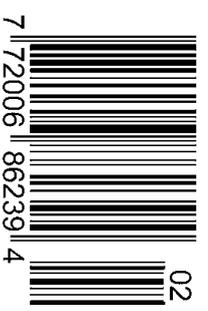


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CHERYL GLADU

Get to know the neighbours

Cohousing experiments in democratic living

Cohabitat Québec

FITCH ARCHITECTURE & COMMUNITY DESIGN

IT IS POPULAR today to claim that polity is giving way to tribalism, whether of the partisan or lifestyle-politics variety, making a widely shared understanding of the challenges we face, and the possible solutions to them, feel out of reach. In such a situation it would seem foolhardy to try to invite closed-up people into a deeper form of civic engagement.

Regardless of how much weight you give to the “new tribalism” argument, there are tried and tested ways of bringing people together, even at the intimate level of the household, that negate the pop-culture naysayers. These experiments in collaborative

housing could even be scaled up under the right conditions—as long as we start by trusting citizens with more power to make important decisions collectively.

THE COLLABORATIVE HOUSING MODEL

Many of us have sat around the table with friends and family and imagined something similar to collaborative housing, or cohousing for short. It could be as simple as building a place together, with a shared yard, garden, workshop and maybe even a playroom for any future kids. Almost 430 households have managed to turn those lofty goals into a reality across

17 very different neighbourhoods in Canada, and we can learn a lot from their experiences.

Cohousing is a type of intentional community in which the design, development and management of a project is shared among participants in a self-organizing group or collective. There may be a process of leadership in such communities, but no one leader. Likewise, while participants may hold shared values—a commitment to mutual respect, for example, or environmental stewardship—in general you will not find a single philosophy on the “best” way to live in cohousing setups. The end result of the development process is a high-functioning

neighbourhood where members share in both the labours and celebrations of life.

The cohousing model of design and development was introduced to North America in the late-1980s by U.S. architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett. The pair based their concept on cohousing projects they had visited in Northern Europe, such as the Danish *bofællesskab* (sharing community/cohousing) and Swedish *kollektivhus* (collective house). These communities were as much a different approach to living as they were a different approach to design—and I would argue that it's in considering this approach to living that we have the most to learn.

While cohousing communities can vary in design, they are typically made up of between 15 and 33 households. At this scale, most members can get to know everyone else by name. The projects also generally include a participatory process, an overall design that encourages residents to come together from time to time, common facilities and complete resident management using a non-hierarchical decision-making structure. Other than that, cohousing arrangements can be quite different from one another, sometimes taking the form of urban courtyards or clusters of rural single-family homes, among other variations. As the design brief is put together by the community itself, cohousing projects are a reflection of the people who live there.

What makes this model particularly well-suited to North America is that it strives for community while preserving a high degree of individual privacy. Cohousing residents own or rent complete private dwellings within the project, but also share common property that is designed to be used together. Each community member has a complete home (the “co” doesn't stand for cohabitate), though they do tend to be smaller than in traditional suburban settings.

In Canada, some cohousing communities have allowed people to downsize, on average, by 75 m² (800 ft²). Residents were able to do this by making use of clever space-saving designs and by letting go of some personal occasional-use spaces including, in some cases, guest rooms or single-purpose dining rooms. The common house in a cohousing development typically includes an industrial-sized kitchen and dining hall for large gatherings, as well as guest rooms and spaces for play, exercise and creative projects. The common area can be a standalone building or part of a complex of spaces.

I interviewed nearly 100 people living in cohousing in Canada as part of my doctoral research. In talking about some of the benefits, one community member described her experience like living in the “private wing of a shared manor.” By sharing, she was able to live a much richer life both materially and interpersonally even if, as an individual, she had less stuff.

Smaller individual living spaces are also cheaper to heat and cool, furnish and clean. So it isn't surprising that research is starting to demonstrate that cohousing communities can outperform green apartment or condominium buildings on many environmental metrics.

The sense of community that allows for this level of sharing, including in the management of daily affairs, is

not a happy accident or left to chance. It is in many ways the central aim of cohousing. And it is perhaps this quality that makes cohousing projects so worthy of study and emulation as models of local democratic engagement.

COLLABORATIVE HOUSING IS ROOTED IN CONSENSUS

Cohousing communities in North America make use of consensus- or consent-based decision-making. Consensus is not the same as unanimity, and there are a variety of ways to achieve it in group settings. But overall, we can say that consensus is akin to gaining a *general agreement* between members of a group on matters that concern that group. Consensus is, in other words, a democratic practice.

This democratic approach to decision-making will be familiar to some people who are already trying to create a more just and equitable society, perhaps through small voluntary collectives or within larger professional co-operatives. In the case of cohousing, consensus is also a process used to successfully design, develop and manage award-winning, multi-million-dollar real estate projects.

One of the many reasons that this process of decision-making should be interesting, in an increasingly diverse yet polarizing world, is that consensus-based decision-making aims to create a formal space for dissenting perspectives to be communicated and explored in an environment well-equipped to manage this kind of dialogue.

There is a common expression in organizations that make use of this means of decision-making: embrace the “no.” It means that in seeking consensus it is important to make space for the dissenting voice that may help the group fully understand an issue and figure out how to better resolve a decision. This effort to embrace dissent is rooted in a shared desire to overcome group-think in pursuit of the best options for the community.

In diverse communities, agreeing to disagree is an outcome arrived at only after careful consideration of the assumptions that underpin different proposals. Through this process, people may better understand the real roots of difference—how our upbringing, experiences and education shape our ideas and preferences. This awareness, in turn, helps to create a new understanding between people (dialogue is fundamentally a creative process). Learning to look for this understanding is imperative to making our cities more inclusive and just.

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For consensus-building to work, however, group members have to make a commitment to improving their ability to communicate in an open and honest way, while also adopting a more charitable view of the ideas of others. As you might imagine, these skills are built with time and practice.

And this is why the years-long, deliberate approach to building a neighbourhood in a community-led project is such a good incubator: cohousing allows people to master the art of collectively working through challenges. It is, unfortunately, the opposite of what currently goes on in our federal and provincial legislatures.

Consensus-seeking is obviously not without its challenges. Rarely do Canadian cohousing communities adopt models of pure consensus, where there is a risk the group could be held hostage by a single dissenting member for an extended period of time. While it is uncommon for groups to vote on contentious issues, it does happen. This is generally considered to be an unfortunate outcome of an attempt at reaching consensus that didn't work.

Even when a group has come to a general agreement regarding a decision, it doesn't mean that every community member has gotten "their way." Individuals may ask themselves, "Is this the hill I want to die on?" That is, does the proposal go against my understanding of what the community needs, such that I'm willing to fight *for the community* by blocking the proposal? Most frequently the answer is no, which means that some decisions are arrived at with the understanding that a proposal is "good enough for now, and safe enough to try."

SCALING UP COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITIES

Several consensus- and consent-seeking models, with names such as Sociocracy or Holacracy, are being adopted by an increasing number of cohousing communities,



ULTIMATELY IT SHOULD MATTER LESS HOW MANY UNITS ARE PART OF A NEW DEVELOPMENT AND MORE HOW THOSE UNITS OCCUPY THE SITE.

collectives, companies and co-operatives who want to engage their members and/or employees in a more creative and democratic practice of organizing. Can any of these models be scaled up for other kinds of community-led projects, or even community-wide decision-making?

As a first step, we need more local expertise in the processes that are particular to community-led development. One of the key success factors in multi-family real estate development is the completion of previous projects. Given that communities developed by their members are, by their very nature, one-off projects, this presents a challenge, since it leaves the prospects for spreading collaborative forms of community almost completely in the hands of real estate professionals. The designers, project managers or developers who want to direct more of their work into the field of cohousing should have the option of receiving more training in methods of democratic collaboration.

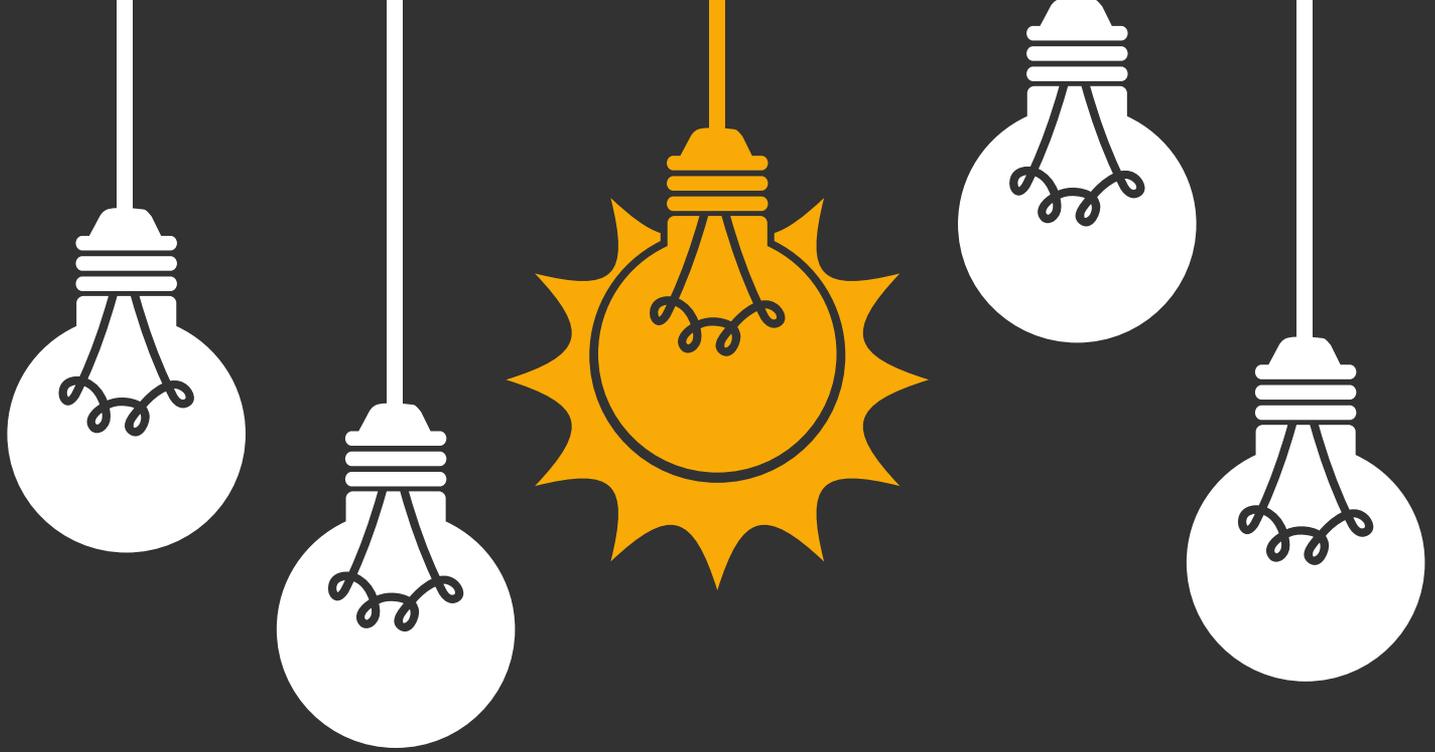
Experienced, top-down housing developers could also be engaged in the process of building co-housing communities. McCamant's Cohousing Solutions company has successfully brought cohousing communities into master-planned neighbourhoods such as Hearthstone Cohousing in Denver, which was built into the Highlands Garden Village plan. The benefits to the developer are many and include reduced risk, increased equity, and political support in the project.

Cohousing also widens the housing market. According to McCamant, cohousers are not your typical new home buyers; they are often drawn to the kinds of locations that are vibrant rather than new. Cohousers can also seed any new project with a level of community engagement that can take generations to establish for more traditional residential or commercial projects.

Canadian cities and towns can do more to encourage this kind of development by zoning in a way that describes minimum rather than maximum densities on a site. Ultimately it should matter less *how many* units are part of a new development and more *how* those units occupy the site (e.g., how they are massed). Zoning that describes the maximum density and number of units on a site incentivizes developers to build the most square feet per unit that they can possibly sell. It's easy to see where "McMansions" come from when you consider these rules.

Finally, governments at all levels can look to open up the process of accessing government properties, for example by including land grants or leasehold contracts that guarantee the long-term use of land to such communities in exchange for rent. This type of model has helped make collaborative projects more affordable and sustainable in cities such as Berlin, where *Baugruppe* ("building groups") are a common model of community-led development.

There are a number of paths that a variety of actors can take on the way to making our cities more engaged and more livable. Each path involves giving people the tools they need to work together. Cohousing is about trusting in people to make the kinds of decisions that benefit not only themselves but their wider community. This will allow cities and towns to make use of the latent creative capacity of their citizens at a time when we need it most. **M**



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