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Sharing a magic place

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You suspect there's something distinctive about the suburban neighborhood when you spot Emily Weinstein out on a sunny morning, painting the woods in oil on a piece of recycled lumber.

Weinstein, an artist and writer, lives in a cohousing community. She has chronicled a community effort that many of her Solterra neighbors were involved in to save 43 acres of former Duke Forest land from development in her new book "Saving Magic Places." The property adjoins the Solterra neighborhood.

There are four cohousing communities in the Triangle: Solterra and Eno Commons in Durham, and Aracadia and Pacifica in Carrboro.

Most people who live in cohousing are like Weinstein, passionate about the environment. She uses loads of old wood that would ordinarily go to the landfill as canvasses and frames she makes herself in her Solterra home and studio.

People who live in cohousing are also passionate about being good neighbors. You might find them out shoveling a neighbor's driveway like Solterra's George and Judith Krassner did when they came back from a Florida vacation one winter. Or at an ice-cream party for the neighborhood children like Judith Krassner held in her home recently. Or out picking kale from an organic community garden like retired Tulane University librarian Phil Leinbach. Or at the poetry readings in the common house retired clinical social worker and poet Bennett Myers organized for his neighbors. Or eating meals together in the common house which most neighbors share three or four times a week.

"It's an absolutely gorgeous community with shared meals and activities, full of security and you can watch the kids grow up," said Judith Krassner, who pointed out on a trip around Solterra a tree house on common land that several of the neighbors decided to build after getting agreement from the entire community.

People who live in cohousing tend to have similar values and want to be close to their neighbors.



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According to a survey by Abraham Paiss and Associates in "Superbia," a book written on cohousing by Dave Wann, a writer and film-maker who lives in Harmony Village, a cohousing neighborhood outside Denver, people who live in cohousing drive 30 percent less, pay 50 percent less on utility bills and use less water than the average American.

Houses often feature green building principles and are built with energy conservation systems like radiant heat from concrete flooring and active and passive solar. Some even have rain barrels to collect water so residents can save on water use. Of course, this is all done by choice and not mandate.

"I was drawn to cohousing because of its sustainability aspects and because it's focused on everyone having a say," said Wann.

But it's not utopia.

"We liken it to having extended family, both the blessings and the challenges," said Becky Laskoedy, a scientist at GlaxoSmithKline who calls the blessings of living in Carrboro's Arcadia the social support for her raising children and the closeness she feels to her neighbors. "You often have chrotchety old aunt or uncle who's hard to get along with. Occasionally, we have that."

Why that matters a little more in cohousing than in your standard suburban real estate is that cohousing rules are made by consensus at community meetings of the homeowners association. Everyone has to agree, much like in a Quaker meeting. Laskoedy admits this can bring challenges. Sometimes you have to learn not to be judgmental when the neighbors down the way are concerned about the traffic that the farmers will bring in instead of the vegetables and won't sign on to a Community Supported Agriculture agreement for local farmers to deliver their goods to the neighborhood, she said.

But she and her husband, Lee Laskoedy, an attorney in Graham, respect their neighbor's opinions so much that they asked them to help pick out the colors of their house when they repainted recently.

"They're going to be the ones looking at it," said Laskoedy. "I don't see it as giving up independence. In other neighborhoods you might have covenants. I am a very independent person. I think what I'm concerned with next is interdependence."

Cohousing originated in Denmark and started being promoted in the United States by architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett in the early 1980s. There are about 80 cohousing communities in the United States, according to Joani Blank, who lives in Swan's Market cohousing community in Oakland, Ca. and coordinates tours around the country of cohousing neighborhoods for the U.S. Association of Cohousing. The communities were built in the Triangle in the mid-90s.

Blank helped coordinate the Triangle tours that were held last summer when the association held its national conference at UNC-Chapel Hill. About 100 people made bus tours of the local neighborhoods.

Green architect Giles Blunden, who designed site plans and houses in Solterra and Arcadia and is in the process of designing all of Pacifica, said there is plenty of demand for cohousing in the Triangle, yet it doesn't fit into the traditional market structures very easily.

"Pacifica has been sold since we started it," said Blunden, who includes residents' ideas into the design of the communities. "There is a longer process because of this than in a standard subdivision. It doesn't fit the traditional pattern very well. Most developers don't like to mess with people when they are building. We want people involved in the design."

Often, cohousing communities are homegrown enterprises, formed by people who wanted to live there, hiring the professionals to carry it out.

Carol Eilber and her husband, Chuck, founded Solterra after she read about cohousing and was charmed by the notion of living in a neighborhood where neighbors knew and supported each other.

They bought an old farm off Erwin Road in Durham County, hiring Blunden to draw up site plans and then sold lots to people who became their cohousing neighbors.

"My wife was a guiding spirit behind it," said Eilber, who along with Carol, attended Arcadia's formation meetings to help get their idea off the ground in the mid-1990s.

But Blank said cohousing is also catching on with progressive developers like Wonderland Hills, a development company in Denver, that builds cohousing communities across the country.

Cohousing may be a newfangled idea, but to George Krassner it feels nostalgic.

"It's like a small old-fashioned neighborhood where I grew up as a kid," said Krassner, who lived as a child in a suburb of New York. "Everybody knows their neighbor. The youngest resident is five years old and the oldest is over 80. It's diverse ethnically and professionally."

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