Characterization Study of Urban Cohousing Communities

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The study proposes to characterize urban cohousing communities by developing case studies of cohousing developments located in urban settings. The goal of this research is to describe these communities and to identify the social issues that define the urban cohousing model. It aims to answer the questions whether cohousing is an urban phenomenon, and if so, what are some of its defining characteristics. This study reveals the lack of a precise definition of the term “urban” but does begin to assign cohousing communities into two categories: urban and non-urban. From this study, three defining characteristics of urban cohousing communities were found: building compactness (7.4 units per acre compared to 4 units per acre), the diverse/specific demographics (diversity of age, singles/couples membership), and the relatively large common house square footage (3,444.7 sq. ft.). Future work should define the term “urban” by population density and land boundaries in order to accurately define urban from suburban/rural communities.

INTRODUCTION

A cohousing community is defined as a resident-created and -operated collaborative, pro-environmental neighborhood characterized by its intention to encourage community. Some unique architectural features of a cohousing community consist of a central pathway connecting the units (see Figure 1); a common terrace facing the units with ample seating; nodes along the walkways; front porches on the units that are typically 7’ x 9’; kitchens on the common side of the units; rear-facing private unit spaces; and a common house with a kitchen, dining space, media room, laundry room, sitting room, workshop, craft room, music room, guest rooms, etc. that can be seen from every unit (Durrett & McCamant, 2007).

Figure 1. Daybreak Cohousing, breezeway for socializing. Source: http://blog.oregonlive.com/pdxgreen/2008/10/_cohousing.html.
The cohousing movement originated in the 1960s in Scandinavia with Jan Gudmand-Hoyer, a Scandinavian architect who saw the need for a new housing option (Lindsey, 2008). Cohousing was brought to the United States in the early 1980s by architects Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant after they conducted research in cohousing in Scandinavia (McCamant & Durrett, 2007). In 2009 in the U.S., 100 communities had been completed, 20 communities were under construction, and 120–150 cohousing communities were in the planning stages (Durrett, 2009). Today, there are over 229 completed/forming communities throughout the United States (see Figure 2).

In the United States, the creation of suburbia, where private residences are designed to focus on self, has resulted in an absence of community (Miles, 2008; McCamant & Durrett, 2007; Meltzer, 2005). The prevalence of suburbia also leads to urban sprawl (defined as low-density, car-dependent development beyond the edge of service and employment areas (Environmental Protection Agency, 2003)), which causes loss of farmland, loss of wildlife habitat, increased air pollution, increased water use and pollution, increased energy consumption, and social fragmentation (American Farmland Trust, 2009). This type of development is wasteful: from 1982 to 2007, the United States population grew by 30 percent while developed land increased 57 percent (Clean Water Action Council, 2011).

The concept of cohousing diminishes this type of development and creates community through the discussed architectural elements related to intentional neighborhood design. Additionally, the community compactness and sustainability of cohousing prevents urban sprawl. However, throughout cohousing literature, the concept of cohousing as a whole is reiterated but there is an absence of defined characteristics of cohousing types, especially urban cohousing. Urban cohousing should be characterized because cohousing cannot be further understood as a concept to become an American standard of development without solid characterization. Further, characterization will define a sustainable model for compact development.

While characterizing the urban cohousing model, the study aims to answer the questions: Is cohousing an urban...
phenomenon? What are some of its defining characteristics?

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

Within the literature, cohousing communities are characterized as environmentally friendly (Bang, 2005) and family oriented (Christian, 2003). They are also an example of smart growth development: they mix land uses; use compact neighborhood design; preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and environmental areas; and strengthen and direct development in existing communities (Benfield & Terris, 2011). Additionally, cohousing communities are intensive and democratic and provide a sense of community. Fenster (2000) believes the cohousing organizing principle “is to resolve the competing desires for the inclusivity of the community and the exclusivity of privacy. The community serves as the notion of a greater collective ‘we’ that can be invoked while hanging wet clothes on a common line and represents an ongoing goal, something towards which cohousing enables its participants to ‘make a major step.’ Privacy, in terms of control over an individual’s or family’s ‘private life,’ as well as the community’s collective control over the use of its land, represents the core of selfhood.” Cohousing attempts to correct and eliminate isolation within our current communities, the growth of private residences within urban sprawl, and crime in the inner city neighborhood.

Within cohousing literature, there are limited references on the topic of urban cohousing, especially in the Cohousing Listserve, an internet data base that connects cohousing residents, researchers, and advocates through an email style format and posts on average 3–4 postings per day. Also, the pioneers of American cohousing, McCamman and Durrett, do not make the distinction between rural and urban cohousing, nor is it mentioned anywhere else.

Throughout cohousing and non-cohousing literature, the term urban area is as “4 units or more per acre” (Cohousing Directory, 2008). This definition coincides with the 2010 United States Census, which defines urban area as “a densely populated area where 50,000 people or more live” (United States Census, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was collected and analyzed through a literature review of most studies about cohousing in the United States. Data collection methods also included a content analysis of the Cohousing Listserve and the Cohousing Directory, available from the Cohousing Association of the United States, and firsthand information gathered through participation in the 2010 National Cohousing Conference in Boulder, Colorado. Within this study, outliers with 20+ acres were not included in the common house square feet data, the community unit size data, the community acreage data, and the community member size data due to their location outside of the city and their agrarian focus.

RESULTS

Through the analysis of the 2011 Cohousing Directory and the use of the United States Census’ definition of urban, the 229 cohousing communities in the United States were defined as either urban (113) or non-urban (229). Basic counts and percentages were used in an attempt to answer the research questions.

Results suggest that many communities featured in the Cohousing Directory claimed to be urban. However, when paralleled with the United States Census definition, these communities could be best categorized as non-urban (a populated area consisting of 49,999 people or less located adjacent to urban areas). Similarly, many communities that claimed to be non-urban could be clearly defined as urban. This suggests that cohousing communities most likely use subjective criteria to classify whether they are urban or not (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Urban cohousing communities measured by number of communities.

Data collected in this study indicates that cohousing communities defined as urban are between 1 unit per 0.1 acre and 7.4 units per acre. This indicates that urban cohousing communities are high-density developments that exceed the Cohousing Listserve statement that an urban community is “4 units per acre” (Fisk, 2008), and aligns well with the corresponding United States Census definition (see Figures 4 and 5).
Data also reveals that the average urban cohousing unit houses one to two occupants. This implies that most cohousing households are either single adults or couples (see Figure 6). The urban cohousing common house is similar in square feet to that of the non-urban. This implies that the common house size does not depend on the size of the community site or the demographics of the differing community type. An urban and non-urban common house is usually between 2000 and 4000 square feet (see Figures 7 and 8). Additional general statistics for the urban cohousing communities reveal that they are not culturally diverse (residents are 91% Caucasian) and are age diverse (residents range from 0–80 years).
Figure 6. Community member size measured by number of members.

Figure 7. Common house square feet (urban) measured in units of square feet.

Figure 8. Common house square feet (non-urban) measured in units of square feet.
CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals the lack of a precise definition of the term “urban.” The urban definition is insufficient due to the absence of space parameters (urban is a densely populated area that consists of 50,000 people or more within an undefined area unit). Without a clear land boundary, agrarian/rural communities can be considered urban due to their area (city, county) consisting of 50,000 or more people. Though the urban definition is inadequate, it begins to place the cohousing communities of the United States into two separate categories, urban, non-urban, that can be analyzed. Separating the communities into two separate categories answers the question of whether cohousing is an urban phenomenon. Clearly, it is not: out of the 229 communities within the United States, there are only 113 urban communities. However, there still is a need to further categorize each American cohousing community according to an accurate definition of urban, suburban, and rural.

The data collected through this study starts to categorize an urban cohousing community. The building compactness was discovered to be on average 7.4 units per acre, compared to the defined 4 units per acre. The data hinted at the urban cohousing demographics (diversity of age: 0-80 year age scope, singles/couples membership: 1-2 people per unit), which may give insight into future marketing for this type of cohousing community. Furthermore, this study defined urban cohousing by understanding the term “urban,” which contributes toward a better understanding of cohousing as a whole. Future work should define the term “urban” by population density and land boundaries in order to accurately define urban from suburban/rural communities. Additionally, future studies should explore the issues underlying the creation of urban cohousing communities and inform the overall sustainability (solar panels, walkability of the community, amenities, etc.) of each community.

REFERENCES