

# **A Perspective on 50 Years of Housing Evolution in Boulder**

One CU grad's adventures in helping to shape Boulder neighborhoods and housing choices

by Jim Leach.

## **Introduction**

When I was first asked to do a guest lecture for the CU environmental design school by friend, architect and Professor Michael Tavel at the school, I thought it might just be another one of the cohousing presentations that I've done for several CU classes in the past. After talking with Michael I began to realize this might be a bigger deal than just a one hour lecture with slides. This could really be my chance to get my act together about my take on how housing in Boulder has evolved since the late 1950s; from the era and evolution from post WWII tract style production housing to some very innovative forms of planned developments and community-based neighborhoods. It could also be about my experiences as a CU student collaborating and communing with other student friends who were studying architecture, engineering and business to manage to have an influence on the evolution of housing and neighborhoods in Boulder over the past fifty plus years.

It is been enlightening for me to review some of these adventures from my past that I had previously given only a little thought to in terms of their impact on how we Boulder-ites live together and how they may relate to some of the housing challenges that the city has experienced and currently still does. It has also been enlightening to realize how disorganized and inefficient my career and passions have been at times. To paraphrase Tom Lear *it has been a sobering thought to realize that when Mozart was my age he had been dead for almost 40 years.*

## **Section 1 - Leach and Arnold**

### **How it started, the search for something better than Levittown.**

I graduated from CU in 1964 with a combined degree in architectural engineering and business, then did a one-year master's degree program in construction engineering at Stanford graduating in 1965. What inspired me and some of my fellow students at CU was figuring out how to make a living designing and building new and better models of housing and neighborhood development, creating a better American housing model than Levittown. A tall order but it was the 1960s, America was changing, and as college students we knew we could do things better than the past generation. It was that or put flowers in our hair and drop out or maybe just burn the place down.

While studying at Stanford a fellow student and I did a thesis type study of production housing in the San Francisco Bay area, and especially the modern production housing built by Joseph Eichler. Eichler was a former butcher that went into the housing business with the inspiration of producing an innovative new housing product better suited to the California life style. His home designs with atriums, glass walls, and indoor-outdoor kitchens had attracted a cult like following in Northern California. I was inspired by the simple, elegant, and very contemporary designs and the success of his company and the love of his product.

In 1965 IBM had just announced their new Boulder headquarters and it looked like a great time to jump into the housing business. Gene Arnold was a fellow CU student and good friend who after graduating with honors from the engineering school, was working for a large production homebuilder in Denver.

For a couple of years Gene and I had been dreaming up our visions of starting a company to build a better merchant built housing product, maybe a Colorado version of Eichler's homes.

We went into business and started Leach and Arnold Homes in 1966. We hired three of my friends from the architecture school at CU to each design a house of the future, and these became the designs for the first homes we built on Wilson Court off Norwood in North Boulder. The first house we built, (and we literally built it stick by stick ourselves), was designed by my good friend from both high school and college, Bruce Downing, who became my long term partner in the design firm Downing Leach and Associates.

In 1968 Gene and I started an additional new company, Leach & Arnold Engineering and Construction, a commercial construction company that contracted for the construction of everything from high end custom homes, historic renovations, commercial buildings, and affordable housing.

Sometime, around 1973, Gene made his decision to leave Boulder and move his growing family to Grand Junction. Over the next year or so we wound the Leach & Arnold companies down. The breakup of the business and parting was amicable. I went on to form Wonderland Hill Development Company with Bruce Downing and a new investor partner Jimmy Roswell.

### **The Levittown model for housing America – Can we do something better in Boulder?**

The early post WWII suburban housing and neighborhood models, like Levittown, were an example of the best of typical American capitalism and enterprise. They were designed and built as efficiently as possible in large scale developments of repetitive home designs on single family lots and built by merchant builders with factory in the field mass production construction and development concepts. They offered the best and most affordable neighborhood lifestyle for American families with a good amount of privacy and convenience.

The rapid spread of Levittown production track housing after WWII created affordable middle class housing ownership opportunities all over the country. Boulder was no exception with the early suburban model developments of Martin Acres and then Table Mesa. However, Boulder with a history of being home to activists progressive about the natural and built environment soon began to wake up to the detrimental side of this somewhat architecturally uninspiring suburban model of housing development. In the late 1960s the complaint in Boulder, and other cities experiencing significant growth, was that these suburban neighborhood models were becoming too much of the same good thing, and if left unchecked would create low density auto driven sprawl and all the associated problems that came with it.

The Blue Line and the seeds of the open space program were hatched as one response to a growing concern about the impacts of urban sprawl on the city. There was a mix of activism around either stopping the city's growth or creating better neighborhood housing models. At that time Boulder was both experiencing more rapid employment growth but was also still considered a housing suburb option for the Denver job market. Every morning there was more traffic leaving Boulder for jobs in Denver than there was coming into Boulder for work, just the opposite from what we have today.

Boulder County planning and development was largely under the government leadership and control of the same group of progressive leaders as the city was. The County commissioners and planners were concerned about the more rural versions of suburban subdivision development that were being

developed and proposed in the county and outside of incorporated cities. Boulder County began to gradually implement policies that would force all suburban development into the cities where it could be both better served and controlled.

### **Appleridge Park – An early attempt at breaking the mold**

In the late 60s Gene Arnold and Bruce Downing and I made trips together to California, studying, and photographing the cutting edge new neighborhoods and housing being developed at Irvine Ranch and other progressive California new town communities. I had also visited East Coast examples in Reston and Columbia.

Apple Ridge Park, a planned development of about 35 single family homes and 50 townhouses, was our first attempt to go beyond creative single home designs to bring what we had learned in California about planned neighborhood development to the Boulder market. Located at the corner of Broadway and Norwood in North Boulder Apple Ridge was literally built on an old apple orchard. We sold all the homes, mostly to young families, but kept the townhouses as rentals in joint ownership with Foster Lumber Company, who invested in the project.

Boulder had a new young planning director named Bill Lamont who shared and supported our progressive visions for improved residential neighborhood designs and housing architecture. He made it possible for us to successfully work with and around many of the established rules and regulations, and to create a more progressive model of subdivision development.

We planned the development of Apple Ridge to preserve rows of apple trees in common areas behind the back yards of the homes, and we talked the city into new narrow street designs with small landscaped island park areas at the cul-de-sacs. I believe that it was the first planned residential development, with common areas and a home owners association to maintain them, to be approved in the city and among the first in the state of Colorado. In both the design of the neighborhood and the individual homes, Apple Ridge was a true cutting edge moderate priced new home community. It was recognized nationally and awarded by Plan Boulder as the “Best New Subdivision in Boulder County” in 1968. It is still today one of the most desirable North Boulder neighborhoods of smaller uniquely designed homes.

## **Section 2 – Wonderland Hill**

### **A one of a kind model for larger scale planned neighborhood development**

In the late 1960s a cultural revolution was going on in America, and we were a transition generation, out to make the world better as we made our fortunes. A young CU physics professor, John Shonlie toured Apple Ridge, liked the progressive planning concepts, and asked us to join him in completing the development of about 120 acres of land that he had acquired west of Broadway at the northwest edge of the city, the former Maxwell Ranch on Wonderland Hill. John shared our vision of saving the world through better neighborhood planning and architecture. He had started the first phase of residential subdivision development on the south facing hill side that overlooked the city called Linden Park, but he was quickly getting burned out as a real estate developer and wanted to get back to his other interests. We took over the development of Wonderland Hill and eventually managed to buy John out, but not before naming streets in the development, Northstar Court and Orion, after his passion for astronomy.

## **Northstar Court – Bringing it all together in one small cluster of courtyard homes**

In 1970 we made our first attempt to incorporate all of the progressive west coast planning concepts together in one very unique development which was Wonderland Hill. We did this without giving much thought to the economic practicalities of scale. For example, Northstar Court is a small cluster of 35 single family mostly courtyard homes surrounding a central park with a small club house a swimming pool and tennis courts, and surrounded on three sides by natural open space with pathways that connect to other section of the Wonderland Hill neighborhood. Significant diversity in affordability was achieved by including both larger single family homes on standard sized lots with views over Boulder with small lot patio homes on the open space. It is one of a kind to have such a small group of only 35 households plus 10 associate members supporting common facilities which typically would serve neighborhoods of several hundred homes. We repeated this formula of cluster homes surrounding recreation facilities in two of the later phases of Wonderland Hill but soon learned we could include more housing units for each recreation facility. Partially to hedge our bets and partially because we loved the thought of living in this small unique neighborhood, Bruce Downing, Jimmy Roswell and I each decided to build homes on the court for our families.

My wife Brownie and I raised our daughter Shari in our house at 500 Northstar Court, and ended up remodeling the home several times while living in it for 35 years, until we moved into the Silver Sage cohousing community 10 years ago. Although the house was featured in a color spread in the Boulder Camera as an example of the new modern of the 1970s, I was always trying to improve on its design through creative additions, and was reluctant to part with Northstar until Shari offered to buy it and live in it with her family.

Wonderland turned out to be a long slog, with the addition of another 120 acres surrounding Wonderland Lake and many phases of development including over 500 homes of various types, three recreation centers, and even a small commercial village center, all at a low density of only 3.25 housing units per acre. (significantly lower than Martin Acres or Table Mesa neighborhoods).

The Wonderland Hill neighborhood is truly one of a kind that is not likely ever to be repeated. At a very low density it contained a high percentage of small more affordable homes, many of them attached, and has large sections of private and public open space separating its clustered sub-neighborhoods. It is literally a series of small neighborhoods built around a park and open space that is connected to a major portion of Boulders foothills open space. It was originally planned and approved by the city for a density of 6.5 units per acre with a variety of housing types in clusters separated by greenways.

Neighborhood resistance, ironically mostly supported by home owners living outside the city above the blue line and the proposed development, forced a lawsuit, a year of negotiation, and eventual re-approval of the initial 120 acre development with half as many housing units. At that point it would have been more profitable to change the Wonderland plan to a development of exclusive single family homes on large lots. However, we were stubbornly unwilling to forgo the progressive neighborhood design with denser clusters of economically and design diverse housing types, greenways, and community facilities, and chose to go ahead with a modified version of the original plan clustering some sections at as high well over 10 units per acre and incorporating unprecedented amounts of open space between clusters. Fortunately we were supported by the more progressive Boulder housing market that responded well to the attractiveness of the many unique features of the Wonderland Hill neighborhood.

Wonderland Hill in North Boulder, and Shanahan Ridge and Devils Thumb in South Boulder, were all conceived and started in the late 1960s, and were the first Boulder examples of larger scale planned neighborhoods representing progressive West Coast planning concepts with mixed housing types and significant quantities of public and community open space and community recreation facilities.

Throughout the next twenty plus years, as Wonderland Hill and the early larger South Boulder developments were built out, a variety of other smaller residential developments were built in Boulder employing many of the same progressive planning concepts. Several were designed by Downing Leach and Associates and developed by Wonderland Hill development Company on infill sites in North Boulder, sometimes in partnership with other local developers and builders. These include Wonderland North, The Cottages, Willow Springs, Parkside, and Winding Trail Village.

### **Section 3 - Affordable housing in Boulder – my experience**

Early attempts to provide affordable housing in the city of Boulder focused on rental housing for low-income families with children and affordable senior housing. Both types were developed and managed by the newly formed Boulder Housing Authority. In the late 1960s and early 70s we had an interest in designing and building small affordable and energy efficient single family homes. We designed a series of three and four bedroom homes ranging in size from 960 to 1500 square feet that were built to more progressive environmental standards of the day using optimum value engineering framing techniques. We built several of these homes on economical lots in South Boulder and at Twin Lakes in the Gun barrel area and sold them at prices starting below \$20,000.

In the early 70s we designed and built a small neighborhood of 14 single family homes on a two acre site in the 1700 block of Hawthorne Avenue in Boulder and sold it turnkey to the Boulder Housing Authority (BHA) at an average price of about \$19,000 per home. It included three and four bedroom versions of these early affordable house designs around a common play yard for children. It was our first project done in partnership with the BHA, and is still owned and managed by them as affordable family housing. Alvarado Village, a similar community of inexpensive single-family homes with common areas was built by Wonderland Hill Development Company in the Martin Acres area of South Boulder on an infill site owned by the Catholic Arch Diocese a few years later.

Leach and Arnold and later Wonderland each built larger scale multifamily rental projects for or in partnership with the Boulder Housing Authority. The Canyon Point project with 81 units of senior housing, is located on Walnut Avenue at 8<sup>th</sup> Street, was built by Leach & Arnold Engineering & Construction in the 70s. Bridgewalk on Table Mesa Drive in South Boulder was designed by Downing Leach and built by Wonderland in the 1980s. It was Boulders first public private partnership for affordable housing. It contains 131 units of relatively upscale apartment units of mixed income rental housing that was to be managed by the housing authority for a thirty year period and then converted to condominiums and sold as affordable condominiums at a profit for the housing authority and the private investors. The housing authority eventually bought out the private investors during an economic downturn and still owns and manages the project as mixed income rentals.

Affordable housing in the Wonderland Hill development was addressed with smaller, lower priced attached townhomes in the Wonderland 3rd & 4th filings. Prices in the late 1970s started below \$30,000 for the smaller two bedroom units. Although most of these homes have since increased in value by more than tenfold, they still remain an attractive moderate income Boulder housing choice.

The Cottages on Wonderland Lake a development of 35 small unique detached homes were designed by Downing Leach and built by Wonderland to address the city's need for affordable single family homes for families. It is on what first appeared to be a physically and politically marginally developable site at the northeast corner of Wonderland Lake surrounded by city open space and having a high water table that prevented basements. We negotiated with the city to get approval for affordable single family homes at a density of about 10 units per acre. The project is unique on several fronts. The site plan offered good south orientation and the small homes were designed and built to be energy efficient with both active and passive solar components. The common vehicle access serving the homes was built as a pedestrian street using, a new for Boulder, European woonerf style pedestrian street concept that the city accepted as a public street.

Winding Trail Village a planned neighborhood located west of 28<sup>th</sup> Street at Palo Park Avenue was developed in the 1980s by a partnership between Wonderland, Markel Homes and others. It was one of the first new developments that the city required inclusion of deed restricted affordable housing units or cash in lieu payment for them. Wonderland's affordability requirement was met through the inclusion of solar townhomes that were integrated with similar market rate units and sold at lower prices to qualified buyer's based on income and asset limitations. The affordable townhomes were designed and built with the same energy efficient features as the rest of the units they were part of.

This integration of deed restricted affordable homes with market rate units can work reasonably well for builders and developers of townhomes and condominiums providing the market rate units are moderately priced and designed for home ownership to appeal to middle income Boulder households that could not afford the rising cost of single family detached housing in the city. They can be part of a larger planned neighborhood like Winding Trail with mixed housing types and community features.

### **Cohousing and Affordability**

Because cohousing has to date been such a small and little understood segment of the American housing market, cohousing groups in order to grow their membership have sought to be as economically inclusive as possible within a home ownership model. This has led to wide variances in size and prices of homes in the typical cohousing neighborhood. In early projects, where there was no affordable housing either subsidized or required, the price variances were still often over 100% of the lowest priced units. Many cohousing communities have helped their capable lower income members assisting them in getting into the neighborhood in creative ways ranging from renting portions of homes to outright economic assistance in purchasing.

Wonderland Hill Development Company has completed three cohousing projects in the city of Boulder and currently has a fourth under construction. Unlike most current new residential development in the city we have intentionally mixed a high percentage of permanently affordable housing units into each small community. These communities have relatively large price variances between the affordable units and the market rate units. In the Wild Sage community the affordable units were priced in a range between \$80,000 to \$200,000 and the market rate units were from \$ 275,000 to \$450,000. At the Silver Sage seniors community the range was from \$125,000 to \$800,000. This extreme economic diversity has caused few real problems to date, and in general has added to the richness and quality of life for all community members.

The most significant economic issue for the affordable units in cohousing has been the relatively high home owners association dues due to the shared maintenance cost of the more extensive common

facilities provide in the communities, and the more rigorous monthly reserve allocation for building repairs and replacement that is required for condominium ownership and often overlooked in other types of home ownership. The real value of the common facilities plus the more connected neighborhood is a tradeoff that affordable home buyers have to consider when choosing a cohousing unit over another affordable home that may be available.

## Section 4 - Cohousing

### Cohousing - Real Intentional Community at the Small Neighborhood Level

The cohousing concept started in Denmark in the 1970s when a young architect with a growing family and limited housing budget gathered together a group of his friends and proposed that they jointly design and build a planned neighborhood of small homes with one large common house that they could all share. The idea was a success in Denmark and Jan Gudmand-Hoyer went on to build his architectural career doing cohousing type neighborhoods in Denmark and Northern Europe.

The concept was brought to America by Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett who were young architects from California that studied and lived in Danish cohousing for a year in the mid 1980s. When they returned to Berkeley they wrote and self-published the book that launched the cohousing movement in the USA and Canada, *Cohousing: a Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*. They established McCamant & Durrett Architects, a firm that specializes in a unique participatory design method for creating cohousing communities. This helped to enable some of the earliest cohousing communities get started on the West Coast. Groups of motivated potential home buyers who had read the book would get together with goal of developing their own cohousing neighborhood, and would consult with the architects that started the movement.

### Nyland

One of the early cohousing groups in Colorado started in Boulder. Their membership grew rapidly to the point where they were soon looking for a suitable building site for their dream community. The founding members of the Nyland cohousing group were inspired by the writings of Christopher Alexander in his seminal architecture book *A Pattern Language*. They had visions of a collaborative neighborhood, possibly a rural utopia of affordable housing and a community farm where food could be raised and consumed by the community. They also wanted it to be as close to Boulder and to be as energy efficient and sustainable as possible. All are typical goals for cohousing groups even to this day and are nearly impossible to include in any one project.

The Nyland group got close. They had roughly 20 household members, mostly proactive relatively highly educated and talented individuals, with adult ages ranging from late 20s to mid 70s, with plenty of variety and talent in the group including architects, a builder, and multiple educators, therapists, artisans, business owners, and even a retired military couple. When I met them they had found a site adjacent to the town of Lafayette about 10 miles east of Boulder. It was a former 42 acre farm that happened to set next to the city of Lafayette water plant with great views of the front range of the Rockies. They were able to get the site under contract but were struggling with how to best go about the design and building process, and how to put together the necessary financing. They named their community after the previous owners of the farm and the fact that Nyland in Danish translated as new land.

The Nyland group's experience was typical for the early pioneering American cohousing groups, most of which struggled to find suitable sites and raise the cash necessary to tie up the site and pay for the design and get the necessary government approvals. The ones that succeeded had to attract sufficient community members with the capability of investing significant sums in their project at substantial risk.

In 1989 my friend Ed trunk, a fellow homebuilder and funding founding member of Nyland, approached me with the idea that I might be interested in helping Colorado first cohousing community developed a project. He thought cohousing and I might be a nice fit together because I had developed other planned communities in Boulder. I had also done innovative solar and energy efficient housing in the late 70s and early 80s, including collaborating with the Department of Energy to the tune of \$250,000 in solar grants. All of this played well for members of the cohousing community that later became the Nyland cohousing community.

When Ed described cohousing which included a strong commitment to green building and living sustainably I was intrigued. I immediately went out and bought McCamant and Durrett's book. This idea seemed like a breakthrough in developing a market for more environmentally progressive housing. I was eager to work with the cohousing group and find a method to develop their community. Maybe they could become a model for other similar communities. It was also clear to me that cohousing was very much resident driven and in the spirit of some of Christopher Alexander's writing, a group of people wanting to design and build their own neighborhood, and to do a better job than most conventional builders were doing.

As a custom home builder, I've observed that just designing and building one's own house is a monumental endeavor that few people have the energy to even attempt. Of those that do, many are tortured for years by the process. The decision-making alone is enough to break up a good marriage. Trying to do this for a whole neighborhood seemed like an overwhelming task for a diverse group of households, and the Nyland group was just coming to this realization after optioning their land. They had decided to seek outside professional help. After I began working with them, I began to realize the power of community to change the way Americans live, moving us in a more sustainable direction.

At Wonderland we developed a method to organize and finance a cohousing community based on our experience developing smaller neighborhood communities and custom homes, and first implemented it for the Nyland community. In 1991 Nyland became the first completed cohousing community in Colorado, and fourth in the U.S.

We annexed the Nyland farm into Lafayette at a density of one unit per acre with water to be provide by Lafayette and group septic systems for sewer, but with a whole separate system of sewer lines for when the city could serve the area. The 42 housing units with a central common house were clustered on 12 acres with balance of the land left as open space and for future community gardens. Balancing the affordability goals of the group with their environmental goals was a challenge, but in the end the community was declared the "most energy efficient new development in Colorado" in 1991 when it was completed.

Because Nyland was the a first of its kind of housing project, there were some challenges in obtaining the financing for the project. The group recruited the buyers and raised the initial cash to buy the land and pay for initial design costs. Wonderland managed the design and construction and put together the construction financing using a unique risk and reward system. To create the required equity in the project we established a model to share and mitigate the risk wherein buyers were able to use their



investments in the project as their down payments on their homes. We built a 10% contingency profit into the project budget, which was shared at completion between Wonderland as the developer and project manager, the outside investors, and the community HOA as extra funding for their common amenities.

The construction lender, a local savings and loan bank, provided the construction loan which was guaranteed by Wonderland, myself, and some of the initial members. The lender was very cautious because of the unusual design features of the project including a large shared common house and parking that was far removed from many of the housing units. *(A basic tenant of cohousing is for parking to be at the edge of the community and for residents to walk on pedestrian ways to their homes seeing and communing with neighbors on the way, and using carts or wagons for carrying groceries, kids and other necessary items. At Nyland the homes furthest from the parking sold for the highest prices because of views and other factors.)*

After Nyland was completed, this unique model for financing of cohousing developments was refined by Wonderland together with other cohousing professionals, including Katie McCamant and Chuck Durrett, to create a unique partnering model that included not only the financing but also a community process for design and construction input. We branded the whole process as our “streamlined method for cohousing development”. This model has since been used in one form or another for all the cohousing projects that Wonderland has developed.

As Wonderland completed Nyland other groups began to come to us to partner on their communities using our streamlined method of development. These early groups included Harmony Village in Golden and Greyrock Cohousing in Fort Collins and several more that followed and were developed by Wonderland in Colorado, California, Arizona, and Washington.

## **Section 5 - New Urbanism**

### **An Architecture of Community Meets Pocket Neighborhoods and Cohousing:**

New urbanism is a neighborhood design concept originated by architects in response to a lack of neighborhood community in the traditional suburban tract developments. It is an attempt to create better functioning neighborhoods designed to encourage community among neighbors through attractive walkable streets, small parks and other features, and housing designed so it addresses the street with front porches, placing garages and cars in rear alleys. It is also accomplished by the use of higher densities and mixed housing types to generate more neighborhood diversity and activity. Neighborhood focal points are created by specially located and designed buildings, pocket parks and mixed-use commercial centers, providing destinations for pedestrians and incentives to walk in the neighborhood and commune with neighbors.

New urbanism is a design-based solution to a lack of community in residential neighborhoods. This is driven by the belief that if neighbors are closer connected, and have deeper relationships, their quality of life improves. Cohousing adds another dimension to new urbanism in that it is not only design based, but also more intentionally socially based. Cohousing residents strive to create a social community with their immediate neighbors as well as with their larger neighborhood.

*(Although American culture has a strong bias towards individualism and social privacy the reality is the country was founded and developed primarily through communities of people coming together discovering how they could live together under common basic principles of tolerance and democracy ).*

It is interesting to note that, Christopher Alexander, the author of *A Pattern Language* and *The Timeless Way of Building*, Peter Calthorpe, one of the founders of the new urban movement, and Katie McCamant and Charles Durrett all lived and worked in Berkley and were in a sense collaborating in the discussions and evolution of community based architecture and planning. In the 1970s and 80s Berkley and the University of California became a sort of “Silicon Valley” for a neighborhood design movement that has spread throughout the country)

### **Hearthstone & Highlands Garden Village**

Highlands Garden Village (HGV) was a large infill mixed use development on the former Elitch Gardens amusement park site in northwest Denver. It was acquired and being planned by one of Denver’s most progressive and civic minded real estate development firms - Perry Rose and Company. Peter Calthorpe, who was familiar with cohousing and happened to be Jonathan Rose’s brother in law was the planner for the development. I knew Chuck Perry and had helped introduce him to my former and now employee owned home building company, Wonderland Homes, that ended up being the builder for most of the for sale housing in HGV. Chuck knew that his partner Jonathan Rose, a prominent developer of innovative affordable housing in New York City, had an interest in cohousing.

I believed cohousing could be a very positive element within a larger new urbanist neighborhood like HGV which was designed to promote community among neighbors. Chuck Perry agreed and found a block of townhomes on the approved site plan that could accommodate about a 30 unit townhome style cohousing community with a common house. The Hearthstone Community was the first attempt in the U.S. to integrate cohousing into a new urbanist planned neighborhood.

A small neighborhood pocket park equipped for children’s play was located adjacent to the cohousing site, and the neighborhood community gardens were just across the street. The common house would be located at a prominent T intersection where it could be a key building in the neighborhood. The site contained less than 2 acres and the zoning required that all of the living units would have to be town house style with no stacked units. Creating the typical open space between rows of living units would be a challenge.

Hearthstone became our first project integrating the new urbanist model of street and alley arrangements with the cohousing model of units facing the common house with privacy on the rear side. With cohousing it’s also typical to place the kitchens on the community side of the units with the theory that people will be spending more time in their kitchen than any other room, especially when they may be in a more sociable mode and thus can see each other walking back and forth and can more easily communicate visually.

In the Hearthstone site plan we rationalized that by creating two rows of townhouse living units between the alley and the street, that the alley side and the street sides of the units would serve as the private side for the cohousing homes, and a central shared green space would be the community side where the kitchens were located. On the alley-side cars were parked off the alley in either garages or in open parking. Small private backyards were planned between the parking and the private sides of the unit. In some cases the units had attached garages with private living decks above them and no back

yard. We thus created a new model for cohousing site planning that was consistent with traditional new urbanist lot and block planning.

We theorized that by putting a cohousing community within a new urbanist neighborhood, the cohousing community would serve as a catalyst for promoting connections between neighbors at deeper levels than new urban design alone would. The cohousing common house would serve the whole HGV neighborhood by being one of the largest gathering spaces in the neighborhood and available for functions for the entire neighborhood – not just the cohousing users. We didn't know for sure how this theory would play out with the cohousing residents but we believed it would work based on the premise that cohousing tends to attract the most community minded individuals who are willing to work at building neighborhood community and see the value in it. The Hearthstone community members did not disappoint us. Their common house has served as a hub for the larger neighborhood and their energy and enthusiasm for neighborhood community building has led them to be leaders in the larger HGV neighborhood including the management of the adjacent neighborhood gardens and other functions designed into this progressive new urbanist neighborhood.

### **Holiday neighborhood**

The far north district of Boulder, with a patch work of underdeveloped county enclaves, was affectionately known to many as “Dogpatch” due to its somewhat eclectic and variable quality of development with everything from older light industrial and a strip club to rural residential. In the 1990s it was subjected to a City sponsored planning process that involved bringing the residents and property owners of the area together along with Boulder civic leaders to work through a multi-year process with the goal of creating a plan for the future development of this relatively underdeveloped portion of the city. The planning process was led by Victor Dover, a prominent new urbanist planner, and the final plans include many of the latest new urban concepts. I served on the North Boulder Steering Committee representing a southern portion of the study area.

The Boulder Housing Authority operating under their development arm Boulder Housing Partners (BHP) was able to put together the financing and support to acquire the largest site in the North Boulder Community Plan, the former Holiday drive in theater site. To the dread of some of Boulder's progressives the site had been lusted for by big box developers with visions of developing the likes of Walmart. BHP reached an agreement with the city that if they would develop it into a progressive new urbanist residential neighborhood that incorporated affordable housing at twice the typical requirement of 20% that the density of the property could be doubled from a gross density of five units per acre to 10 units per acre.

Boulder housing partners chose the local firms of Barrett Steele to do the planning for the project and Coburn Development Company to act as a development consultant for it. Once a plan was created and approved by the city, BHP negotiated with four local design build teams to each do portions of the development with the guideline of meeting the goal of 40% of affordable homes. Boulder is the home for an amazing number of talented residential designers and developers. I was proud that Wonderland was chosen to be part of the local group that developed Holiday and I bet heavily on the project by moving our office and my home into this innovative new neighborhood. The Holiday Neighborhood has become a national model for successful economically integrated residential development.

Having completing the Hearthstone cohousing community and beginning to feel the impending success of it as a model for promoting community within larger new urbanist neighborhoods we began

promoting the idea to new urbanist designers and developers. Wonderland was chosen by BHP to develop a cohousing community on one of the sites in the Holiday neighborhood that became the Wild Sage Community and later negotiated for a second site that became Silver Sage Village.

## **Designs for Community**

Over the past 50 years many creative approaches to neighborhood planning have successfully emerged. Currently popular concepts like New Urbanism seek to create neighborhood community through thoughtful planning and design. Home owner associations (HOAs) are common in these residential neighborhoods and they are required for individually owned multifamily or attached housing. These HOAs have the capability of being a major influence on neighborhood community, but in many cases are poorly established by developers and not managed in a way that connects neighbors in a mutually beneficial way.

In our cohousing work we emphasize the important connection between neighborhood community and sense of place, quality of life, and sustainability. When people share meaningful common spaces they get connected as neighbors at a deeper level. Ross Chapin's *Pocket Neighborhoods* illustrates the elements of residential architecture and site design that facilitate real neighborhood community. Shared common spaces and pocket neighborhoods are not new design concepts, but understanding how, when done right, they generate aliveness and sense of order driven by community is the breakthrough in Chapin's book. New housing developments and mixed use neighborhoods as well as existing neighborhoods benefit in many ways from a real sense of community and place. These benefits range from higher real estate values to greater security and more social, environmental and economic sustainability.

The challenge is how to best create and stimulate meaningful community building in both new and existing neighborhoods. Although many new neighborhoods and housing developments are designed to encourage community with walkable streets, parks, and mixed uses, real community with deeper and supportive relationships between neighbors often takes a long time to develop and usually requires effort and commitment by proactive residents working together for the betterment of the neighborhood.

The cohousing concept not only incorporates valuable common facilities that are shared by immediate neighbors, but also includes significant and broad based resident participation in the design, development, and management of their small residential community. This attracts the culturally creative individuals who are willing to take risk and put forth energy to create together a better and more sustainable place to live. Cohousing communities have proven to influence their larger neighborhoods in positive ways. They have the organizational discipline and tools to create positive connections and to transform conflict in the neighborhood. The cohousing residents often play leadership roles in the larger neighborhood. The cohousing common house adds value to the neighborhood as a central meeting space and a place for people to connect around common interests. Thus the cohousing community provides a healthy, rapidly sprouting, and valuable seed of community for their larger neighborhoods.

The cohousing movement has generated a great deal of expertise in good neighborhood community building and collaborative decision-making process. This is important in building relationships and capitalizing on the diversity in a neighborhood. The Holiday Neighborhood in Boulder and Highlands Garden Village in Denver are good examples of how cohousing communities have added real and

valuable social capital. Both of these very innovative New Urban and mixed income neighborhoods have cohousing communities included within them. In both cases the cohousing residents and their common facilities have made significant contributions to sustainability in their larger neighborhoods.

### **Cohousing, Sustainability & The New Normal**

Global warming, human consumption and financial meltdowns are driving an accelerated interest in human sustainability, both globally and locally. Local community driven transition efforts are resulting in farmers markets and urban agriculture reemerging in American Culture as examples that resonate positively with us, drawing us in emotionally and connecting us in ways that generate some of the valuable social capital that is needed to shift to a more sustainable culture. There is a long way to go to reconnect with the very local tribal benefits in terms of social capital that have been the foundation of human survival and advancement prior to the evolution of our modern independent and materialistic western culture. How we live, our homes and neighborhoods have largely been designed and built for economy and for the convenience of the automobile with a low concern for sustainability and the value of community based social capital.

David Wann in his book *The New Normal* points out that: *“We usually assume that huge challenges can only be finessed with technical, political, and economic fixes, but we forget that all three are programmed by human culture, and it is there that we can leverage change most quickly and effectively... “humans are hardwired for cooperation...” “We need to take care of one another and act cooperatively or we won’t make it. Therefore we’ve always valued trust, resourcefulness, authenticity, and the integrity of our leaders. Security, safety, and social connections are as valuable now as they were sixty thousand years ago when our ancestors left Africa and began to explore and settle the rest of the planet.”*

Writings and books like Wann’s and Bill McKibben’s *Deep Economy* and *Eaarth* are helping to provide the vision of cultural change toward a more sustainable lifestyle. Local groups, communities, are forming around visions of greater local autonomy and sustainability.

Over the past 25 years the cohousing movement has learned a great deal about neighborhood community building and creating social capital. Intentional participation among neighbors is the key. Intentional neighborhood community building, as practiced in cohousing communities, creates deeper relationships between neighbors. When neighbors are connected and work together on a shared vision of sustainability through community, they benefit from their diversity in knowledge, skills, and experience. Neighborhood community building can be very satisfying, but it does require a significant commitment of time and effort, as well as a tolerance for compromise and collaboration. It may not have the quick and easy satisfaction of many material and entertainment attractions in our modern culture, but there is good evidence that these intentional neighborhood communities do generate greater happiness and social capital for their residents and their larger neighborhoods, and for a sustainable American Culture.

The kind of cultural shift that Wann, McKibben, and others are promoting needs to start at the grass-root level, with groups of individuals committed to lifestyle change that influence each other and the larger communities they live and work in. Governments, local and national, large institutions, and large corporations need to support the change to a more sustainable way of living. However, as Wann points out, in the freedom based culture we Americans cherish, these larger institutions will not likely be able to drive the change fast enough.