

## Business

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### Cohousing creates new level of community

Developments mix private living spaces with common areas

By **NANCY SARNOFF**

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A relatively obscure style of living pioneered by the Danes is making its way to Houston.

The concept, called "cohousing," is a type of collaborative housing where private living spaces are combined with common facilities, like courtyards, playgrounds and a common house.

Residents, who help design their communities, watch each other's children, cook group meals, and tend to the grounds themselves — kind of like a commune, but slightly less Bohemian.

A small group of Houstonians has been meeting to discuss developing such a community here.

"We're kind of in the infancy of developing what the possibilities are," said Tom Tompkins, co-owner of a local media communications company who attends cohousing meetings held monthly at a health food restaurant near Montrose.

The group of about 12 was formed as an offshoot of a Leisure Learning class on cohousing. Other members include a lawyer, architects and a professor. Both married and single folks belong.

Tompkins said he likes the concept because he's not interested in living in "conventional ways."

The idea of living near people with similar interests with whom he can socialize is appealing to Tompkins, who's recently divorced and is having a hard time finding the right living situation.

"I'm naturally drawn to buy something, but what I see out there doesn't fit me," he said.

Cohousing developments are usually designed as attached or single-family homes along one or more pedestrian streets or clustered around a courtyard, according to the Boulder, Colo.-based Cohousing Association of the United States.

Most of them accommodate between 20 and 40 households.

The common house is the center of the community. It's where group meals are served, meetings are held and recreational activities take place.

Advocates said there are economic benefits, too.

Units are typically structured as condominiums. And while most cohousing neighborhoods tend to be comparable in price with other homes in the area, residents can have reduced living expenses. Driving expenses can be lower because many social activities occur on site, and a community might have commonly owned equipment such as one lawnmower.

Residents usually pay homeowners' dues, but community work-sharing can offset many costs.

Other defining characteristics of cohousing include:

- **Resident management:** Residents manage and maintain their developments. They help prepare shared meals and develop policies for the community.
- **Nonhierarchical decision making:** Leadership roles exist, but most cohousing groups make their decisions by consensus.
- **No shared community economy:** Occasionally, a resident will be paid for a specific task, but the community is not a source of income for its members.

It's taken a while for the concept to reach Houston. In the U.S., this type of housing is found mostly on the coasts.

Many developments have been started in California, Colorado, Oregon, Washington and Massachusetts.

There are 88 across the country, according to Zev Paiss, co-founder of the Elder Cohousing Network and the former executive director of the Cohousing Association.

Elder cohousing is designed for people 55 and above.

The major difference is in the design. These communities might be more wheelchair accessible, have parking closer to the homes, or have rooms for caregivers or treatment areas.

"The reality is, this conversation is happening all over the place," Paiss said.

In Texas, the concept seems to be farther along outside of Houston.

Paiss said a group in Austin is designing a cohousing project, and land has been identified for one that will cater to seniors in nearby Georgetown.

A group in Dallas has also started looking for sites.

With the millions of baby boomers nearing retirement age, more builders should start taking note of the trend. Paiss said he's already met with home builders in Dallas and Florida.

"They're considering taking this on as an ongoing product they'll build again and again and again," he said.

### More office buildings

Myers, Crow & Saviers is planning two speculative office buildings in Oak Park.

The buildings, to be constructed simultaneously early next year, will be named Oak Park Office Center III and IV and will have 150,000 square feet and 157,200 square feet, respectively.

The buildings, on a 22.8-acre Beltway site near the Westpark Tollway, will have similar designs and can be connected for a single tenant that wants a campus environment.

The developer has already built and leased two buildings in Oak Park.

The Men's Wearhouse initially leased 130,000 square feet for its corporate headquarters in one of the buildings, and it recently took the remaining 76,000 square feet of space there.

Managing director Greg Mondshine said he wants to get the buildings on the ground quickly to take advantage of the momentum in the Westchase submarket.

The area has a 14 percent vacancy rate, according to third-quarter statistics from Grubb & Ellis.

But the company will have competition. Granite Properties is building a 14-story, 310,000-square-foot tower near Richmond and the Beltway.

### One with nature

As the Houston area becomes saturated with golf courses and the communities that surround them, developers are building projects that bring homeowners closer to nature.

A Dallas-based residential development firm is expanding to the Houston area with a new project in Conroe.

Wilbow USA is developing Barton Woods, a 242-acre project that wraps around a 200-acre park.

The project will have 588 lots with direct pedestrian connections to Barton Park, which will have soccer fields, a fishing lake and meandering nature trails through a pine forest.

The company's other Texas projects include a 47-acre parcel near the historic district in McKinney, a recreational-themed community in Prosper, Texas, and a neighborhood in Lancaster that's part of a 1,200-acre district spearheaded by the city to build better homes and neighborhoods.

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