



ROSS CHAPIN Foreword by SARAH SUSANKA, author of *The Not So Big House*

POCKET NEIGHBORHOODS

CREATING **SMALL-SCALE COMMUNITY** IN A **LARGE-SCALE WORLD**



PART ONE

POCKET NEIGHBORHOOD PRECEDENTS

The history of settlement is a fascinating story, and one that continues to unfold as we work out our relationship with the automobile. Villages and towns nearly always had gathering places for the community—the village green, town square, market street, pub, church—that served the needs for economic, social, and religious exchange.

Sometimes, householders lived in clustered dwelling groups where their day-to-day needs were lightened by virtue of shared work and leisure: sharing the tasks of milling corn, making chapatis, washing clothes, tending children, as well as just sitting and talking, or gathering around the fire for stories. The commune of households made life easier and more enjoyable.

This type of clustered layout is rare today, as the single-family house on its own plot of ground has been the long-standing American Dream. Any talk about a “commune of households” is likely to be looked at with suspicion. We are, however, social animals, and a wide variety of prototypes have been created to meet the social and daily needs of small groups of householders—many of which could be regarded as pocket neighborhoods.

The historic pocket neighborhood precedents highlighted in this section date back to the 1400s, and came about through early initiatives for social security, by happenstance, by romantic reference to the old world, or by result of a grand vision. Whatever the reason, there is much to learn by studying their form and social life and applying it to our contemporary era.

“The house itself is of minor importance. Its relation to the community is the thing that really counts.”

—CLARENCE STEIN, PIONEER OF THE GARDEN CITY MOVEMENT



CHAPTER 2

Gardens of Compassion

Communities respond to the needs of the less fortunate in different ways. Sometimes, those with the ability to help choose to ignore those living under challenging conditions, whereas at other times misfortune can bring out the best in their neighbors. Over the centuries, goodwill has occasionally taken the form of pocket housing communities oriented around shared gardens. A prime example is the *hofje* almshouses of the Netherlands.

HOFJE ALMSHOUSES

In Europe, before there were retirement pensions, children typically looked after their parents in their old age. But what about people who didn't have children? They had to rely on the goodwill of extended family or the community. From the 15th through the 18th centuries in the Netherlands, at the time of the flourishing textile industry, some wealthy merchants founded almshouses to support people in need.

The Dutch word *hofje* refers to a form of privately funded socialized housing for the elderly with no children. *Hof* means "garden" and *hofjes* are small groups of apartment houses clustered around a courtyard or garden, similar in many ways to contemporary pocket neighborhoods.

Most of the rent-free houses of the *hofje* were very simple living quarters consisting of a small room and sometimes a loft. These modest dwellings opened onto a community kitchen garden with a pump for rain or groundwater. Often they provided enough space for an orchard and a "bleaching-green" for sanitizing linens.

There were typically 8 to 10 apartment houses in a cluster, though some *hofjes* had as many as 25 units. These quiet refuges were not locked off from the outside world, but were accessed from the busy urban streets through a large door or gate. Their relative seclusion and small size offered residents an opportunity to look after one another while retaining their privacy.

Residents of a *hofje* lived under strict order, with expectations to be "pious, of good behavior, and clean." Before the Reformation, some were asked to pray for the founder. A porter distributed the daily beer, bread, and cheese, and peat in the winter to heat the houses.

There are dozens of *hofjes* still in existence in and around Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden, and other Dutch cities. Most are rented to students or low-wage working people or have become museums.

"Hof means 'garden' and hofjes are small groups of apartments clustered around a courtyard or garden."

The quiet courtyards were typically located along a busy urban street and accessed through a large door or gate. Some *hofjes* were adjacent to small chapels.





CHAPTER 13

New Urban Pocket Neighborhoods

Don't be fooled by the name, the whole notion of "New Urbanism" is relatively old. This movement among planners and architects emerged in the 1980s as a response to the ubiquitous sprawl that was spiraling out of control in the United States. Heralded by Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk with their design for the new town of Seaside, Florida, New Urbanism espouses a number of old-city principles.

First among these is "walkability"—being able to walk to a wide array of destinations in daily life, such as school, friends, shops, restaurants, and recreation areas. Walkable streets are pedestrian friendly. Roadways are designed to slow traffic and are lined by human-scale features such as buildings with porches and thoughtful detail, trees, and landscaping.

"Connectivity" is another principle—having an interconnected network of streets and sidewalks to disperse traffic and make walking more pleasurable. Other key principles include having a mix of shops, workplaces, and homes; a diversity of styles and range of prices; and all at higher densities to promote sociability and ease the pressures of sprawl. The idea is to create livable cities with a tapestry of life across a full range of scales, from a single building to an entire community.



Walkability is a key principle of New Urbanism.

After Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, a team of New Urbanist designers brainstormed solutions for rebuilding communities. One of the first examples to be built is at Ocean Springs, Mississippi, where cottages face onto a shared green.

FINDING THE IN-BETWEEN SCALE

New Urbanist communities are often planned with a traditional grid of local streets and back alleys. In this layout, the street is animated with activity from slowly passing cars, people walking by on the sidewalk, and chatter from the porches. Local streets are community public spaces



HOW CAN A STREET BECOME A NEIGHBORHOOD COMMONS?

Local streets can become active neighborhood common spaces when residents begin to think of the street as a room and shape their properties to make the room work well as a commons. Here are a few ideas to get started:

Connection and Contribution. The public space is shaped by its surrounding private properties. When each building and yard makes a connection to the shared street space by its own unique contribution, the street has more vitality. This might be a colorful gable, a broad front porch, or a running hedge of perennial plantings.

Active Spaces Looking On. Orient at least one of the home's active rooms toward the street—a living room or a porch large enough to be lived in. These “eyes” on the commons are the first line of defense of the neighborhood's security, making the block a safer place to live.

Layers of Personal Space. People will more likely engage in the commons when the personal space is well defined. A sequence of layers may include the active interior space/porch/front garden/low fence and hedge/front gate. Pay attention to getting the right balance of exposed and enclosed.

Enclosure. Just as conversation is more engaging when people are a certain distance apart, the life of the street will be more alive when buildings are appropriately close.

Clear Entry and Territory. A street will become more of a room when the entries are clearly defined. Consider narrowing the ends of the block with planting beds, arching trees, and a crosswalk to signal drivers that they are entering a residential zone.

Shared-Use Street. Pedestrians are an essential ingredient of the neighborhood commons. They can have the right-of-way on local streets when traffic speeds are less than 20 mph.

THINK OF STREETS AS ROOMS

Streets are more than the routes we take to get somewhere else. Another way to think of them is as rooms whose walls are made of building facades, trees, hedges, and fences—rooms with a sense of enclosure that feel good to be in. When traffic slows to a walking pace, streets can also become the neighborhood commons—places where neighbors meet casually and children play, while other neighbors overlook all the activity from their porches and homes.

When local streets are thought of as rooms, as in the Barrio Santa Rosa neighborhood in Tucson, Arizona, shown here, they will more likely become the neighborhood commons. The “walls” of these rooms help create a sense of enclosure that feels good to be in. Each of the surrounding property owners can make a contribution to shaping the room: a colorful gable, a running hedge of perennial plantings, a bench or sitting area facing onto the street.





Storm water filters back into the ground through drainage swales in the pocket neighborhood greens.

Fruit and nut trees and vineyards form a large element of the landscaping in the neighborhood. This edible landscape produces oranges, almonds, apricots, pears, persimmons, peaches, plums, cherries, and grapes. In the community gardens, located on the west side of the development, residents grow vegetables, fruits, flowers, and herbs for home use and sale to markets and restaurants.

Holistic approaches to environmental issues can bring unexpected benefits. “You know you’re on the right track when you notice that your solution for one problem accidentally solves several other problems,” Michael says. For example, in trying to conserve fossil fuels by minimizing the need for automobiles, they found that streets and parking could be minimized. Reduced asphalt lowered the ambient air temperature 10°F to 15°F compared to surrounding neighborhoods in summer months. Narrower streets also slowed traffic, which reduced noise, beautified the neighborhood, and proved safer for children.



Within the pocket neighborhood clusters, community and privacy dovetail in a pattern of streets and neighborhood greens. Local streets are more like alleys, with parking bays and carports tucked right off the pavement. Although the connection to the house is from the street, high fences and shrubs form a private courtyard from which the cars are not visible. On the opposite side, the houses open to the central green, shared with 8 to 10 neighbors. Design guidelines prohibit fences here, but hedges and trees create a sense of privacy as needed.

NEIGHBORHOOD PIONEERS

JUDY CORBETT

Judy Corbett is a woman on a mission. After the challenges of getting Village Homes approved by her city, she set up the Local Government Commission (LGC) to help educate officials on social and environmental issues. “It was clear to me that without mayors and city council managers and supervisors taking the lead in making things change, Village Homes could never be duplicated,” she says.

With the LGC, Corbett hosted 10 national “Smart Growth” conferences for local government officials and published more than 50 policy guidebooks on topics such as water and energy conservation, alternative energy, sustainable economic development, and resource-efficient land-use patterns. In 1991, Corbett and the LGC drew together leading-

edge urban thinkers to write the “Ahwahnee Principles for Resource-Efficient Communities,” which became the basis for New Urbanism.

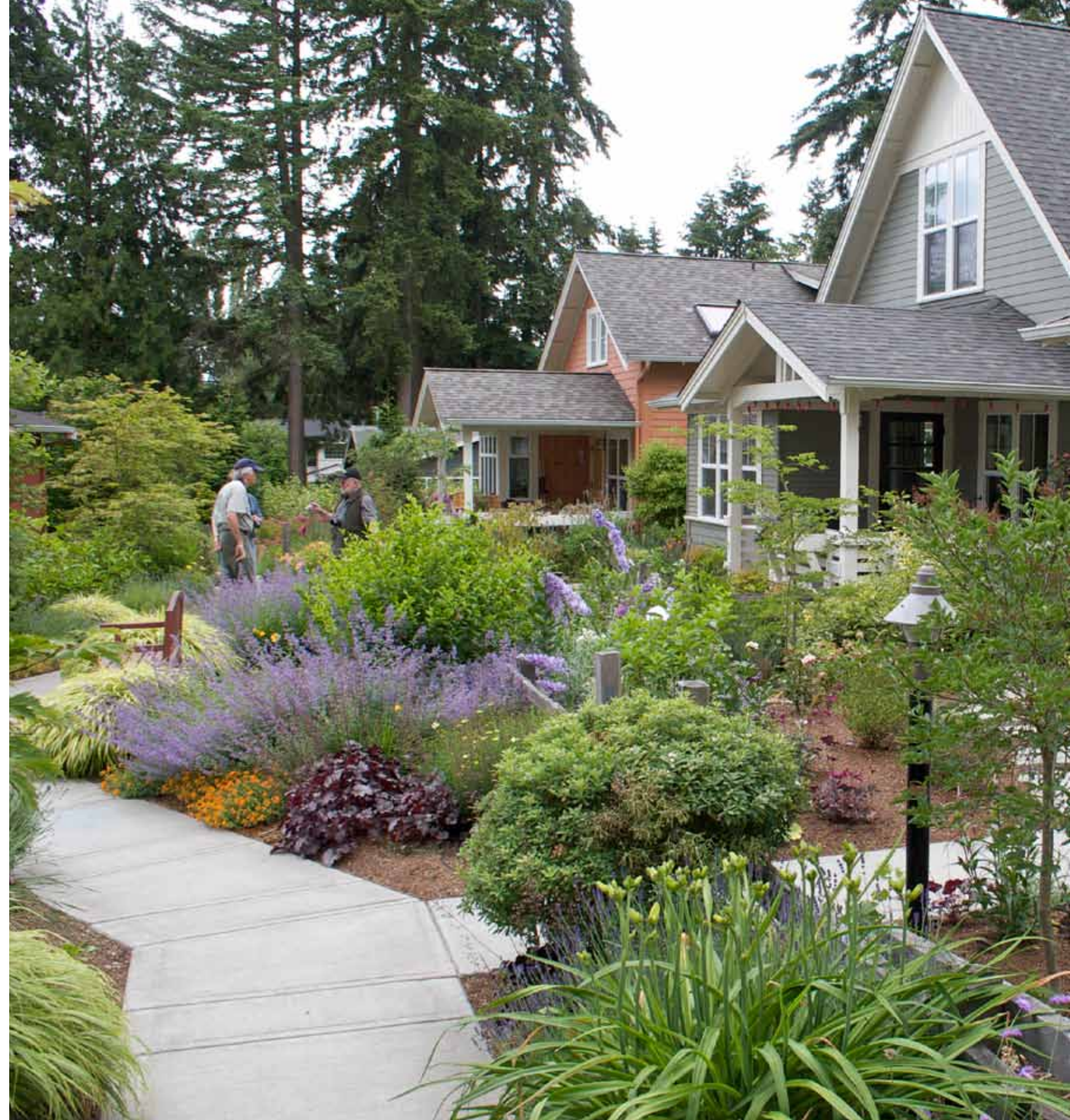




The lower courtyard is more formal in nature, with a central lawn and a flagpole; the upper courtyard has a relaxed mix of perennial flowers and shrubs.

The two courtyards have different qualities. The lower courtyard is more formal, with steeply pitched bungalow cottages lined up along the central lawn; the upper court is smaller and oriented around an informal, landscaped garden.

Garages are clustered together a short distance from the homes, an arrangement that has residents walking through the commons to their front door, offering a chance to enjoy the flowers or chat with a neighbor. This configuration also gave us the flexibility to fit buildings onto the land in ways that preserved trees and open space.

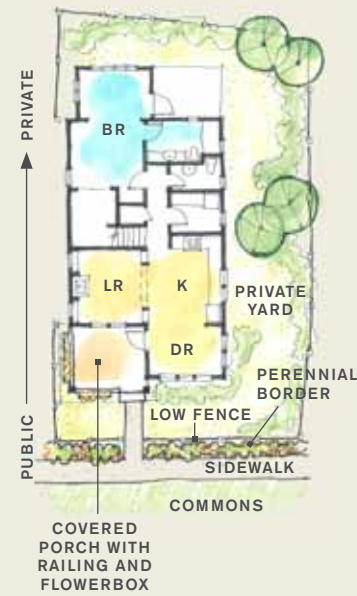


LAYERS OF PERSONAL SPACE

Personal space is a felt sense of comfort and safety that varies from one person to another. Davy Crockett, for example, moved his cabin to the edge of the frontier when a neighbor settled within an hour's ride by horse. In many parts of the world, whole families crowd into a small dwelling, separated from the next family by only a thin wall.

This zone of personal space is measured not so much by distance as by visual and acoustic separation. Cultural and personality differences play their part, but just as important is how and where the boundaries of personal space are defined. Left undefined, a person may feel invaded. If the boundary around personal space is too enclosed, a person may feel isolated. Finding the right balance is key to cultivating community.

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A pocket neighborhood has a central space defined by the cluster of houses surrounding it. Passing through the entry gate, a resident will feel a sense of arriving home, an invited guest will feel welcomed, and a stranger will feel they've crossed into private territory. This is the first layer of personal space.

In our pocket neighborhoods, we work to create five additional layers of personal space between the courtyard and the front door: a border of perennial plantings at the edge of the sidewalk; a low fence; the private front yard; the frame of the covered porch with a low, "perchable" railing and a band of flowerboxes; and the porch itself. These occur within a span of about 18 ft.

A sequence of increasingly private personal spaces continues inside the house, with active spaces located toward the front and private spaces placed farther back and upstairs.

Between the sidewalk and the front door are five layers of personal space that help balance the connection between public and private—all within a space of about 18 ft.



At the back of the homes that meet the side street, careful layering helps buffer the private space of the house and yard from the sidewalk and street.



Above and facing page (top): A group of friends purchased an apartment building in Cambridge, Massachusetts, together and transformed the backyard into a shared picnic and play area.

CAMBRIDGE FRIENDS

“What really sold us on the building was the asphalt-covered back lot coming up with weeds,” recalls Sue Stockard, thinking back 35 years to the time when she and her husband along with six friends were looking for an apartment building to buy together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Each of the couples had young children, and their dream was to live in a place where their children had built-in playmates and adopted aunts and uncles.

“It was not a desirable location at all,” Stockard goes on to describe, as she points out the busy intersection with a gas station and railroad tracks. “But we imagined reorienting the building to the back, and making

an attractive backyard.” There were no fences to take down, but the group did take out enough asphalt to create a large play area with trees to climb and grass to kick soccer balls. Some of the asphalt was left for hard-court games, “And, oh yes, for some parking spots, too.”

The backyard was completely safe, and the children were welcomed in any of the neighboring apartments like family. In fact, with nearly everyone’s immediate relations living far away, this small clan of friends functioned like a surrogate extended family to one another, celebrating many holidays and birthdays together, going to each other’s children’s concerts and plays, and combining vacations to the country. They helped each other through important issues, and engaged in lively discussions about politics and the school board. The dynamic has changed since the children have grown, but the bonds of friendship remain.



FENCE OR NO FENCE? WHAT IS BEST?

Robert Frost’s well-known saying, “good fences make good neighbors,” comes from a poem that questions the need for fences. In rural areas, a good fence kept your cow and animals out of the neighbor’s fields. In residential neighborhoods there are few cows, and all throughout the American Midwest are yards that never had fences. In California, it is common to see 6-ft.-tall fences that prevent neighbors from seeing each other. Fence, or no fence? What is best?

The examples in this chapter have shown neighbors coming together by removing fences. Here’s an example with the opposite approach: two neighbors working together to build a fence on their common property line. In this case, the fence is a sitting shelter with a covered roof, with seating on either side opening to each yard. Above the seat is a vintage stained-glass panel that allows light, but limited views (see p. 108 for another view).



Straddling the property line between two houses, this sitting shelter has seating opening to either side.



CHAPTER 16

Danish Origins

It's generally believed that cohousing originated in Denmark in the 1960s, due to the popularity of a book by American architects Kathryn McCamant and Chuck Durrett, who coined the term “cohousing.” But related forms of collective housing appeared about the same time in Sweden and the Netherlands, stemming from a socially responsive tradition of shared housing throughout Northern Europe stretching back hundreds of years (see *Gardens of Compassion*, pp. 26–31). Nevertheless, the evolution of cohousing in Denmark offers rich examples for the study of pocket neighborhoods.

In the mid-1960s, most Danish housing options were isolated single-family houses and apartments. With many women going to work outside the home

after World War II, children were left home alone. Architect Jan Gudmand-Høyer and author Bodil Graae introduced ideas for cooperative living and gathered the first groups to build a housing collective, integrating childcare and social contact. They called their approach *bofællesskab*, which translates as “living community.”

The first Danish cohousing communities featured around 30 attached and detached houses, along with a Common House shared by all. Cars and parking were outside the commons, leaving a pedestrian environment that was completely safe for children.

MANY HANDS MAKE A COMMUNITY

Cohousing has evolved from the initial Danish communities, but in all of them, resident participation is an essential ingredient.

Participatory Design

Gudmand-Høyer felt strongly that the future residents of a community should be involved in the planning and design process from the beginning. His watchword was, “Not only houses for people, but also,



Above: Cohousing was envisioned as a community that fostered interaction among neighbors of all ages.

Below: From the very beginning, Danish cohousing communities were planned, owned, and managed by the residents themselves.





CHAPTER 23

Taking Down the Fences

It's a fact of life that many of us don't know our neighbors very well. One way to get to know them better is to invite them over for coffee now and then or to arrange neighborhood potlucks and street parties. A less conventional (but equally or more effective) option is to take down the fences dividing the properties and begin sharing the joined backyards.

N STREET COHOUSING

Two neighbors in a subdivision of ranch houses in Davis, California, decided to take out the fence between their properties. Adjacent households joined the fold and the group began to define themselves as a community. They shared several meals a week, planted a community garden, and used consensus decision-making procedures for shared concerns, similar to those described in Chapter 18.

Eventually the residents of the ranch-house subdivision adopted the cohousing model as a guide and gave themselves a name: "N Street Cohousing." Excitement grew each time a new house on the periphery joined in. "Fence Tearing Down Parties" became an institution. The combined backyards of 18 houses now span almost the entire center of the block—a community of 50 adults and 14 children.

Kevin Wolf, the original founder of N Street, is clearly a cheerleader for the advantages of shared backyards. But he understands that taking down fences can raise a neighbor's anxiety level. "So we take care to dismantle and save the old fence's wood. If things don't work out, they can easily put the fence back up." Even though the fences have been removed, none of the property lines have been adjusted. As far as the city and the bank are concerned, these are detached, single-family dwellings. Each household owns or rents its property separately. The culture, though, tends toward communal.

When a new property is added to the community, there are only two conditions attached: the meandering flagstone pathway that connects the neighbors must extend across the property. And, there must be some element created by the new members that benefits the community, such as a shared vegetable garden, chicken coop, children's playhouse, hot tub, or beehives (yes, this is true).



Kevin Wolf has been shepherding the removal of his neighbors' fences over a period of more than two decades, while fostering a vision of community with his engaging and generous spirit.



Taking the fences down behind 18 houses and duplexes created a central commons shared by all. None of this is apparent from the street, nor from the city tax surveys that show no change in the underlying property lines.



CHAPTER 18

Greening the Neighborhood

Half a world away, in Australia and New Zealand, two groups have taken the global environmental crisis to heart and built small-scale communities as templates for ecologically based cities. It is no surprise that their planning and design principles closely align with the key ideas of pocket neighborhoods, and that they are developed and organized using cohousing processes and social structures.

EARTHSONG: A VISION COMES TO FRUITION

In the mid-1990s, Robin Allison, an architect from Auckland, called a group together to create New Zealand's first cohousing community, Earthsong Eco-Neighborhood. Their founding vision had three components: sustainable design and construction, respectful and cooperative community, and education by demonstration.

Earthsong is home to nearly 70 residents—including young families, singles, and seniors—residing on just over 3 acres in a suburb outside of Auckland. The community is laid out with 32 homes in clusters of two- and three-story dwellings arranged along common paths and shared courtyards. Dwelling types range from one-bedroom studios to four-bedroom houses, to accommodate a wide range of ages and household types.

Accessibility for older or less mobile people was an important factor in the design of the homes, as well as the site. Seven of the houses were built to accommodate residents with limited mobility, and all buildings have level-entry thresholds to their ground floor area. Exterior pathways are limited to a 1:20 slope, extending full access throughout the site to all.

Children's needs are accommodated, too. In addition to young child and teen rooms in the Common House, there's a car-free central courtyard, with a playhouse, large sandpit, and children's vegetable garden. Parents and neighboring friends take turns supervising a childcare group, as well as offering watchful eyes and welcoming kitchens for their young friends. Cars and parking are limited to a portion of the site, allowing the area around all of the houses to be car-free. The exception is the central path for emergency vehicles and heavy deliveries.

As with other cohousing communities, residents share extensive common facilities. At the hub of the Earthsong neighborhood, near the main entry and parking area, is the Common House, which includes a kitchen and dining space for community dinners, children's room, and shared laundry. Nearby is a shared workshop for small woodworking projects and bike repair. And at the back of the site, next to the pond, is the community food garden and orchards. The front portion of the site is reserved for the development of small businesses and shops that will enhance the adjacent commercial center and provide work opportunities for both Earthsong residents and the wider community.

The temperate climate of New Zealand's North Island is ideal for bananas, oranges, lemons, and peaches. It is also where the inspiration for an ecologically based community has come to fruition.

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