

# Cohousing: Linking Communitarianism and Sustainability

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## **Introduction**

This paper considers the nexus between communitarianism and sustainability. It asks, "Do communal societies, which historically have existed at the margins of society, have anything to contribute to a generalised theory of sustainability?" Does communal experimentation of the past or present hold relevance for the stark reality of contemporary urban decay, social disorder and environmental degradation? The paper draws lessons from 19th century sectarian communities and communes of the 1960s and 1970s. It suggests that whilst some of these groups may well have achieved a measure of sustainability at the personal or community level, their problematic relationships with wider society mitigated against any contribution to broader, societal sustainability.

Cohousing, a new type of intentional community is introduced. Cohousing is said to be embedded within communitarian tradition through its conscious engagement with classic dilemmas that have always challenged intentional communities; society versus individuality, communal versus private property, commonality versus diversity and withdrawal versus outreach. Yet unlike its predecessors, cohousing is a mainstream option, and intentionally so. It is not an alternative lifestyle; but one deemed appropriate for the broad majority of people. Furthermore, even if only a tiny percentage of the population eventually live in cohousing, strategies it is currently pioneering have the potential to radically influence urban growth, community development and social change processes. As such, cohousing may well be the first manifestation of communitarian endeavour with relevance for global sustainability and the linked problems of rapid urban sprawl, continued environmental degradation, excessive resource consumption and increasing social disorder.

### Learning from the past

Commentators disagree on the value of historic communal societies as precedents for contemporary intentional communities. Rudolf Bahro for instance, dismisses as irrelevant, much historic communitarianism.<sup>1</sup> Delores Hay den, on the other hand, has suggested that the admittedly premature truths of 19th century Utopian communities offer a history of organising and building which provide many lessons for communards struggling with social, practical and technical concerns of the present.<sup>2</sup> In her seminal book, *Commitment and Community*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter drew parallels between 1960s hippie communes and 19th century Utopian communities, suggesting that their respective guiding principles shared a striking resemblance.<sup>3</sup> In a later work Kanter maintained that certain themes have underpinned communal thought and action throughout history, suggesting for example, that social integration has pervaded communitarian values from the time of Plato's *Republic* until today. Almost all Utopias have attempted to substitute cooperation for competition, mutual support for hostility, meaningful relations for non-expressive ones, involvement for isolation.<sup>4</sup>

The reluctance of some scholars to accept Kanter's thesis of the continuity of communitarian tradition is not simply a matter of the similarities or differences between historical and contemporary instances. In part, it is due to the commonly held belief that much communal experimentation of the past was naive, ill-conceived and destined to fail.<sup>5</sup> In accepting the link between past and present communities, contemporary communitarianism might be expected, by association, to have a similarly limited shelf life.

If we believe that lessons can and should be learned from the past, then it is necessary to develop an understanding of the trials and tribulations, the joys and sorrows, and most importantly, the successes and failings of historic communities. This requires careful consideration of the means by which we assess historical phenomena and the criteria used to measure the characteristics of past communal groups. Longevity is one measure of the 'success' of communal groups that gained currency through Kanter's work. Cornfield used a combination of duration and an index of members' overall satisfaction with their communal experience.<sup>6</sup> Other criteria used to gauge 'success' have included; group cohesion, stability, spirit, commitment, common ideology, degree of organisation, emergent leadership, and numbers of well-integrated individuals.<sup>7</sup> Some commentators have developed parallel inventories of failings in their analyses of the demise of intentional communities.<sup>8</sup> Kanter suggested that ineffective decision-making process, poor self-definition and lack of purpose have all contributed to the demise of intentional communities. Economic pressures and isolation from the mainstream have been said to cause introversion and stagnation.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to remember that 19<sup>th</sup> century collectivism was not static, but changing and evolving throughout an extended period. A range of terms

have been ascribed to its countless variations; cooperative, communalist, communist, harmonist, mutualist, socialist, etc.<sup>10</sup> The movement was in constant flux. The lessons learnt and the lessons offered, were not (and are not) unequivocal. Rather, they were (and are) pointers to issues which all communitarian groups face from time to time, and their resolution should be seen in terms of a spectrum of choices rather than particular "rights" and "wrongs". These include the "great dilemmas" identified by Hayden<sup>11</sup> which still are foremost amongst those faced by communards today; societal versus individual rights, communal versus private territory and commonality versus diversity. The primary lesson offered by history is that there are choices for all intentional communities that require careful consideration. Each group will develop a unique profile of characteristics, having resolved matters in the light of their particular make-up and circumstance. An appreciation of precedence, both historic and contemporaneous, is important to this process if reinvention of the communitarian wheel is to be avoided.

Contemporary communes ignore historic communal debates at the peril of repeating their predecessors' mistakes, building in the same tentative ways, reliving the same dilemmas.<sup>12</sup>

### **Cohousing: extending the lineage**

Cohousing is a new type of intentional community, first developed in the 1970s in Denmark and the Netherlands. It spread rapidly to other Northern European countries and more recently has taken root in the United States and Canada. Cohousing integrates autonomous private dwellings with shared utilities and recreational facilities such as kitchens, dining halls, workshops and children's play facilities. Danish projects range from as few as 6 dwelling units to as many as 100, with most being between 20 and 40. Several hundred such *Bofællesskaber* have been built in Denmark with many more being planned or constructed.<sup>13</sup> In the Netherlands, where size varies considerably, 59 *Centraal Wonen* projects had been realised by 1992.<sup>14</sup> In North America, where they typically comprise 20-30 households, over 50 cohousing communities are currently occupied or under construction.<sup>15</sup>

Cohousing demonstrably fits Bouvard's reading of contemporary intentional communitarianism; that is, a strand of Utopian lineage having many points in common with Utopian communities of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, cohousing may be said to manifest Delores Hayden's speculation of some twenty years ago, when she wrote,

Some contemporary groups will no doubt develop model environments over the next few decades which are as subtly worked out, in terms of personal relationships and environmental structure, as Hancock or Oneida at their height.<sup>17</sup> Cohousing has at least four distinguishing characteristics;<sup>18</sup>

1. common facilities - extensive shared indoor and outdoor spaces and amenities,

2. neighbourhood design - dwellings addressing a pedestrianised 'street' or courtyard,
3. participatory development - member participation in project conception, design and realisation,
4. resident self-management - commitment to ongoing management and community development.

The first two, together with the careful configuration of private and shared space, comprise the "environmental structure" to which Hayden refers above. The later two, in combination with a rich social agenda, help build the subtly worked out "personal relationships" to which she also refers. Further evidence for cohousing being embedded within Utopian tradition may be found in the responses of cohousing groups to the "great communitarian dilemmas" identified by Hayden; namely, society versus the individual, communal versus private territory, commonality versus diversity and withdrawal versus outreach.

### **Society versus the individual**

The degree to which the singular needs and aspirations of individuals fit with those of society is an enduring and central discourse within political and social philosophy. Discourse becomes dilemma for intentional communities, where a society's direction is determined and managed by a small number of individuals who are that society rather than its elected representatives. Many American and Australian 19<sup>th</sup> century sectarian communities resolved this dilemma through autocratic leadership. In contemporary communities, where patriarchal and charismatic relationships of power are somewhat less the norm, procedures have evolved or been developed to reduce the tension caused by conflicting needs of group and individual. 1960s and 1970s communes, with their emphasis on personal freedom, generally opted for a free-wheeling, unfettered developmental process. Kanter suggests that Sunrise Hill was typical.<sup>19</sup> There, an approach evolved which maximised freedom of direction for all members and censored decision making which might set limits upon that freedom. She noted however, that the resultant diversity of direction prevented the community from acting decisively in a single direction. By contrast, other groups in which mutual trust and commitment had developed through a sense of shared purpose, found that they could build organisation and cohesion to significantly enhance their development as a society.<sup>20</sup>

Intentional communities have increasingly recognised the importance of a balance between the well-being of the individual and the furtherance of communal aims.<sup>21</sup> In the 1990s development process, participatory management and decision making procedures have been keenly applied to that end.<sup>22</sup> Cohousing groups, in particular, have refined and developed these instruments, pioneering a participatory development process that occurs up-front, well before members reside together. Cohousing development groups form to

discuss individual and collective needs and aspirations, typically taking one, two or three years to hone and make clear their social agenda before considering the location and physical form of their community. The resultant set of agreements give form to the group's identity and informs their direction as individuals and as a society.

A dynamic balance between individual and society is the goal, encouraged in the local community by its provision of a human scale, knowable society in which individuals have reflected to them, and recognise, the importance of their personal roles.<sup>23</sup>

The development process provides time for members who find they cannot reconcile their individual needs with those of the group to leave without consequence. New members will be attracted to the direction in which the group is developing. The process takes much time and effort, but significantly contributes to the reconciliation of individual and group needs. Ultimately, the resultant set of agreements gives form to the architectural brief; the location, site planning and building form become the physical manifestation of the group's social aspirations. This is not an approach for which we are well prepared. Twenty years of cohousing development has confirmed Hayden's expectation that, "participation in planning and building can be an especially valuable tool for small groups exploring the implications of growth, although often, it simply reveals disorganisation and timidity."<sup>24</sup> Cohousing groups generally seek the outside assistance of facilitators, architects and developers in order to mitigate the inherent difficulties of such a process.

### **Communal versus private territory**

For location based communities, the differentiation of communal and private space can give concrete expression to the relationship between group and individual. In both the Greek *polis* and the medieval 'commune', the configuration of private and public space was a natural manifestation of the social and political relations that underlay daily life.<sup>25</sup> Contrastingly, the architectural visions of Utopians from Vitruvius to Soleri, including those of Owen, Fourier and even Howard, were rarely an expression of real human values. Their proposals were typically of non-human scale, paleo-technological or just plain absurd. Utopian designers did not generally derive physical form from human values. Rather, they thought to engineer human need with a perfect, static and Arcadian built form.<sup>26</sup> A contemporary perspective that acknowledges individual difference and the need to balance community involvement with opportunities for privacy can better assist in forging more ecologically balanced and humanistic communities.

In both historical Utopias and contemporary communes, a norm of high personal involvement prolonged duration, but in modern communes this applies only where such involvement is not seen to encroach on members' privacy.<sup>27</sup> Kanter found in both rural and urban communes, that some privacy in

the context of strong group contact appeared essential.<sup>28</sup> Cohousing takes these lessons, and translates them directly, sometimes literally, into physical form. Cohousing grants autonomy to the individual dwelling whilst retaining the shared advantage of the commons; demonstrating a pragmatism unimagined by predecessor communities. The private realm is fully self-contained with adjacent private outdoor space in the form of a small court or backyard; perhaps fulfilling Hayden's prediction that intentional communities will become about as private as communalism can possibly sanction.<sup>29</sup> The "commons" on the other hand are extensive but generally comprised of well-defined exterior and interior spaces such that the distinction between shared and private space is manifestly clear. Cohousing recognises the increased importance, in this situation, of the social meaning imbued within linking circulation spaces that mediate between communal and private domains. Houses generally possess a soft edge or transition zone that is neither fully public nor fully private but can be utilised as either by its residents. These become areas for sitting and reading, informal greeting and meeting, watching the world go by and the accumulation of kids toys and bikes. They are the built manifestation of the realisation that communal stability depends on whether the community allows members to maintain psychic distance without destroying their sense of communion.<sup>30</sup>

### **Unity versus diversity**

The third of Hayden's "great" dilemmas is social cohesion and unity of purpose versus membership diversity (of socio-economic, ethno-religious or other characteristics). There is little doubt that the cohesion and directed purpose of many 19th century Utopian communities was the single greatest reason for their robustness and longevity. It was to protect their unity that many kept their distance from wider society. Amongst 1960s communes, personal difference had a telling influence on many communities.

Personal styles and their 'fit' can make a difference in whether group solidarity develops, especially if the commune does not share transcendent philosophies that give people sufficient belief in the commune and its leadership to overlook interpersonal irritations.<sup>31</sup>

In an age of increasing heterogeneity within wider society and a growing appreciation of the ecological importance of diversity within natural and social systems, "sameness" within human groups of any kind is difficult to sustain in principle or in practice. Nor is it politically useful for the communitarian movement. Homogeneity and isolationism have the potential to render "the brave social experiment of the 1970s, the isolated anachronism of the 1990s ... known and cared about by a minute proportion of the population."<sup>32</sup>

Cohousing groups strongly believe that diversity is essential to community vitality. In recognition of the lessons of history they incorporate within

their social agenda, dispute resolution procedures to overcome the tensions that interpersonal difference can cause. Many groups are addressing the threat of cohousing becoming exclusively middle-class due to the cost of home ownership. Groups such as Southside Park in Sacramento, California are pioneering the provision of affordable units and rental accommodation (See below). During the development phase of that community, "some people put in an incredible amount of money and some only put in a few hundred dollars, but everyone participated on an equal basis."<sup>33</sup> All communities advocate greater diversity of ethnicity, religion, wealth and sexual orientation but they are aware of the thin line between positive discrimination and tokenism and seem wary of being overtly pro-active in seeking racial diversity.<sup>34</sup>

### **Withdrawal versus outreach**

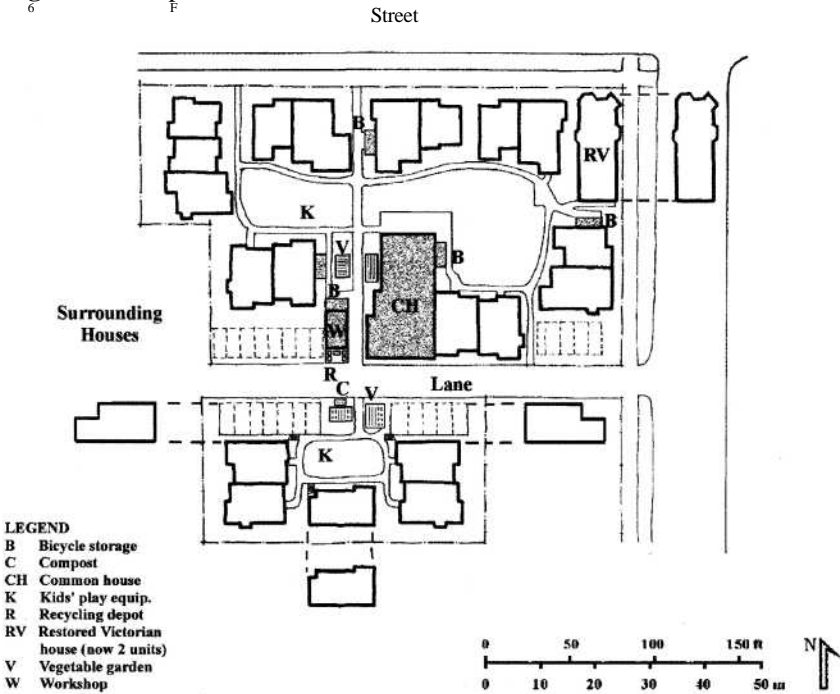
19th century Utopian communities had tenuous links with mainstream society.<sup>35</sup> Yet, many steadfastly believed they would contribute to widespread social change by living an exemplary "perfect" life.<sup>36</sup> The relationship between 60s and 70s communes and the rest of society was similarly problematic. Many communards opted out of a society they perceived as impersonal and alienating<sup>37</sup> whilst others only partially withdrew due to their perceived "exemplary" role in the vanguard of change for the whole society.<sup>38</sup> Despite the good intentions of some, Pepper suggests that inherent within sixties communes were potential barriers to their agency for social change. They lacked a wider audience, had little clarity of purpose and when they did have agreed aims, did not necessarily live by them. If intentional communities of the coming decades are to have greater relevance and be better able to contribute to social change toward a more sustainable society then the introversion that has characterised past groups must be dealt with.<sup>39</sup> For sustainability to be addressed effectively, ordinary people need to know about communitarian alternatives to the cult of individuality endemic throughout Western society.<sup>40</sup> This will require no less than a "community-building industry" to "bring communitarian values into the picture, countering generations of acculturation to the paradigm of home as moated castle".<sup>41</sup>

Cohousing communities in Denmark, the Netherlands and the United States are firmly embedded within mainstream society. Most projects are urban or suburban. Residents are aware that introversion and withdrawal are counter-productive. They strive to connect with neighbours and contribute to local economic, cultural and political life. This is perhaps cohousing's most significant deviation from communitarian tradition and its basis is a matter of principle, being a different reading of the process of social change. Some groups have contributed to the rejuvenation of depressed urban precincts whilst others have led pro-environmental activism in their region. Many groups have invited and gained widespread media exposure, bringing increasing mainstream awareness of the social and environmental advantages

of community living.<sup>42</sup> Might the cohousing movement be realising the hypothetical scenario sketched out by Poulter and How? "Instead of seeing it as something 'out there' to be protected and disconnected from, New Communities will engage with society and make a conscious effort to pull the 'reality' of the world towards a new 'vision' ".<sup>43</sup>

**Southside Park: A case study<sup>44</sup>**

**Figure 1: Site plan**



Southside Park Cohousing (SPC) is a community of 25 households occupying 1.37 acres within a 15 minute walk of downtown Sacramento, California (See Figure 1). From its inception in 1989, SPC members sought integration with an "interesting" neighbourhood of diverse ethnic mix. They resolved to be "part of the neighbourhood, not insulated from it."<sup>45</sup> The Sacramento Redevelopment Agency offered the group a suitable site with the proviso that they incorporate affordable units, residents of mixed income, a high-density, 'context-responsive' architecture and the restoration of a dilapidated Victorian house on the property (See Figure 2).<sup>46</sup> The community moved in at the end of 1993 after protracted financial negotiations and a "classic" cohousing development process that took 4 years and thousands of hours of meetings.



**Figure 2:** Restored Victorian house (left) and "context-responsive architecture" (right). (Drawing by architects, Mogavero & Notestine Associates).



**Figure 3:** Porches facing the street facilitate interaction between residents and neighbours



**Figure 4:** A pre-existing laneway cutting through the community is kept open to the public



The neighbourhood is said to be "blighted by crime and drugs,"<sup>47</sup> yet the architecture expresses openness and permeability. Front porches are designed to address the street (See Figure 3) and a pre-existing lane cutting through the site remains open to the public (See Figure 4). Since moving in, residents have participated in local improvement projects, hosted neighbourhood association meetings and fought for the interests the district.<sup>48</sup> Although they have never drafted a mission statement, the residents of SPC are clearly committed to an urban cohousing that pro-actively contributes to grass-roots social change.

While clustered homes and cooperation - even in suburban projects - are a big step ahead of typical tract homes when it comes to natural resource conservation and human development, an infill project that also becomes a player in the battle to preserve its urban residential neighbourhood can contribute to social health and progress at an entirely different level.<sup>49</sup>

The community comprises 42 adults and 26 children (under 18 years of age). The 25 households include a diverse mix of 8 nuclear families, 6 single parent families, 6 couples without children and 4 people living alone. Minorities are represented by 4 members of non-European ethnicity, 2 who are severely disabled and one gay couple. Members' educational qualifications include 2 doctorates, 27 graduate and 6 undergraduate degrees. Twenty-three residents (of whom 3 are self-employed) have full-time work. Ten (including 4 self-employed members) have part-time work. Two are full-time students and 2 more are homemakers. Others are unemployed or retired. Five residents make their living from home. Vocations represented include teaching (8 members), law (5), government (4), environmental science (4), health (4) and business (3). Personal income levels are evenly spread with approximately 25% of adults respectively, earning less than US\$20,000, US\$20,000 - US\$30,000, US\$30,000 - US\$40,000 and greater than US\$40,000 annually.

The homes at SPC protectively encircle two courtyards of semi-private community space (See Figures 5 and 6). A "soft edge" of decks, porches and pathways encourages informal social interaction. Casual overlooking ensures safety for children at play. The project incorporates a wide range of dwelling size, cost and configuration to accommodate the needs of a diversity of household types. Dwelling cost ranged from US\$85,000 for a 640 square foot single bedroom unit to US\$154,000 for a 1,475 square foot five bedroom house. By comparison, the median house price in the Sacramento area was about US\$150,000 at the time SPC was built.<sup>50</sup> Five "affordable" units were made available to low-income households and another 6 were held for households of moderate income. If resold, these units are required to remain "affordable" for 30 years (at 80% of median income) and 10 years (at 120% of median income) respectively. Issues of equity, access and affordability have been further addressed through the inclusion of 4 renters. None of the units have laundries or garages and few households keep a "spare" room as

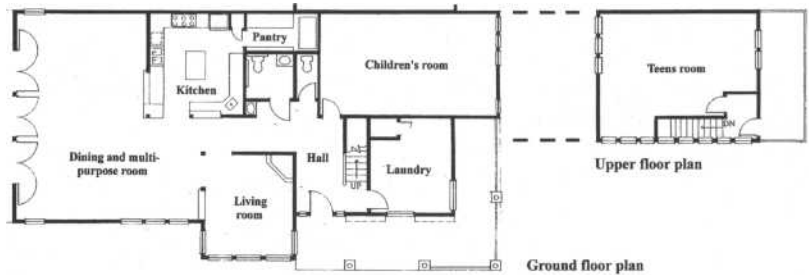
**Figure 5:** Northern courtyard ringed with porches and common house centrally located



**Figure 6:** Intimately scaled southern courtyard of well-defined community space



**Figure 7:** Common House plan. (Drawing by architects, Mogavero & Notestine Associates).



guests can usually be accommodated with neighbours away for the weekend.<sup>51</sup> The community share 31,000 square foot of indoor space including a large kitchen and dining room, living room, laundry, kids' play room, teens' room, workshop and bicycle storage. Rooms in the common house can be adapted to accommodate meetings, weddings, parties, sports or theatre (See Figure 7).<sup>52</sup> Condominium fees required to service the commons vary between \$80 and \$110 per month. Common meals held 3 times per week cost \$2 for adults and \$1 for children.

How has living in cohousing influenced members' resource consumption, given that the core group of founders called themselves the 'Downscalers'?<sup>53</sup> The median size of the dwellings at SPC is approximately 1120 square feet, which (even after adding the average area of common space per dwelling, 124 square feet) compares favourably with local (1600 square foot) and national (2300 square feet) averages of the early 1990s.<sup>54</sup> There has been little change in the total number of privately owned vehicles, however cars are willingly shared and car-pooling is commonplace.<sup>55</sup> There has been minimal reduction in the quantum of major household items (other than lawnmowers) although there is considerable sharing of tools, books and smaller household goods. Informal bartering and trading has alleviated inconvenience and reduced expenditure.<sup>56</sup> Enhanced trust and neighbourliness has facilitated the sharing of skills and ideas, such that the environmental advantages of composting, recycling, worm farming and organic gardening are now widely appreciated (See Figure 8). Suggested one member, "I have experts who live here who I can ask advice on things. I learn simple ways of saving resources by observing my neighbours and sharing with them." Importantly, such raised consciousness has generally been translated into behavioural change. Another resident reported that,

living in cohousing makes purchasing some things easier (ie. shared lawnmowers etc). Some things I don't buy because I can borrow seldom needed things. There is more recycling here than you can reasonably do individually. It's easier to do these things with it being an accepted rather than exceptional practice. Common meals are usually healthier than I will bother to cook at home (ie. fresh produce, less meat, more whole foods).<sup>57</sup>

Households that moved intact from their previous location (ie. with little change of personnel) reported about a 20% improvement in the frequency of recycling and composting (See Figure 9).<sup>58</sup> Highly energy-efficient houses and the installation of water-conserving faucets, toilets and irrigation systems (beyond the expectation of building codes) facilitate energy and water conservation. The common house roof carries solar panels that return electricity to the city grid.

**Figure 8:** Organic gardens, common house (left) and workshop/bicycle storage (right).



**Figure 9:** A community-scale recycling depot facilitates fine-grained recycling practice



## Conclusion

No doubt many of Southside Park Cohousing's social and environmental achievements can also be found in countless intentional communities with equivalent levels of cooperation and mutual support. Radical urban communes since the 60s have been at least as committed to pro-active involvement in neighbourhood affairs. Unlike SPC however, very few historical or contemporary intentional communities could claim, or would wish to claim, that their chosen lifestyle was compatible with mainstream values. Indeed most communards would insist that theirs were alternative lifestyles. This is where cohousing clearly deviates from communitarian tradition, despite being thoroughly embedded within that lineage. Cohousing is also embedded within mainstream society. SPC demonstrates a model that is appropriate for, and potentially appealing to, vast numbers of ordinary people (See Figure 10). It has already captured widespread attention through exposure in the print and electronic media. Cohousing communities generally, comprise a new wave of intentional communities with the potential to awaken society from the "great American dream" and guide its transition to a sustainable future.

**Figure 10:** "The planting of an idea" drawn by John Kloss, a resident of SPC.



The planting of an idea

## ENDNOTES

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44. Based on extensive research of 18 North American cohousing communities conducted in late 1996. Preliminary data from the study, which focused on the environmental advantages of cohousing, is soon to be published (G. Meltzer, "Cohousing: Verifying the importance of community in the application of environmentalism." *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, In press (1999).

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