

Seattle a pioneer in "community living" movement

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The information in this article originally published Jan. 26, 2008, was corrected Feb. 3, 2008. The founders of Songaia Cohousing Community in Bothell, are Stan and Carol Crow, and Fred and Nancy Lanphear. The dates

Seattle a pioneer in "community living" movement

By Diana Wurm
Special to The Seattle Times

Kathy and Bill Sellars' home near downtown Seattle gives no hint that they are pioneers in the fast-growing "community living" movement. Inside it looks like a typical, tidy modern condo with hardwood floors, custom bookshelves and paintings.

It's quiet, except for the sound of opera music playing softly in the background as Kathy sips tea.

Outside the unit, though, it's a different world. There is a courtyard with walking paths and benches often filled with people of all ages who seem to know each other quite well.

Welcome to Jackson Place Cohousing, a 27-unit building perched near Rainier Avenue South and South Dearborn Street, where residents become friends who often eat together, manage the building together and share the belief that small is better than sprawl.

"Cohousing means we have an intentional desire to have community," said Kathy Sellars, 80, an early member of the group that began planning Jackson Place back in 1997 and was one of the first occupants when the building was completed in October 2001.

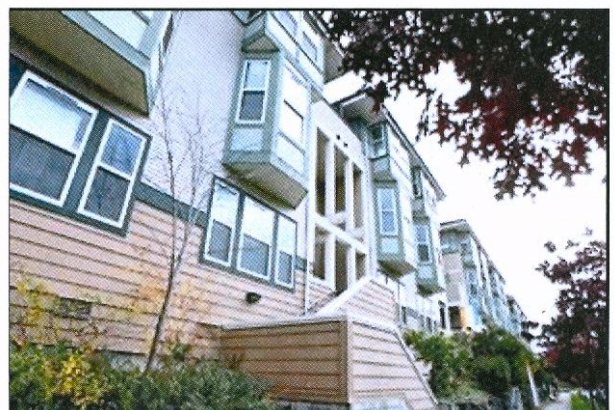
Creating that community wasn't an easy process.



THOMAS JAMES HURST / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Seattle cohousing pioneer Kathy Sellars likes Jackson Place's cozy, community feel.



THOMAS JAMES HURST / THE SEATTLE TIMES
The home of Kathy and Bill Sellars at Jackson Place Cohousing looks like a typical modern condo and provides privacy. The Sellars enjoy having neighbors of all ages and getting visits by children in the morning who may stop by for a cookie and a story read to them.



"At the early meetings, there were explosions and tears," Sellars said. "We've learned over the years how to talk to each other."

The Seattle area is one of the top cohousing centers in the nation, now with about 15 established or forming communities, according to Craig Ragland, executive director of the Cohousing Association of the United States.

There are about 90 across the nation, said Ragland, a retired Microsoft program manager who lives in the Songaia Cohousing Community in Bothell, which was founded by Stan and Carol Crow, and Fred and Nancy Lanphear. NICA's winter meeting is March 8. There also is an informational event Feb. 17 at Jackson Place. Ragland said the cohousing life is a good life

The cohousing movement began in Denmark and spread to the United States in the early 1990s. Word-of-mouth and the Internet has helped fuel its growth. Ragland says that the number of people attending the local informational meetings of the Northwest Intentional Community Association (NICA), held twice a year, tripled from about 40 to 120 in the past year.

NICA's winter meeting is March 8. There also is an informational event Feb. 20 at Jackson Place. Ragland said the cohousing life is a good life.

"You own your own home and it's fully equipped and you have all the privacy you want and all the community you need. Most people have all the privacy they want, but no community," Ragland said. "Most neighbors don't know each other very well, but here I know grandchildren of most of the people and the children all know me and we all know about each other."

The diversity of age in such communities appeals to the Sellars.

"Hey, we don't want to live with old people," Bill Sellars, 75, said with a laugh.

The Sellars enjoy having neighbors of all ages and getting visits by children in the morning who may stop by their unit for a cookie and have a story read from one of the kids' books stacked in a corner of the living room.

And it's easy to keep your privacy, said Neshama Abraham, of Boulder, Colo., and a leader in the national cohousing movement

In her 10 years of living in cohousing, Abraham says she has noticed subtle ways of letting each other know when they don't want visitors. Abraham simply closes the curtains in her kitchen window if she needs some time alone and opens them when she wants to socialize.

Abraham and other cohousing leaders see their developments as role models.

THOMAS JAMES HURST / THE SEATTLE TIMES
The Jackson Place Cohousing project, above Rainier Avenue South, is among a growing number of such communities going up in the Seattle area.

Cohousing events coming up

The cohousing movement in the Seattle area is one of the biggest in the nation. Here are some details about upcoming events and Web sites:

Puget Sound Cohousing Fair: The next in a series of fairs on cohousing is Feb. 17, 1-3 p.m., Jackson Place Cohousing, 800 Hiawatha Place S., Seattle. www.seattlecohousing.org

Northwest Intentional Community Association: Annual winter gathering is March 8. The time and location will be at INWW.ic.org/nica

NICA: Northwest Intentional Communities Association. INWW.ic.org/nica

Songaia Cohousing: Bothell cohousing community founded by Craig Ragland. www.songaia.com

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"We have to intentionally do something to counter urban sprawl and this is a solution-oriented lifestyle," Abraham said, "I think people get it, they just need to be willing to learn about it. It's a lifestyle being adopted by ... every kind of person imaginable of every age."

Cohousing is not a commune and it's not a co-op - both of which involve shared ownership of the total property or shared expenses. A cohousing community like Jackson Place operates much like a condo association, where people own their units and pay dues.

Designs for interaction

But at Jackson Place, the layout of the development encourages community interaction. All units have kitchens that face a common courtyard. Each member is expected to contribute at least three hours per month on a "team" that helps manage the property.

The prices for a cohousing unit are comparable to a condominium or town house.

But cohousing residents can save money if they want to share common meals and child care, and also by having members take care of the yards and routine maintenance, costs they would likely have to pay for if living in a condo.

Ragland said such communities are usually stable, noting that his Bothell development, there has been only one vacancy in seven years in his 15-unit community.

While many people buy into an existing cohousing project, others get together with like-minded investors to buy property and build their own.

Future community

Jen Witsoe, who rents a unit at Jackson Park, said she is among a group of people saving their money and making plans to start their own co-housing community. She realizes it can be a challenging task.

"We're not just a bunch of kids saying, 'Hey let's start a show in a barn!' " Witsoe said.

Ragland warns that taking such a path isn't for everyone.

"You have to be careful about the money," he said. "It costs a lot of money to build in real estate. So if you are not prepared to do that; you should not get involved."

Ragland hopes he can make a difference - helping people learn about cohousing so they can enjoy their lives more by learning how to live with others.

That's what motivated Kathy and Bill Sellars to help get Jackson Place off the ground.

They have a daughter with Down syndrome and they had joined nonprofit groups to help advocate for the disabled. That led them to the cohousing movement and its goal to make cities safer for all people.

The Sellars said they want to create safe places where people look after each other. It's the kind of thing they want for each other and for their daughter, who now lives independently.

"Once you go through something like we did, you feel like you need to do something to help build

community," said Bill Sellars,

His wife agreed.

"We really care about our community and participating in it," said Kathy Sellars. "We want to be a part of something that is positive."

Seattle Times business news desk editor Bill Kossen contributed to this report.

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