relationships and companionships among residents. There are two formal monthly meetings in N Street Cohousing. Long range issues such as how to finance the common house construction are driven in 2~3 hours vision guest meeting once a month. Monthly community meeting runs to discuss for one hour short-term operational issues such as chicken-care rotation. Several Committees (include common house management, outdoor, food, tool, children, outreach and orientation) bring proposals back for the larger group to decide. Decisions are made through a consensus process.

Informal interactions are enhanced by the physical design of cohousing communities. Residents come in contact with each other as they carry out their daily activities in the laundry room, watching children, over a common meal, etc. The community bulletin board and mail boxes also utilize the communication. Residents not only spend time and energy to develop the community but also save them through trading off cooking meals and sharing resources. For example, residents cook just once a month and can eat better quality meals with reasonable price three times a week.

Residents' self evaluation

N Street residents were generally high satisfied with their individual dwelling units as well as cohousing community for joint use of all residents. All respondents except one said that residing in N Street Cohousing was better than a previous residence. Some wished to have shared facilities such as a swimming pool, more washer and dryer. Many residents considered their neighbors as their closest friends and seemed very satisfied with the process developed the community.

Southside Park Cohousing: A case of prototype cohousing community

Layout

Southside Park Cohousing is a community of 25 households occupying 1.37 acres within a 15 minute walk of downtown Sacramento, California. The houses at Southside Park Cohousing protectively encircle two courtyards (Figure 2). The dwelling size and price were a wide range from US \$85,000 for a 640ft² single bedroom unit to \$154,000 for 1,475ft² five bedroom unit. There were five affordable units for low income and six for moderate income households.

The common house at the center of the community included a large kitchen and dinning room, living room, laundry with 3 washers and 3 dryers, kids play room and teen's room. Outdoor spaces included an organic garden, a children's play ground, picnic tables, workshop and bicycle storage. Room in common house can be adapted to accommodate meetings, parties, theatre or weddings. Common meals were prepared three times a week cost \$2 for adults and \$1 for children. Monthly fees required to service the commons vary between \$50 and \$150.

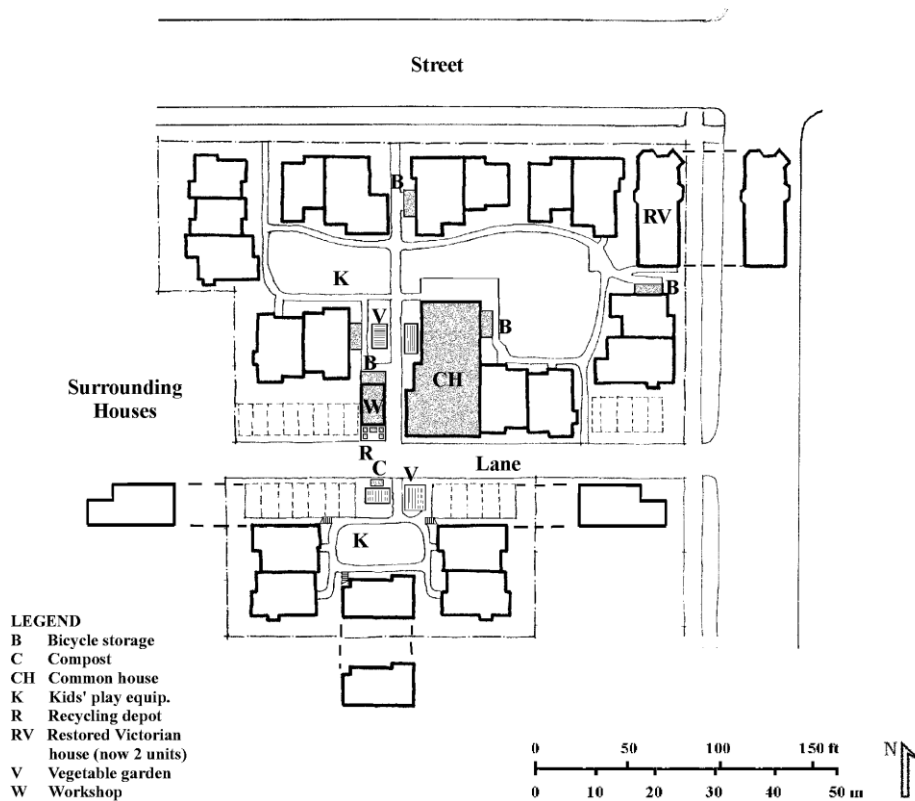
Developing process

Southside Park Cohousing is a prototype cohousing community followed the ground-up model suggested in a McCamant and Durrett book. In its step-by-step progress from slide show to umbrella group to a core group to site search and acquisition, this community illustrates the 'classic' cohousing development scenario (McCamant & Durrett, 1994).

Since McCamant and Durrett's cohousing slide show had presented to Sacramento residents in November of 1989, Susan Scott and other attendants emerged an umbrella group and had a monthly potluck meeting at an elementary school about a year to concentrate on education and outreach as

well as on potential cohousing site. The umbrella group broke off two core groups to explore downtown and suburban sites.

Figure 2. Southside Park Cohousing site plan



Sauce: <http://www.aiid.bee.qut.edu.au/~meltzer/articles/communal%20Societies/ICSACS.html>.

The urban core group of 11 households hired a project manager and consultant to search a site in downtown. They found a site met many of the group's criteria in deteriorated downtown neighborhood struggling to regain respectability. The owner of the site, Sacramento Housing Redevelopment Agency, issued a Request For Proposals to develop the site in September of 1990 with proviso that they incorporate the scale and character of existing neighborhood into the design of new house, a high density, residents of mixed income included affordable units, and the restoration of a victorian duplex located on the property.

In preparation a site design to submit, the future residents hired architect and CoHousing Company to help establishing site plan and a course of action and formed a nonprofit corporation in order to business as a legal entity. The group's proposal won conditional approval on the site in January of 1991. The final approval was given on September 1, 1992. During the two years of the design process, the group had been boning its decision making skills and conflict resolution techniques through hundreds of meetings within the group and dealing with so many government agencies and departments turned over a lot in city government.

The construction began in November, 1992. First household moved in September of 1993 and all household moved in September 1994.

Characteristics of residents

There were 40 adults and 22 children under age of 18 years old in total 25 units. Table 2 shows the 17 households responded to the survey.

The diverse characteristics of residents were resulted from that the residents sought to include in the community the wide diversity of cultures, incomes, and family types that characterized the downtown neighborhood. They felt they have met the diversity with only moderate success. All the respondents were home owners. Some could not have afforded a home otherwise this cohousing development process. All homes were intended to be owner occupied. There is a constraint about selling the 11 affordable units

to remain affordable for 30 years for low income and for 10 years for moderate income household.

Table 2. Characteristics of residents in Southside Park Cohousing

Age of residents	N	Family type	N
Under 18 year old	17	Married couple w/ a kid	5
18 and over	27	Single	7
		Live together	5
Education of adults	N	Income	N
Bachelors degree	3	Under 10,000\$	1
Masters degree	17	20,000~<30,000\$	4
Doctoral degree	1	30,000~<40,000\$	4
Home ownership type	N	60,000~<70,000\$	3
Owner	17	70,000~<80,000\$	4
Renter	0	100,000\$ and over	1

Vision and goals

It was clearly mentioned that if they want to live in cohousing they must have strong drive to live in a community. Unlike other intentional community cohousing residents pursue to have balance between privacy and community life. Ideally all residents have dual responsibilities of individual needs and community needs. Even if individual resident wants to have different balance between two responsibilities, his decision also should be respected by others.

Residents have a wide variety of views about politics, religion and most anything else. They are not a commune or collective with any unifying principles except the desire to be good neighbors. They respect each other's beliefs, but they also mention about their duties and works that should be shared.

Complete resident management

They have general meetings twice a month for 2 hours each time. As has been their policy from day one, they offer childcare to encourage parents to attend. Decisions are by consensus, with a fall back to voting at a later meeting if they need it. But they have never voted. There are all day big meetings once a year.

Every owner/ member must file a work contract on a regular basis, saying what they are willing and able to do to keep this community functioning. They may sign up for a committee, individual chore, and how many work parties they are planning to do. Most people sign up for all 3. Like most communities, they find it is not easy to get everything done, and continually try new ways to lure in those who don't do much of the work of the community.

They have game nights, parties, movies, seasonal celebrations, women/ men night out, camping trips. Many of them hike, bike, swim, work out, camp, and travel together in smaller groups

Residents' self evaluation

Southside Park residents were generally satisfied with their individual dwelling units except the number of bedrooms and amount of space. They were also satisfied to not dissatisfied with cohousing community for joint use of all residents. A few were dissatisfied with day-to-day management and their neighborhood. All respondents said that residing in Southside Park Cohousing was better than a previous residence. Some wanted to have shared sauna and guest room and to extend parking lot.

Ten out of 17 respondents did not at all plan to move to a different community within the next five years. Fourteen respondents would like to recommend for their friends and relatives to live in cohousing.

Summary and Discussions

This paper attempted to show the two cases of cohousing taken different developing process to reach the similar needs for establishing a sense of community. There are four issues to discuss based on the two case studies of cohousing.

N Street Cohousing began as an existing neighborhood of ugly, low budget and ranch houses. Neither the house nor the backyards were not originally designed with cohousing in mind. Fence tearing down party fist taken between only two houses has kept going on and then the boundaries of the community expend over time. This model of developing process using existing houses and site has advantages that it is not only easier on the group but also influences environment less. From the moment that fance gradually came down, the new residents were living in the cohousing community. No time pressure on purchase or construction process. However, physical design must be constrained by the existing layout of the houses to participate without freedom to nicely cluster houses or to parking together. N Street physical growth has been less planned.

Starting out with existing units and having tenants and owners together has some great strengths to the community beyond being financially less demanding and less exclusive. It allows a possibility for middle and low income people, especially students, singles, dual working parents, and single parents, to live in a supportive and cooperative community with permanence, belongingness and commitment in the Korean residents in rental apartments and multi-family house.

While, Southside Park Cohousing adapted a stereotype developing process. The construction began after about three years of struggling with the appropriate site. The future residents seek to strike a balance between creating an urban community where they and their children could feel safe and comfortable, and reaching out to the larger surrounding neighborhood. On a weed-covered lot with several crumbling houses in a deteriorated downtown neighborhood has been a vital development of 25 households. The Southside residents had addressed several essential issues that must

considered if we are to reclaim our cities as healthy environments where people can live and work (McCamant & Durrett, 1994). They have helped to reenergize an urban neighborhood while striving to work with and include current residents. They are strengthened the backbone of their downtown neighborhood and represent a significant urban variation on the cohousing theme. Melzer (1999) pointed out that Southside Park Cohousing demonstrated a model that was appropriate for ordinary people.

Southside Park residents contributed thousands of hours, sweat and tears to getting the site, carefully designing and planning every possible component of their own cohousing community. Korean residents are usually completely excluded in the developing process but periodically paying millions won of downpayment. They are only a buyer of the final product of dwelling. Future residents don't have any idea that is going to be next door until the day they move in. I expect not to see a group of people built their own houses focused by the mess media.

Cohousing residents of the two cases as other residents are completely responsible for its ongoing management and maintenance. Responsibilities are voluntarily shared or rotated by the participants in small and/or large groups. By trial and error the residents learn to work together and compromise with neighbors. It is a process of learning over the life by doing and a vitality of the cohousing community. 'The more you participate the more you feel the community' - that is the comment by the resident we met in the Southside Park Cohousing. Durrett said that the most effective size of cohousing community would be 18~25 households.

As the two cases showed, cohousing developments vary in size, location, type of ownership, design and priorities. Although the six characteristics, McCamant and Durrett identified to define cohousing, are consistently present all cases of cohousing, their application have been diverse in case-by-case. Each community evolved from a process of weighing different options reflecting residents' needs and desires, learning from past experience, and compromising to get it built. Therefore, each community is different. This flexibility is one of the strength of cohousing we should keep in mind.

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