

Value in Sustainable Neighborhood Community

Jim Leach, Sept. 19, 2010

Housing in America is in a state of transition driven by the current housing led economic crisis, together with the sense of a looming environmental crisis that requires major shifts in the energy consumption and environmental impact of buildings and neighborhoods. These conditions are leading to a heightened interest in the sustainability of our homes and residential communities. For example, innovative home designers and builders are currently seeking a goal of net zero energy use in homes and neighborhood developments.

Creative designers and developers are also generating progressive neighborhood plans with higher densities and attempts to promote community in the neighborhood through more walkable streets, common open spaces, and a variety of residential unit types and sizes and mixed uses. This is intended to lead to a greater sense of community in a neighborhood which in turn leads to a more socially and economically sustainable neighborhood and local culture. That is, assuming that the occupants of the neighborhood connect with each other in a way that supports a positive neighborhood culture, and that public and common elements of the neighborhood are cared for and maintained with a goal of sustainability.

A missing or often weak link in these more sustainable development models is an intentional attempt to create stronger community through deliberate and facilitated social programs that connect residents and even local businesses in ways that encourage local responsibility and efforts toward common goals of increased social, economic, and environmental sustainability to the benefit of all.

This concept is mostly foreign to our modern American residential lifestyle where each family unit is considered entitled to some version of their own castle independent from neighbors except as absolutely necessary. However, the concept of intentionally collaborating with neighbors is consistent with how humans have lived together in local communities, tribes, for eons and has been an important part of American culture in the past.

As Americans wean themselves away from the unsustainable components of materialism that are relative to their housing choices, other values are beginning to be rediscovered and emerge, many of them relevant on a neighborhood level. Some of these values like security and sense of place are obvious. An attractive neighborhood environment engenders a sense of place which resonates with us and feels more secure, especially if we have participated with our neighbors in helping to create it. It will also create higher economic values and feelings of pride of ownership.

Other values, less obvious, require experiencing and participating in an intentional neighborhood community. These values include joyfulness, compassion, generosity, mindfulness and personal growth. And, of course there is the satisfaction in living a more sustainable lifestyle at a neighborhood level. The challenge for developers of housing and for residents in new or existing neighborhood is how to create a sustainable neighborhood culture that promotes all of these real values.

From cohousing we have identified three areas where residents experience value and sustainability when living in a well connected intentional neighborhood community. These areas can contribute significantly to benefit the health, welfare and the lifestyle of the residents, and empower them to gain more from the use of fewer resources and to positively influence the larger society. These elements of value are the following:

1. **Social capital;** All the quality of life enhancements that community can bring including; having neighbors who are close and caring friends; a nurturing and healthy environment for children and elders. Cohousing communities have proven to generate significant internal social capital and often anchor the success of their larger neighborhoods providing proactive residents and common facilities which facilitate social capital and support for the larger community.
2. **A sense of place:** Shared spaces created and cared for together, and balanced with attractive private spaces, have special meaning and contribute to higher value through sense of place. By being part of an intentional, organized, and effective effort to create a better and more attractive neighborhood, a cohousing community deliberately creates a sense of place that resonates with its residents and the surrounding community.
3. **A sense of greater purpose:** Collaborating with neighbors to live a more sustainable and more satisfying lifestyle together. Cohousing neighborhoods are models of environmental, economic and social sustainability attracting proactive individuals who want to do something about the welfare of the earth and the human race through their lifestyle choices.

These elements are greatly enhanced through the process and practice of community. When a group of people living in near proximity to each other makes the effort to get to know each other and work together through good community process, they are able to harvest value in these important life fulfilling areas. The value comes from finding common ground and working together towards common goals and visions while taking advantage of the diversity in backgrounds, knowledge, skills and interests in the neighborhood group.

In working with cohousing over the past 20 years as well as living in a cohousing community cohousing residents and professionals have learned a great deal about how to create higher value by facilitating intentional neighborhood community, and about the components of

neighborhood design and social and economic structure that lead to higher levels of social satisfaction and sustainability.

These components include:

1. A neighborhood design that encourages social contact through a balance of private and common living spaces;
2. Diversity of residents; economic, social, age and life experiences;
3. Shared neighborhood governance responsibility; consensus based decision making;
4. Neighbor responsibility for the management and maintenance of valuable common facilities;
5. Deliberate and regular meetings and events that generate deeper social relationships between neighbors;
6. Fostering a culture of support and caring for all in the neighborhood;
7. Encouragement and support for a more environmentally sustainable lifestyle that is also more socially satisfying;

In the context of a living environment like a neighborhood or community, social capital springs from the collective energy, creativity, and diversity of skills and knowledge among neighbors. It is facilitated by the intentional cooperative efforts of neighbors and by good community decision making process as well as satisfying, caring and loving social relationships.

Social capital is generated when neighbors connect and work together creating a better living environment. It is the social glue which connects neighbors in a mutually benefiting way to enable more beautiful places, more satisfying and purposeful lives and a more sustainable society.

Building and creating things of value and beauty like gardens, art and crafts, and furnishings are a fulfilling part of enhancing ones living environment. When done cooperatively social capital is generated. Benefits include: more friends and an enriched lifestyle and a more environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable lifestyle. In summary an intentionally collaborative neighborhood generates a social synergy that facilitates purposeful life and a greater sense of place leading to a more sustainable society.

We often measure success in our American culture by our degree of wealth, fame, and accomplishments. We talk about our GNP, (Gross National Product), but seldom mention our GHF, (Gross Happiness Factor). Over the past 20 years cohousing has learned how community can play an important role in our happiness factor, as individuals and as a culture.

Cohousing: "building a more sustainable world, one neighborhood at a time"

COHOUSING RESOURCES



National Cohousing Association – www.cohousing.org

Cohousing – A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves
By Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett

The Senior Cohousing Handbook– A community approach to independent living
By Charles Durrett

Pocket Neighborhoods- Creating small scale community in a large scale world
By Ross Chapin

Reinventing Community – Stories from the walkways of cohousing
By David Wann

Superbia! – 31ways to create sustainable neighborhoods
By Dan Chiras and David Wann

Head, Heart & Hands - Lessons in community building
By Shari Leach

the not so big life – making room for what really matters
by Sarah Susanka

Rightsizing Your Life – Simplifying your surroundings while keeping what matters most
By CIJI Ware