

BOOK REVIEW by Ellen Ryan

The Senior Cohousing Handbook:  
A Community Approach to Independence.

Charles Durrett; Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2009.

Imagine taking charge of the rest of your life by gathering with like-minded others to plan a collaborative living arrangement to foster relationships, mutual concern and a caring community life. Most housing options for seniors isolate them, limit their input, and discourage a neighbourhood atmosphere. In contrast, cohousing counteracts isolation and leaves the choices in the hands of the residents. Senior Cohousing, like Intergenerational Cohousing, is an option for an increasing number of North Americans.

Cohousing refers to a cluster of independent suites/condos/cottages/houses linked by an intentional community to shared common areas indoors and outdoors. Senior cohousing revolves around the needs and desires of seniors, while intergenerational cohousing (including seniors) revolves around the needs of children. In senior cohousing, the group plans for intergenerational contact within the broader community. As William Thomas (esteemed innovator aging care) states in the prologue, we can thank Charles Durrett for translating the European models of senior cohousing into multiple viable alternatives for older adults in the USA and Canada. He is the social architect of new ways of thinking – the community approach to independent living, re-establishing many of the advantages of traditional villages within a contemporary context. Durrett and colleague Kathleen McCamant have been the actual architects for more than 50 such cohousing communities in North America – these communities varying markedly both in physical styles and specific community policies [see <http://www.cohousingco.com/>].

In cohousing, seniors have their own home with community right outside the door. Designs facilitate interaction with porches, gardens, sitting areas, and common activity areas. Common dinner in senior cohousing is prepared in turn, by a chef and an assistant. Such dinners serve as the heart of cohousing. The timing of common dinners (daily, weekly, less often) and other activities is negotiated by the group. Access to the broader community is insured by location within the centre of town or city, or connected by a good transportation system (perhaps including a community van). Cohousing offers economic and environmental advantages with less private space, fewer vehicles, and less driving. The community can provide mutual support for day-to-day living and negotiate partnerships with social and health services where extra assistance is needed.

In cohousing, seniors commit to the community by participating in group decision making, common work days, preparation of the common meals, and in many other ways suited to individual talents and abilities. Some groups tailor the expectation for contribution so that less is expected as the years of residence pass.

This useful handbook outlines the process whereby a group of seniors can gather together to design and build a cohousing community built upon a set of values worked out by the group. Durrett has identified five distinct, interlocking parts to building both the physical neighbourhood and the social fabric of a senior cohousing project – feasibility phase, information phase, group formation to develop goals for successful aging, participatory design process, and development of policies for living in the new community. Senior cohousing is committed to participatory decision making, aiming for consensus among all interested in deciding on a particular issue. The experience of previous community development projects is most useful in guiding the suggested skill training and processes recommended here.