

Start Here

This poster is designed like a typical cohousing community. We start here, in the parking lot on the edge of the community, which literally de-centers cars and instead centers people for safe and frequent interactions. The sidewalk passes directly in front of all front doors, keeping residents connected. Walk around the community, visit all the houses, stop by the garden and courtyard, and end at the common house!

Together, We Can Everything

The Social Outcomes of Cohousing Communities in Denmark

What is Cohousing?

Each family or individual lives in their own house, which normally number 14 to 35 per community. The houses face a courtyard with picnic tables or swing sets and a common house with a large kitchen and dining room for common dinners several days a week, cooked by a rotating crew.



History

After the first cooperative dairy was built in Denmark in 1882, the model quickly spread to other sectors including farming and banking. A 1967 article raised the idea of a community designed for higher social cohesion and kids' safety, and the first cohousing community was built in 1972.



Methods

I interviewed 20 cohousing residents from 8 cohousing communities using ethnographic interviews. This method prioritized the interviewees' stories, even if they felt tangentially related to my questions. Those stories made the project much richer and lent unique insight to the data.



Research Questions

Using Denmark as a case study, I asked two research questions:

What social outcomes distinguish cohousing from traditional suburban housing?

What factors contribute to those outcomes?



In the Garden

For an ENVS major, it seems like there is no environmental sustainability in this project. Why? Environmentalism is much more embedded in government and culture in Denmark, so a universal commitment to sustainability is the default. My interviews showed that although living in cohousing is inherently sustainable, residents don't move to cohousing specifically for the sustainability benefits.

The Courtyard

Common spaces in cohousing communities including courtyards, sidewalks, and the common house, encourage frequent social interaction because of their design. Neighbors sitting on their respective patios can hold a conversation at a normal volume without leaving their chairs. Children play in the common house playroom and the courtyard, and adults chat and have coffee while watching. All residents gather for meals in the common house several times a week, cooked by rotating teams of residents. The physical, social, and organizational design of cohousing communities mean that frequent social interaction and strong connections are embedded in every element of life.

Investment

Cohousing residents must be willing to accept significant investments before and after move-in. Financial costs are higher than a regular suburban house, and it takes multiple years on waitlists to move in. Residents must be emotionally ready to live in a tight knit community.



Values

Residents must align with the values of cohousing. They must be able to compromise and make decisions, which requires residents to respect the organizational system. Communities also expect residents to participate in common events like meals, meetings, and work days.



Social Outcomes

Cohousing communities offer numerous social outcomes. Interviewees feel as if they are a part of a big family due to physical and emotional proximity, and there are extremely high levels of social support for all ages. Universal values of fairness lead to respect for privacy and shared items.



The Common House

The social outcomes of cohousing don't happen by accident, but are the result of awareness of the investments and alignment with values. Only people who are willing to embrace both can reap the associated outcomes that make cohousing a robust and vibrant community for life.

